Developing a Culture of Leadership
A Systems Based Approach to Leadership Development

Leadership is widely recognized as a key success factor in individual, team and organizational effectiveness. Too often, leadership development practices centre only on a leadership development course or workshop. Systems based approaches to cultivating and building leadership capacity embed leadership throughout the whole organization. Want to discover other systemic interventions to ensure leadership capabilities are built and sustained within your organization by connecting people, practices and organizational processes to ensure meaningful performance?   Read on.

Leadership development courses are an effective way of transmitting information on key practices, theories of leadership and even offer an opportunity for a leader to question their own behaviours. Many organizations outsource and send their leaders to workshops only to find that their return on investment is poor. Why? Because leadership development occurs within the context of the organization. It is much more than professional development. That is often why leaders gain insightful knowledge but find it particularly challenging to apply their new knowledge and skills back in the context of their workplace. Leadership development must be supported throughout an organization, through its culture and values; practices; mind set and behaviours of existing leaders.

In building leadership capacity, it must be viewed as a source of sustainable competitive advantage and must demonstrate a high degree of senior executive ownership. Everyone is responsible for leadership – not just training or HR. A key starting point is to involve the organization in defining core leadership behaviours that support the organization's desired culture. Many assessment instruments such as the "Organization Culture Inventory" can assist you in defining key behaviours that are critical for success. Furthermore, it is important what sets your culture apart from that of your competitors. This is critical understanding required for successful recruitment and retention initiatives! Just ask your leadership team how they would define it. Also, does it reflect the values your organization has defined. The two should be closely linked.

Leadership development programs do have a valuable place if they are internally developed to reflect the practices and culture of the organization and if the models developed are easy to understand and tied to business strategy.   They can be extremely valuable for new leaders and especially for those transitioning from the outside to help them understand the challenges, culture and polictics of the organization. For example, do you provide a leadership/management orientation program in addition to your core orientation program? By ensuring participation within two months of assuming their role, such a program can be helpful in communicating expectations of a leader; introducing leaders to others and building productive relationships; increasing knowledge of key strategic objectives and business units; communicating information about practices such as performance management; reward and recognition; financial management; transition strategies; organization culture and values and desired leadership behaviours. This can be extremely valuable in ensuring a fast and effective start for the leader in creating momentum and inspiring others; building coalitions and establishing realistic objectives.

Once leaders know more about the culture and desired behaviours of the organization, it is time for them to assess their own behaviours. 360 degree feedback tools that assess behaviours (LSI II for example uses the same behaviours defined in the OCI) can be extremely insightful since feedback is provided from one's support person/supervisor; several peers and several direct reports. Personalized coaching to help interpret the feedback and develop an action plan is most valuable. Of course, it should also be included and measured in one's objectives as part of the performance management process.

The performance management process is another practice that can support leadership development. Does your organization simply reward performance based on achievement of objectives? Or does it also look at behaviours and values exhibited by leaders in the attainment of those objectives. This can take considerable time and is well worth the effort! Other practices that support leadership development include succession planning and promoting from within; leadership development programs based on business unit objectives in which participants develop job related skills; sharing of culture and values during interview and recruitment process; core leadership training programs offered to support key competencies (e.g. teach effective feedback and communication skills if you want someone to be a performance leader); policies that support leaders and desired behaviours (e.g. if you wish leaders to be empowered and make decisions then policies can't always be black and white and perhaps should be stated as a guideline); use of language in communication – does your organization use the term supervisor or support person – what implications does that hold for your staff? Have you created a command and control hierarchy or one based on the client being at the top with everyone working on a common goal.

Finally, leadership development efforts must be aligned with business goals to maximize performance. Too often, leadership development initiatives are cut back due to poor alignment with business objectives. In the end, they must support them and that only makes good business sense. Leadership development is an investment in human capital and the more comprehensive the efforts, the better the financial results will be in critical measures such as employee retention, shareholder returns, growth in market share and revenue generation.