



Strategic HR Review

Senior leaders' strategic role in leadership development
Clinton Longenecker, Gary S. Insch,

Article information:

To cite this document:

Clinton Longenecker, Gary S. Insch, "Senior leaders' strategic role in leadership development", Strategic HR Review, <https://doi.org/10.1108/SHR-02-2018-0014>

Permanent link to this document:

<https://doi.org/10.1108/SHR-02-2018-0014>

Downloaded on: 18 April 2018, At: 18:42 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 0 other documents.

To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 4 times since 2018*

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:320271 []

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

Senior Leaders' Strategic Role in Leadership Development

Clinton O. Longenecker
Distinguished University Professor
Director-Center for Leadership and Organizational Excellence

Gary S. Insch
Management Department
The College of Business and Innovation

Senior Leaders' Strategic Role in Leadership Development

"It seems like everyone knows and understands the missing piece in leadership development programming is that we need our senior leaders to be engaged and thoughtful about their critical role in this process... if they are not engaged, a critical component for program success is truly missing!"

A Veteran Leadership Development Professional

Organizations around the world are spending billions of dollars annually for leadership training and development programs.¹ These programs are typically built around a cadre of

formal activities and processes that senior leaders, talent managers, and HR specialists believe will help their leaders acquire new skills and talents.² Leadership development initiatives are predicated on the belief that these structured efforts can and will improve an organization's leadership capital which will translate into higher organizational performance. In our previous research, we have clearly documented the potential power and impact of well-run leadership training and development efforts to support the supposition.³

Senior leaders regularly agree to support these formal processes, yet they frequently underestimate the importance of their roles and responsibilities in making these initiatives truly successful.⁴ Leaders charged with designing, implementing or improving their organization's leadership development process know that without the effective engagement, leadership, and ongoing support from senior leaders, these efforts can underachieve their potential for changing and improving leader behavior and organizational performance.⁵

With this backdrop, for the past decade we have been investigating the role senior leaders play to best support their organization's leadership development processes. To explore this issue, we have conducted structured focus groups with over 250 executives, HR leaders, and talent managers from over 30 different global organizations. Participants were responsible for leadership development in their respective organizations, averaged 44 years of age, 18 years of work experience, and were 54% men and 46% women. These focus groups were been used to solicit the input of those responsible for leadership development to identify the specific things senior leaders need to do to best support these leadership development efforts. Our participants were asked to answer the following question, ***"Based on your experience, what specific things do senior leaders in your organization need to do to best support your efforts at developing high performance and strong leadership talent?"***

After participants answered this question individually, they were placed into five-person focus groups to compare their answers, discuss their findings, and come up with the group's consensus top ten (10) responses to this question. This data are then used to help build a model of the specific things that senior leaders need to do to improve leadership development in their respective organizations. The following is a list of the key observations and specific questions (see Table 1) that every organization needs to address to improve its organization's leadership development efforts. And our key findings can best be summarized by the comment in the

opening quote of this article, “*we need our senior leaders to be engaged and thoughtful about their critical role in this process.*”

Observations on the Role of Senior Leadership in Leadership Development Efforts

“Without real support and ownership from senior leaders and an effective process, most organizations will struggle to develop the strong leadership talent they need to compete in a global marketplace.”

Senior VP Human Resources

Here are the Top 10 Observations on the role of senior leaders in any organization’s leadership development process that we assembled from these focus group efforts.

Key Observation #1: Senior leaders must demonstrate their commitment to leadership development and its importance to organizational performance and success. When you find any world-class organization with great leadership, CEOs and top leaders of these enterprises have typically made leadership development an organizational priority. Having said this, we observed that there is a direct link between senior leaders clearly stating the importance and priority of an organization’s leadership development efforts and the organizational activities that follow. For any organization to have an effective leadership development program, it is imperative that the program operate with clear operating principles that demonstrate the organization’s purpose and commitment to this effort from the top down. When leaders in an organization know that senior leaders are committed to leadership development they will take the process much more seriously. And when senior leaders make a strong case that this process is directly linked to an organization’s performance and success, an organization is in a better place to build an effective and sustainable leadership development process.

Key Observation #2: Senior leaders must be actively engaged in the creation of a desired leadership skill set and process for the enterprise. We have learned that senior leaders must be actively involved on several key fronts to create a successful leadership development process in their enterprises. First, senior leaders must be engaged in the identification and establishment of key leadership competencies/skills that are most critical to their organization’s success. Secondly, senior leaders must be actively engaged in the design of the actual

leadership development process that the organization wishes to implement. It is imperative that senior leaders have a “clear voice” in this process of building the foundation for their organization’s leadership development process with a clear understanding of how it will operate. The more actively involved senior leaders are in creating the organization’s leadership development process, the greater the top-down ownership will be. If senior leaders in any organization have not had a clear voice in creating these two important components, the organization will struggle with garnering real support from the get-go.

Key Observation #3: Senior leaders must challenge their organizations to establish multifaceted leadership development processes that are clearly defined, transparent, and understood by all. Many organizations depend heavily on training as the primary tool for leadership development, while others depend heavily on experiential learning activities like coaching, special assignments or cross training. Senior leaders who are serious about creating world-class leadership talent challenge their people to create cutting edge leadership development processes by “thinking outside the box” to create multidimensional leadership development processes that are tied to improved organizational performance. Every component of the process needs to have clearly stated purpose whether it is formal classroom training, cross training, formal performance appraisals, succession planning, mentoring or the like that is clearly linked to the process and is not thrown at participants in a piecemeal fashion. Modern organizations have a plethora of tools that can be used to creatively build leadership talent, but people need to understand the purpose of each component and why the organization believes that each component is worth their time, effort, and energy.

Key Observation #4: Senior leadership must provide the financial, staffing, and technology resources necessary to support the effort and require key measures of success. One of the most critical components to any serious leadership development effort is having the proper resource base to effectively support and sustain this effort. Senior leaders need to provide the resources necessary to systematically run leadership development efforts. At the same time, they need to encourage those responsible for these efforts to appropriately track performance and calculate both return-on-investment and return-on-expectations. Without appropriate funding, necessary staff, and the required technology, even the best designed programs are

destined to languish, and even fail. Furthermore, it is imperative that senior leaders clearly identify the key measures of success so that leadership development efforts can be measured, improved upon, and justified as an appropriate investment in the organization's future. We have learned that there is an important caveat here: *senior leaders must take a long-term approach in creating leadership development processes for their organizations as these efforts typically take several years to impact organizational performance.*

Key Observation #5: Senior leaders must make leadership performance and continuous learning among organizational leaders a real priority.

According to the participants in our numerous focus groups, senior leaders are responsible for encouraging high performance among enterprise leaders at all levels. When an organization has a leader in a position who is not performing in an optimal fashion, who is toxic or destructive in their approach to leadership, or is not properly representing the organization's leadership values, senior leaders must take action. From this perspective, senior leaders are the "keepers" of the organization's culture for leadership performance. And when an ineffective leader is allowed to stay in place without consequence, the leadership development process will appear compromised or impotent. The ultimate purpose of any organization's leadership development process is to improve performance at both the individual and organizational level. Therefore, senior leaders are responsible for using this process to identify, improve, or remove organizational leaders based on their performance and willingness to continuously learn and improve.

Key Observation #6: Senior leaders must role model desired behaviors and leadership practices.

Our participants have made it fairly clear over the years that creating a leadership competency model or skill set with senior leadership engagement is not an overwhelmingly daunting task in most enterprises. The challenge lies in getting senior leaders to demonstrate the appropriate behaviors that have been articulated in the organization's leadership competency/skill set model. Social learning theory teaches us that people in the middle and bottom of any organization structure will emulate the behavior of people at the top. Thus, it is critically important that senior leaders know and understand their organization's leadership development model and process; hence, they are in a position to emulate, demonstrate, and

reinforce appropriate behaviors. Without this role modeling from the highest level on down, organizations will lose support for any organization's leadership development efforts.

Key Observation #7: Senior Leadership must provide ongoing feedback, coaching and mentoring to their people. One of the most powerful things that any senior leader can do to support an organization's leadership development efforts is to personally use the process to develop the talent of their own people. Being a coach and mentor to others in the organization sends the powerful message that leadership development is a priority. This factor has been identified by participants in our focus groups as a real challenge in many enterprises because actions speak louder than words. Having said that, there is a direct link between leadership effectiveness and the ability to develop the people that a leader is personally responsible for training. Consequently, this principle should be a real incentive for senior leadership to implement and follow.

Key Observation #8: Senior leaders must provide their organization's members time for leadership development activities. As we all know, time is one of the most critical resources in any organization. And as a general rule, organizations encourage their employees and leaders to invest time around things that are truly important to the enterprise. Thus, for any leadership development system to work effectively, people need time to engage in the process. This can include time for attending formal training programs, sufficient time to put together personal development plans, the time to conduct effective formal performance reviews, the time for formal mentoring sessions, among others. When organizations do not take the time to discuss the issue of time and its relevance to leadership development in their organization, it is easy for important things to be pushed aside for the sake of "urgent" things. Effective leadership development is important but it is rarely urgent. So organizations need to carefully track the time they devote to this process, and again, it starts at the top.

Key Observation #9: Senior leadership must create accountability for effective leadership development and reinforce appropriate leadership behaviors across the organization. One of the most powerful things senior leaders can do to accelerate both support for and growth of any organization's leadership development program is to create accountability for engagement in leadership development practices among the people that report directly to them. At the

same time, reinforcing and rewarding the behavior of leaders that support these efforts sends a powerful message to the rest of the organization that a leadership development effort is important to the organization and worthy of their time and attention. When leaders are encouraged to engage in a leadership development initiative from the top down and are held accountable for doing so, people take the effort more seriously and the likelihood of improved leadership performance goes up considerably.

Key Observation #10: Senior leaders must demonstrate extreme care with hiring, promotions and succession planning that reflects the values the organization is attempting to support with their leadership development process. Our final observation on the role of senior leaders covers a lot of ground in that if senior leaders want world-class talent in their organization, they must hire, promote, and plan for the creation of this talent base. All of these activities take focus, time, and great care if they are to come to fruition and again this all starts at the top of the organization. When organizations do not take these key HR practices seriously or the process is rushed or the result of political activity and personal patronage, these practices will override the effort to secure and develop leadership top talent, and the organization will never optimize its leadership development process.

CONCLUSIONS

Our research clearly supports the need for senior leadership's involvement in the leadership development process. So, how should an organization start? We recommend that the organization begin with conducting its own senior leader focus groups to solicit their input on how to best support your organization's leadership development programs. Use the questions in Table 1 as guide for this discussion. Answering these questions honestly and openly will provide tremendous information in understanding current practices and opportunities for improvement.

Next, build your own model of the key practices necessary to best support these initiatives. Senior leaders may need to be trained to help them understand their role in how to engage in these key practices. And finally, accountability must be imbedded in the process where senior

leadership behavior and support is measured and valued, and senior leaders provide coaching and are themselves coached on an ongoing basis as part of the organization's culture.

High performance organizations are built. They do not happen by chance. Creating and maintaining superior performance requires the attention, time and support of senior leaders as they recruit, train, retain and reward the leadership teams in their organization. This support using the key observations outlined in this paper, provides an initial foray into the process for building a success leadership development program and organization.

References

1. Hughes, R. L., Ginnett, R.C., and Gordon, J.C. Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience, McGraw-Hill Inc., New York, 2012.
2. Longenecker, C.O., "Barriers to Managerial Learning: Lessons for Rapidly Changing Organizations," Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal. Vol. 24 No.5 2010, pp.8-11.
3. Longenecker, C.O. and Gatins, D. "Gateways to Management Development in Rapidly Changing Organizations," Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal. Vol.25 No.3. 2011, pp. 3-6.
4. Schermerhorn, J.R. Exploring Management, Wiley Inc., San Francisco. 2014.
5. Longenecker, C.O. and Fink, L.S. "Developing a Learning Organization: The Top Management Leadership Factor." Effective Executive, June 2008, pp. 46-51.
6. Longenecker, C. O. and Fink, L. S. "Creating Human Resource Management Value in the 21st Century". Human Resource Management International Digest, Vol. 21 No. 2, 2013, pp. 7-11

Table 1: Critical Questions Senior Leadership Must Answer to Enhance Their Organization's Leadership Development

Key Question #1: *Do your senior leaders demonstrate their commitment and publicly endorse your leadership development efforts in both word and deed? If not, how does this impact how people in your organization view your leadership development process?*

Key Question #2: *Do your senior leaders have "skin in the game" and know and understand how your leadership development process operates? If not, what needs to be done to create this understanding and ownership?*

Key Question #3: *Does your organization take a multifaceted approach to leadership development using all of the tools at your disposal? If not, why not?*

Key Question #4: *Do your senior leaders provide the necessary resources for your leadership development efforts to be successful? If not, what can you do to make a business case for additional investment?*

Key Question #5: *Do senior leaders in your organization have high standards for leadership behavior and performance and a willingness to help leaders at all levels of the enterprise improve their performance? Are your senior leaders willing to accept poor performance among leaders for an unacceptable period of time?*

Key Question #6: *Do the people at the top of your organization demonstrate the leader behaviors and practices what they expect from the rest of the organization?*

Key Question #7: *Do the senior leaders in your organization personally practice coaching and mentoring with the people in their charge? If not, what steps can be taken to encourage them to do so?*

Key Question #8: *Does your organization provide leaders sufficient time needed to effectively engage in key leadership development activities?*

Key Question #9: *Do your senior leaders create accountability for proper engagement in your leadership development process and reinforce appropriate behavior?*

Key Question #10: *Do senior leaders in your organization use the values reflected in your organization's leadership development process for purposes of selection, promotion, and long-term leadership development decisions?*