

Why Training and Development Won't Always Solve Leadership Issues

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Many leaders in HR and OD departments offer development and training for their organizations' leaders. Whether you call them high performers, high potentials, up-and-comers, movers and shakers, or go-getters, the basic plan seems straightforward: to maximize the organization's success, you have to train and develop your leaders. That seems like a simple enough task on the surface, and many companies think that training classes will solve all their leadership problems. Some organizations actually do a pretty good job of offering skills training that is worthwhile and even based on needs assessments.

But the first and most critical piece of the puzzle that many HR and OD professionals often miss is making sure that they have the right leaders in the right Roles at the right time before they add training and development into the mix. Why is this so critical? Because all the training in the world can't help some leaders develop enough to succeed. Ouch. That last statement is harsh and blunt. Think about it, though. How many times have you seen a leader get promoted to a Level where additional training just wasn't enough? When a leader is put into a job that is over his/her head, the whole organization suffers.

Now that we have your attention, let us reassure you: this misalignment can be repaired. In fact, getting it right is what talent management is all about. You can avoid the devastating mismatches and get leaders into the right Roles. Keep reading to learn how.

To begin, let's explore four basic leadership principles.

1. Leadership requirements are different as you move up to higher Role Levels in the organization. The size and scope and complexity of leadership responsibility is significantly different for the CEO than for a front-line supervisor.

Each rung on the organizational ladder has a different combination of abilities that a leader must have to be successful. And each promotion requires a bigger “step up” than the previous advancement, i.e., the increase in ability requirements is not a linear, but rather an exponential, progression with each transition to a higher Role Level. Making the transition successfully to each higher Role Level requires a different way of viewing and leading the organization. (For the purposes of this brief article, the concept of organizational Role Levels and leadership abilities has been significantly abbreviated. Leadership abilities vary based on the size and complexity of the organization, the type of industry in which it operates and many, many other factors. For a more thorough exploration of this topic, contact HPS.)

2. Brace yourself. This is the controversial part that people don't want to hear, but here it is: Not everyone has the potential to be the CEO—or even a manager! Before you close this article or ball up the paper and throw it in the trash, explore this idea with us. Think about it this way: some people are good at math or sciences, others are good at the arts, others at sports, etc. All people are gifted with abilities in different areas and at different levels of skill and proficiency. For example, some students in college struggle through calculus and barely squeak by with a passing grade, while others don't give it a second thought and breeze through to even higher levels of more complicated math classes. Some people have the right combination of hard-wiring in the brain that makes higher-level math quite simple. Other people are wired differently. Neither is good or bad. Leadership success works the same way. Remember how we said above that different levels of leadership require different combinations of abilities? Those abilities are not distributed equally across the general population. Some people have the right combination

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About the Author

Debra Cannarella is the Director of Operations at High Performing Systems, Inc. (HPS), a consulting company that provides assessments, consulting and training solutions to help organizations excel. HPS conducts assessments of leadership potential and provides individual, leader and executive coaching to clients.

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to make complex leadership issues easier to handle. Those are the leaders who should be promoted into those higher Role Level positions.

3. Leadership potential can be measured. By applying concepts from the first two principles above, it is possible not only to understand what leader abilities are needed at each Level in an organization but also to assess whether a specific leader has those abilities. HPS' proprietary leader assessment process is able to determine each leader's strengths and potential. We evaluate how each leader "sees" the organization and how information is organized and processed by the leader. When you overlay an individual's strengths to the needs of the company, it's possible to ensure the right leadership match. You will know at which organizational Role Level each leader has the best chance to be successful, based on the combination of abilities identified by the assessment process.

4. Leadership potential can change . . . sometimes. Everyone has the potential to gain additional knowledge and skills across time. Some leaders also have the potential to see the world a whole new way at different times across their careers. This is not based on learning from classes or new job assignments, but rather from how the brain makes connections and processes information. The way a leader processes the complexity of organizational information can be understood and predicted. If we know a leader's current potential, then we can determine his/her potential for additional ability across time. Not everyone will have the same amount of growth potential. Some leaders progress rapidly across time and are identified as "high potentials." Understanding growth potential across time is a critical component of getting the right leader in the right job *at the right time*. If we know which leaders will

have the potential to operate successfully at higher levels of leadership (and when), then we can provide developmental opportunities and promotions to coincide with the growth in leadership potential.

So now what? Now that we've reviewed these basic leadership principles, how do we create a talent management system that really works? The first step is leader assessment. Just as the coach of a sports team will evaluate the strengths and potential of each player to get each player into the right position, so must an organization evaluate the talents of its leaders. An objective assessment of leadership potential will help you accomplish this first step. The second step is to get leaders into the jobs that play to their strengths and take advantage of their potential. If a job change isn't possible, at least take the opportunity to reevaluate work and responsibility to align job requirements to the ability of each person. Create support systems and build strong teams that will fill in any gaps that may exist. Then, finally, follow up with additional coaching, training and development to help leaders receive the skills they need to succeed in their current Roles and be prepared for next steps if applicable. Without getting the right leaders into the right Roles first, however, your development efforts will be wasted.

The most important thing you can do as an HR or OD professional is to help leaders get into jobs that suit them best. Doing this will ensure that your organization is filled with leaders who are energized and excited every day about the work they do. All leaders will be aligned to work at their full potential and play to their strengths in the workplace. Adding training and development will be icing on the cake, and the job will be easier for those leaders who are already working in the "right" Roles based on their abilities.

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