

Hope Can't Be a Strategy in Leadership Development

Which company doesn't publicly aspire to developing high performing individuals, teams and organizations?

Many support their ambitions with genuine investments in internal leadership training processes, MBA-programs, peer-networking groups, coaches, job rotation, overseas assignments and so on. And, yet 9 of 10 larger organizations admit dissatisfaction with the outcome – there simply isn't enough strong future leaders in the pipeline exemplified again-and-again in annual CEO surveys where "insufficient talents" remains a top 3 concern.

So, we may have a disconnect – but which?

My argument will be that hope is an overemployed strategy in leadership development versus one of structure, design and ROI.

First, however, let's try to establish how many high performing talents and leaders can you expect in an organization? In percentages, shall we?

We do know that 1 of 7 (14%) employees is the "high performing individual with extraordinary value creation abilities" and out this thin slice you need to find the women and men with "above average leadership capabilities".

So, it would be fair to estimate the total number of top-notch-high-performing-high-value-leaders-percentage to be around 3-5% of the entire work force.

Is that enough for your organization?

Before I dispatch my opinions please reflect on a few interesting paragraphs from "Lets Kill Leadership":

In a wealthy society replete with opportunity, perhaps there are few sadder sights than a well-educated 50-year-old still in employment, still reporting to a boss, still working a five-day week, still fearful of stepping out of line and still dependent on the beneficence of others.

Employment is fine at a young age. But its purpose should be to educate its subjects to grow out of the need for it.

In today's economy, the main aim of employment should be to serve as a training ground in self-reliance, self-responsibility and self-employment. By the age of 40, no employee should have any further need of employment. Rather in the way that parents bring up their children to grow out of childhood and to become self-reliant adults, so employment should develop employees to rid themselves of a life of deference and dependency and to start exercising a sense of their own agency."

My reading of this is that we may well have good intention for our people – also long term – but a thinking of traditionalist offers traditional results instead of future-oriented ones. Or put in a different manner, while we may intend to equip and suit people up for bigger roles and responsibilities, we miss to train behaviors and maturity to operate with independence and in roles of authority. Let me explain why.

When participants enter my leadership trainings, their superiors are invited to part-take, advice, engage and follow up along the process of 6-8 months. In case of "**Welcome to Leadership**" the scope is an investment of DKK 40-60,000 ((in)+ direct costs). My estimate is that 1-2 of 10 manager actually are engaged which to me begs the question – how can you expect anybody to develop to your liking when you don't exercise constant care for the investment and time?

Another aspect where hope rules over design is in scope of learning. My reading of the landscape is that surprisingly few superiors are well rehearsed to stipulate learning requirements, standards needed to design forward a path of performance, skills, perspectives, values and leadership abilities.

Part of this is due to that they themselves 'just buckled' down and got on with it despite blood, tears and sweat.

Few have sat in on meetings to intellectualize on skill requirements, values, leadership and maturity needed now and in the future for the organization, but how can you expect more than 2-3 of 10 talents to achieve your targets when you can't articulate them? You are leaving the talents to guessing for a destination.

Today's youth have different needs. They need meaning and a goal post in the horizon.

Numbersⁱ covering 2008-2018 shows a decline of 24% in numbers of younger leaders while the +50 leaders have increased by 33%. The de-selection of leadership responsibility is due to lack of challenges, learnings, and seeing their contribution bear fruit – which older generations unfortunately fail to deliver.

And, finally why hope supersedes design and structure in developing leaders.

Winning organizations is a matter of 5-10-20 years of persistent training, generational developments - and not just a couple of rounds of training, coaching and fancy posters about 'Leadership v2.0'.

The 10 year rule of purposeful training, first revealed by Anders Ericsson, applies in leadership as well to obtain elitist status. But since corporation 'train' in a different tempo and intensity – you may well need 15-20 years of challenging, supporting, yet consequential environment before you have unearthed a new leadership gem.

Are you ready to exercise such a strategy, design, and structure – or would you rather rely on hope?

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And yes, I'm also in the market to also sell you leadership trainings, but you decide from this portfolio:

- ✓ "Welcome to Leadership" – talents, young leaders and managers with no prior training – get off to a great start
- ✓ "Leaders – What's Next?!" – you have been a leader for 3-5 years, what do you do now to become promotable?
- ✓ "The Management Side of Leadership" – examination of the processes of the employee life cycle
- ✓ "Personal Leadership" – mature leaders aiming to improve team and personal performance to v2.0
- ✓ "Leading Leaders" – for executive ready to involve the organization in culture and performance improvements
- And
- ✓ "Tag Ledelsen i Produktionen" – team leaders in/around production environment – a splendid choice!

Kind regards,

Dennis Jakobsen

dfj@thebusinessleadership.academy

+45-60899775

ⁱ <https://www.london.edu/think/lets-kill-leadership>

ⁱⁱ www.lederne.dk