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Retooling leadership development

Michael A. Couch and Richard Citrin

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to describe how properly designed and executed leadership development can make a difference, an approach the authors call intentional development.

Design methodology/approach – By building unique connections among recent advancements in human capital management and neuroscience, this paper proposes the components that any organization can use to significantly improve the return on their investment in leadership development.

Findings – It is estimated that US companies spend over US\$13bn annually on leadership development. Match that number to the abundant research that finds most leadership development to be ineffective, and the conclusion is a phenomenal amount of waste. The situation does not need to be that dire.

Originality/value – Following the practices of yesterday are not sufficient to build leaders needed for now and the future. It is time to retool leadership development.

Keywords Human resource management, Talent management, Learning and development, Human Capital, Leadership development, Neuroscience

Paper type Viewpoint

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It is estimated that US companies spend over US\$13bn annually on leadership development (Wentworth and Loew, 2013). Match that number to the abundant and growing research that finds most leadership development to be ineffective, and the conclusion is a phenomenal amount of waste:

- A 2015 study by the BrandonHall Group found that 81 per cent of organizations said that they were not very effective at developing their leaders, and that only 18 per cent said that their leaders were very effective at meeting key business goals (Loew, 2015).
- In a survey conducted by the Ashridge Business School in the UK, only 7 per cent of senior leaders said that their organizations effectively develop global leaders (Gitsham, 2009).
- A Corporate Leadership Council survey of 1,500 managers in 53 organizations around the world found that 76 per cent felt that their learning and development functions were ineffective in helping them achieve business targets (Mitchel *et al.*, 2007).
- A 2017 survey by McKinsey found that only 11 per cent of 500 global executives felt that their leadership development efforts achieved desired results (Feser *et al.*, 2017).
- In 2017, CEO Challenge study conducted by the Conference Board, only 41 per cent of global CEO's felt that their leadership development efforts were of very high or high quality (Mitchel *et al.*, 2007).

The situation does not need to be that dire. Properly designed and executed leadership development can make a difference. We have both been around long enough to see some baby-step changes in learning and development that were helpful. We now see an opportunity for a sea change, particularly in the ability to build the leaders needed for today's unique

“Intentional development begins by framing the development that clearly links outcomes to effort, linking “Why is this important?” to “How is this accomplished?”

business environment. And, the timing could not be better. The USA and Europe in particular are facing a “silver tsunami” of aging leaders that are ready to retire, and a smaller supply of talent ready to replace them. It is time for a completely new paradigm to create the leaders needed in today’s volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous business world. We call the new paradigm intentional development, and it is founded on the following evidence-based concepts.

Have a planned and targeted impact

Intentional development begins by framing the development that clearly links outcomes to effort, linking “Why is this important?” to “How is this accomplished?”. This framing sets the stage and helps our brains be prepared for and pay attention to something new. Establishing a planned and targeted impact creates an “implementation intention.” Several studies have shown that establishing an implementation intention improves the chances that an individual will change their behavior ([Gollwitzer, 1999](#)).

As adult learners, we all need to see the value from any time and energy spent on developing a new skill – the “what is in it for me” or self-relevance factor. Advances in neuroscience have also highlighted the importance of threats and rewards in forming human behavior ([Rock and Ringleb, 2013](#)). If a person’s internal valuation system assesses an idea or behavior as having value personally, then that person’s brain gives it a thumb’s up.

Having a planned and targeted impact preps our brains to be ready to learn something new. The reticular activation system is one of the oldest parts of the human brain and is essential for some basic human functions like motor control, modulating pain, sleep and habituation (ignoring repetitive, meaningless signals). In addition, the reticular activation system (RAC) controls which sensory signals reach the cerebrum, allowing the signal to come into our consciousness and to be further processed. For example, my daughter recently commented how prevalent the practice of adding “Right?” to declarative statements had become (i.e. “The Steelers are a great football team, Right?”) and how much it annoyed her. I had not realized that (it was not in my consciousness), but then, I started paying attention. At a workshop I attended the next day, I noticed that the presenters must have used “Right?” about a 100 times. And now, I was annoyed. I would not have noticed that unless my RAC had been activated to pay attention to this signal because of my daughter’s comment.

Having a planned and targeted impact is akin to scenario planning. Approaching a challenge by laying out and analyzing different scenarios never predicts the future perfectly. But it does motivate critical thinking ([Chermak and Swanson, 2008](#)).

Focus on the critical few competencies

We could not put it any better than this quote from a 2014 McKinsey & Company publication entitled “Why Leadership Development Programs Fail” ([Gurdjian et al., 2014](#)):

Focusing on context inevitably means equipping leaders with a small number of competencies (two to three) that will make a significant difference to performance. Instead, what we often find is a long list of leadership standards, a complex web of dozens of competencies, and corporate-values statements. Each is usually summarized in a seemingly easy-to-remember way (such as the three Rs), and each on its own terms makes sense. In practice, however, what managers and employees often see is an “alphabet soup” of recommendations. We have found that when a

company cuts through the noise to identify a small number of leadership capabilities essential for success in its business – such as high-quality decision making or stronger coaching skills – it achieves far better outcomes.

We concur – the fewer competencies that are included in an intentional development plan, the more likely the learner will make progress and have an impact with new skills.

Intentional development clearly identifies the skills required to improve a learner's performance or increase her/his potential for future success. We like to use the mantra, "You can't be it until you see it" when we talk about this stage of the process. The "it" needs to be a few basic, simple development themes described in the learner's own terms, not a long, exhausting list of skills. Personalizing the development in this fashion is also a key to optimizing learning and retention ([Jensen, 2005](#)).

Build it in, do not bolt it on

We often begin leadership development discussions by asking the question, "What occurred in your past that makes a difference in how you lead today?" We have probably asked this a 100 times, and the results are always the same. Leaders report that they learned meaningful skills by navigating a variety of challenging experiences. Coupled with these developmental experiences were other people that provided developmental support, feedback or mentoring along with just-in-time study, training or research.

This pattern of experience, people and study that we heard actually repeats the research conducted at the Center for Creative Leadership and subsequent global studies ([McCall et al., 1998](#); [McCall and Hollenbach, 2002](#)). This research identified that effective development has three key components that follow a 70-20-10 ratio: navigating challenging roles or assignments (70 per cent), developmental support, coaching, mentoring or role modeling from others (20 per cent) and self-study or training (10 per cent).

For development to be intentional, it must be built into a leader's day-to-day work and not be seen as something extra that has to be added to an already busy schedule. The only corollary to build it in occurs when the present job is not challenging enough. In this case, the leader's role needs to change, the job revised or more challenging assignments added.

Without significant challenge, our brains remain on autopilot and use the behaviors that have long been stored in long-term memory. Human brains are pattern recognition machines that like certainty. Only when patterns are perceived as significantly different does the brain snap out of standard operating procedure stored in long-term memory and kick in its energy-intensive, short-term memory prefrontal cortex. Focused energy and attention create new neural connections that are imbedded in long-term memory. These new connections/habits/behaviors can then be easily recalled when needed – sometimes, unconsciously.

Understand there is more than one path to development

When receiving feedback, it a natural tendency for all of us is to focus first on perceived weaknesses – we tend to have what Richard calls, in his book *The Resilience Advantage*

“For development to be intentional, it must be built into a leader’s day-to-day work and not be seen as something extra that has to be added to an already busy schedule.”

“Developing a new key leadership skill requires regular focus and attention what we call a cadence of development. Effective development is never a “one and done”.”

(Citrin and Weiss, 2016), a “negativity bias.” Improving a weak skill can have its benefits. However, other development paths can be more beneficial or make a greater difference. For example, one of the interesting results of Center for Creative Leadership’s research was that leaders often failed in their careers by overusing a strength from early in their careers rather than because they had a glaring skill deficiency. In that case, reducing the overdependence on strength could be the most effective and highest impact development strategy.

To create an effective intentional development plan, we consider:

- the importance of a skill;
- the type and availability of experiences needed to build the skill (the 70 of the 70-20-10 model);
- the ability of the learner to envision the new skill and its benefits; and
- the developmental difficulty of the target competency.

For an enlightening description of the variety of potential developmental paths, see the book *Paths to Improvement* (Eichinger et al., 2011).

Create a cadence of development

Developing a new key leadership skill requires regular focus and attention – what we call a cadence of development. Effective development is never a “one and done.” That is why, event-based training is a dead-end when it comes to building leadership skills. Intentional development is just that – intentional. You have to think about the new skill and the situations in which you will apply it, and you need to focus on regularly on what you want to do more of, differently or better. We ask our learner executives to track and report their intentional development efforts at least weekly – what new behavior they tried, what worked or did not work, what the impact was of the effort and what did they learn that they will apply in similar situations in the future. This regular reflection helps to lock in the new learned behavior.

Create a feedback-rich environment

The basic overarching operating principle of human brains is to maximize reward and minimize danger or threats. But our brains are much more attuned to detecting threats – it is much easier to cause aggravation and avoidance in social situations than it is to generate positive emotions. (There is that negativity bias again!) As a result, even the idea of getting feedback is often perceived as a threat that is to be avoided (Rock and Ringleb, 2013). Just think of your own reaction if your boss called you into her office and said, “I have some feedback for you.”

The challenge in creating a feedback-rich environment, then, is to reduce the threat-avoidance response. It turns out that the best way to do that is to have more frequent, two-way discussions between managers and employees and to encourage learners to ask for feedback rather to have it imposed. Research by Deloitte also showed that 90 per cent of companies that implemented processes for continuous feedback from managers saw increases in employee engagement (Sloan et al., 2017).

Objective, targeted and requested feedback plays an important role in intentional development. We plan for and gather feedback in a manner that increases the likelihood that the information is perceived as rewarding and beneficial. Even negative feedback can be seen as a reward if it is collected in the context of an intentional development plan that is framed with clear benefits for the learner.

Match the development strategy to the talent

Our experience has shown that not all employees will benefit from the same development strategy based on their current performance, potential and aspiration. In addition, no organization has unlimited resources to develop its talent, and therefore, it is important for you to know which development strategies will have the greatest return on the time and money invested.

For example, placing high-performing/high-potential employees in challenging, pivotal roles has benefits for both the company (productivity and growth) and the leader (engagement and rewards). However, applying the same development strategy for employees that aspire to be technical experts in the company's core competencies would be a disaster. The "high-pro" employees would disengage, and the company would lose the benefit of their unique knowledge. A high-impact development strategy for the high pro's would be to assure they are focused on maintaining their expertise, thinking about the application of the knowledge for continued competitive advantage and transferring their knowledge to other solid performers that could be potential high pro's.

Make development "sticky"

Research summarized in the *Handbook of NeuroLeadership* how envisioning a behavior can be equivalent to actually performing the behavior (Dixon *et al.*, 2013). Imagining activates the same areas of the brain as actually performing the behavior. Mental rehearsal of a behavior can become an imbedded memory that can be recalled – it makes the development what David Rock of the NeuroLeadership Institute referred to as "sticky." We see this akin to the benefit that sports psychologists found from having athletes mentally rehearse the perfect golf shot or the record pole vault before actually attempting the feat. Rehearsing the intention also improves the chances that you will actually take some action and learn a new skill.

Think about the mental process you have to go through to build the new skill of driving on a different side of the road. You may have gone through this if you ever had to drive in a country that drives on the "wrong" side. You have to be very focused and pay attention. You have to think to yourself, "I am approaching a roundabout, I need to go around in a different direction or I am going to have a head-on collision" or "I am at an intersection, to turn left, I need to pull into the lane closest to me, not the farther lane or I will be going the wrong way." It is mentally exhausting and somewhat stressful until you build the new habits. From a neuroscience perspective, you are using your energy-intensive, short-term and limited-capacity memory to create new connections in long-term, unlimited-capacity memory that can be easily recalled when needed.

As a component of build an intentional development map, we ask learners to come up with development "mantras" or "rules of thumb." These are short statements in the form of "If I find myself in this situation, I am going to do this, so that I achieve such and such an outcome" – just like the mental maps you use to make sure you drive on the correct side of the road. We encourage learners to refer to their mantras regularly to create the focus and attention needed to build new sets of behaviors in long-term memory.

For example, we had an executive client who was seen as inapproachable and tough to get to know so people avoided interacting with him. One of his mantras was "When I meet an employee for the first time or see one of my folks in the hall, I'll make sure I smile, say hello and

ask them how they're doing so that people see me as more friendly." Simple, but for him, it turned out to be very effective; people significantly increased their interactions with him.

Never learn alone

Leaders of a large retail client wanted to determine how to sustain or enhance nine components of their culture to drive growth. We worked with them to assemble nine cohorts of leaders for whom this would be a great developmental challenge. The teams were assigned two tasks:

1. research the culture factor and make strategic recommendations on how to leverage the factor to drive growth; and
2. use the project to become better leaders by building new skills.

After the teams reported their results to the executive team of the company, the CEO commented that the recommendations were great – but the increase in the capability of the leaders may have been the bigger payoff from the project. The cohort members reported the same, particularly, the benefit they had gained by working with their cohort members.

Humans are intensely social beings. We are just starting to understand the benefits of social networks within organizations. One benefit, reported in research by [Corporate Executive Board Company \(2013\)](#), is that the extent to which people not only do their own jobs well but contribute to the success of others is related to overall performance of organizations.

We leverage this social bias and social networks by using development cohorts as a regular component of intentional development. Cohorts provide a safe environment for building new skills and significantly enhance the “20” of the 70-20-10 model of development. The cohorts can focus solely on development. However, the learning opportunity is significantly enhanced when the cohort is also assigned a meaningful challenge to address – combining a “70” with a “20” – adding in the intentional development factor of “build it in, Do not bolt it on.”

Conclusion

King Wuling of the Zhao kingdom declared in 307 BC that “A talent for following the ways of yesterday is not sufficient to improve the world of today.” Therefore, it is with the standard approach that has been taken to develop the leaders that we all need now and in the future. It is time to retool leadership development.

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