



KEEPING YOUR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT ON TRACK



AND WHY MOST PROGRAMMES FAIL

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ARE you an effective leader? Context matters. Just consider the departure of Antony Jenkins as chief executive of the British multinational bank and financial services company, Barclays, in July 2015. A different set of priorities apparently required a different sort of leader.

Equally, an effective leader in one company may not be able to work the same magic elsewhere because the circumstances are different. And one must never ignore the inconvenient truth that luck casts a long shadow over performance.

Leadership development is a big business, but are companies getting good value?

Despite lots of time and money being spent on churning out leaders, it is not clear that the results justify the means. Outcomes are hard to measure. Cause and effect are difficult to establish. Yet, spending that is often justified as an investment continues unabated.

The solution lies not in more spending but in questioning where and how the money is spent. Is there something that all senior leaders must excel in, regardless of context? The answer unsurprisingly is yes.

Surprisingly, little time and attention is devoted to five everyday skills.

1 TIME MANAGEMENT

The scarcest and arguably the most valuable resource a leader has is time. Leaders today are like jugglers keeping an increasing number of balls in the air while walking the tightrope of time. Most leaders struggle with this balancing act.

Working longer hours is not a sustainable solution, neither is multitasking. While no one solution works for everyone, leaders need guidance on how to manage time effectively.

Unfortunately, few if any initiatives aimed at senior leaders focus on this very important dimension. Leaders are left to

their own devices and most struggle to overcome this challenge. A little improvement can have an asymmetrical impact.

2 EFFICIENT MEETINGS

Meetings take up an extraordinary amount of time. Is this time well spent?

Board meetings with investors and customers are important and unavoidable. Internal meetings take up an inordinate amount of time and there is often much room for improvement.

There is a lot of advice available on how to run effective meetings but why little of it finds their way into leadership development programmes is not clear.

To be effective, leaders need to run effective meetings; pretty mundane but very important.

3 EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

All leaders need to communicate effectively. As George Bernard Shaw once said: "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

Presentation courses are typically offered to those at the lower organisational hierarchy when it is most needed at the higher level. Presentations are a small subset of communication.

It's not just formal client presentations that matter. One-to-one communication, internal town halls and written messages are all equally important.

How leaders connect and how they craft their message determines if they have impact. Leaders need to effectively distil and headline messages, create a picture, establish an emotional hook and deliver it effectively.

Even the best communicators can do better. Yet, scant attention is paid to improving this important skill at senior levels.

4 SUPERIOR TEAMWORK

Another essential attribute of leadership is getting things done through others. There are lots of workshops on delegation and empowerment. But first

things first, you need the right people to empower and to delegate tasks to.

Placing people in the right roles and knowing when to take risks is one of the most important drivers of leadership success.

Improving interviewing skills and helping leaders understand their own biases can be developed but they get little airtime.

Related to right fit is the issue of creating and sustaining teamwork. Teamwork is more than just showing up wearing the same T-shirt or going rock climbing together.

It's a skill that does not come easily to all and needs to be carefully nurtured. You can acquire good players but getting them to play well together consistently is the hard part.

5 DECISION-MAKING AND EXECUTION

Every leader has to make decisions and to execute. The more senior the leader, the greater the stakes. In some situations, only the leader needs to make the call. In others, you need to facilitate the process of arriving at a decision. The crucial difference is knowing what to do and when.

In addition, behavioural science and systems thinking provide very effective tools for making decisions and executing under uncertainty.

For example, understanding the pitfalls of rushing to cause-and-effect judgements, confusing causality for correlation, guarding against cognitive bias, recognising the power of diversity, appreciating the importance of trial and error in innovation and taking a systems view of problems and opportunities, can make a huge difference in the quality of decision-making and execution.

Yet, very little of this finds its way into leadership development programmes.

PROVOKING THOUGHTS

The battle to develop leaders rages on with greater intensity with aerial bombardment by executive development programmes, internal training courses

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and executive coaches.

Generals know that air power alone cannot win a war. Developing skills in strategy, vision, and mission are like air strikes which are necessary but rarely decisive.

Winning the ground war of time management, efficient meetings, effective communication, superior teamwork, decision-making and execution are crucial for successfully developing leaders.

Faulty focus is often compounded by another flaw leading to unsatisfactory results. Companies fail to ask basic questions such as "Have you done this yourself?" or "Have you been in this position before?" before signing up to expensive programmes or coaching by people who have never led, run a business or managed complex operations.

Armchair generals are rarely effective and can be downright dangerous in a real war. Management and developing leaders is an apprenticeship business.

Engaging non-practitioners to develop practitioners is hard to justify but is widely practised. Chief executive officers and board members can get better results if they begin to ask the right questions and focus on skills that can make an immediate difference.

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