

# The StraightTalk Coach

## Insights for Leading From Strength

### Developing Leaders: A Process, Not an Event

By Cathy A. Higgins & David J. Kreischer

**A**re leaders born? Are they made? This is a longstanding debate. Some people become leaders without planning and others intentionally acquire skills, but few become truly outstanding leaders without a focused development effort. Unfortunately, many of today's emerging leaders are likely to suffer from the lack of just such an intentional development process. Due to downsizing, de-layering and other short-term cost-cutting initiatives, many positions that were developmental have been eliminated. As a result, many organizations' leadership development efforts have become reactive and episodic.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of identifying individuals with leadership potential, enhancing their innate qualities, teaching them additional skills and helping them understand how to apply these abilities effectively. In fact, many of today's notorious examples of corporate misconduct resulted largely from inadequate leadership – top to bottom, in business units and functions.

Given the essential role of leadership in creating sustained value in today's intensely competitive, rapidly evolving global marketplace, leadership development must be an ongoing part of your organization's strategy.

#### What Kind of Leader?

The best leaders do not automatically appear; they must be developed. So it is worth asking, what is a "best leader?" The answer lies in your organization's

strategic intent and the fundamental attributes of effective leaders.

For example, organizations with a Revolutionary strategy need Inventor-leaders (see *Change the Rules! The StraightTalk Coach*, Volume 2, issues three and four) who can guide the organization to create new products and markets. Evolutionary strategies need Builder-leaders to create team-oriented cultures that can manage complexity and achieve the long-term vision. Whatever your organization's strategy, your leadership development program should reflect it.

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**“To sustain such  
(organizational) growth,  
people must be willing to  
grow and renew themselves  
at all times. And the  
organization must always  
be seeking better ideas  
and better results.”**

*~ J. Kermit Campbell,  
former president and CEO,  
Herman Miller, Inc.*

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Identifying desirable skills and characteristics is another critical component of developing the leaders your organization

needs. Each individual has a unique “foundation” that defines her potential in various roles, the core components of which are her intellect and reasoning capabilities, and personal motivations.

Intellect and reasoning are essential elements of setting goals and solving problems to establish the agenda for a team, group, division or an entire organization. Strategic and tactical thinking, intuitive and analytical problem-solving skills, and balancing planning with action are key factors.

Personal and motivational characteristics define an individual's ability to accelerate the learning and change that help an organization increase its competency and quickly adapt to changing circumstances. Traits such as a global external orientation, flexibility and adaptability, and tolerance for risk and uncertainty are important. Commitment to principled and ethical behavior is essential above all.

Beyond these foundation skills, leadership demands that one successfully relate to and influence others. Speaking clearly, listening actively and practicing StraightTalk are among desirable influencing skills. Valuing the diversity that results in better decisions, and building alliances with superiors, peers, subordinates and outside stakeholders are especially significant leadership abilities today.

Someone who is adept at setting goals, accelerating learning and change, and influencing others has many leadership fundamentals, but he must also be able to impact an organization. This requires

setting a clear vision and roadmap, and motivating and empowering people to achieve it. More important, an individual must serve as a thought catalyst and change agent, proactively confronting and resolving issues, and constantly raising expectations for himself and others to engender confidence, respect and trust.

### **When Should Leadership Development Start?**

Many organizations provide no leadership support until people reach the managerial level, which is often 8 to 12 years into their working lives. In contrast, we advocate starting development activities from the beginning of an individual's career with your organization.

At each step in the career lifecycle – from applying raw intellect to running a division – there are countless chances to provide new experiences, challenges and learning opportunities to help people acquire, enhance and refine the skills required to lead.

A common misperception is that leadership development is only concerned with grooming someone to fill the highest position. Yet today's flatter structures mean that almost everyone has some leadership responsibilities, even if only within a narrow purview. Development strategies that start early and continue through people's careers build "bench strength," fostering leadership throughout an organization to help it look ahead, respond to challenges, innovate successfully and operate more strategically.

### **Leadership Development in Action**

Another common misperception is that a leadership development effort requires significant infrastructure investment – a "My Organization University." While these sophisticated, structured programs have their place, a successful program can be established simply by making leadership development a priority and creating appropriate processes to support it. For example:

- ◆ Shape opportunities to build deeper and broader expertise. This may include providing new challenges in an individual's specialty and assignments to cross-functional teams that offer exposure to other activities and issues.

- ◆ Tailor individual learning plans.

Designing an annual growth plan for each individual that anticipates possible future roles is extremely valuable. Although Human Resources or an external advisor can provide structure and advice, the plan should be completed and updated each year by an individual and his immediate supervisor. Team learning plans are also an excellent strategy for accelerating learning throughout the organization.

- ◆ The complexity of today's opportunities and challenges require that leaders have stronger team and alliance-building skills than in the past. Sound advice for current and prospective leaders is to manage calendars so there is time to get to know peers, subordinates and other key stakeholders both personally and professionally, and ensure that building relationships is an important cultural attribute.

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**“A true leader has the capacity to shed old baggage, to reinvent herself and to develop a new skin, always in the context of searching for creative ways to express herself fully and making herself and her organization stronger. Her entire life is a study in continuous renewal.”**

**~ About Reverend Carla Gorrell,  
Founding Executive Director  
of Food & Friends**

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- ◆ A global outlook is essential to dealing effectively with an organization's key stakeholders – investors, customers, competitors, employees and the communities in which it operates. Leaders can broaden their horizons by joining an organization

that addresses global issues, such as the Council on Foreign Relations, or by reading books that foster a global outlook, such as Thomas Friedman's "The Lexus and the Olive Tree." Traveling abroad is also a good way to develop a global perspective.

- ◆ Emerging and established leaders both need mentors and coaches who challenge them to constantly enhance their expertise and apply it more effectively.

### **A Broad Approach**

Leadership is not a title; it is an operating style that can add value to an organization at every level and in every function. Certainly, not everyone has the potential to fill an organization's highest position, but the most successful leadership development efforts reflect the belief that everyone can make increasingly valuable contributions as they grow in both technical and management skills.

There are considerable advantages to including every individual in your organization in a leadership development process. Although you may need only one person to lead the entire organization and a few to run major divisions, your organization undoubtedly needs many more leaders to manage teams, projects, functions and units. The more people who are included in leadership development program, the better your capacity to drive improved results.

Further, leadership development builds loyalty without needing to "buy" it. Individuals who are being developed have good reasons to stay and grow with an organization. An organization that invests in people and hopes to tap their expanding capabilities strives to provide the challenges, growth and satisfaction that foster commitment. A broad-based leadership development process can be the ultimate win-win for an organization and its employees.

Above all, making leadership development an ongoing priority is a strategy for generating the capability and enthusiasm that propel innovation and results – and create sustained value. **HK**

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