



Acceleration

Seven principles to speed up leadership development in a tough world

“Businesses could fill the leadership vacuum from their internal ranks if they knew how to spot and develop their real potential leaders. But they don't, despite the enormous resources and thought they pour into the task.”

Ram Charan, “Leaders at all Levels”

Leadership development: the current state of play

With the expansion in business education, the popularity of executive coaching, the proliferation of management training (over 26,000 courses in the UK at the last count), and the growth of ad hoc development activities (horse-whispering, dervish dancing and the like), leadership development is now a major industry in its own right. But despite increasing investment in the inputs, the evidence of better outputs - breadth and depth of leadership talent - is thin on the ground.

We've got ourselves into a tangle of competing perspectives, implementing a series of short-term tactics without an overarching strategic framework. Part of the problem is that there is no set of guiding principles based on robust theory and tested by systematic evaluation. And a range of leadership development practice, good, bad (ineffective) and ugly (counter-productive), is filling the vacuum.

In a tough business environment when demand for leadership and the qualities of character and wisdom is rising, what should organisations do to improve the supply of available talent? **How should organisations accelerate the development of current and emerging leaders?**

“*It's no secret that succession planning and leadership development fall woefully short of delivering on their promise.*”

Ram Charan

Leadership development and the business impact

Accelerated leadership development is a business imperative.

Ten years ago we surveyed organisational performance in 60 firms as part of our ongoing review of succession and talent management practice. In 2008, we followed up the group to analyse survival and success rates:

- what role did succession management activity ten years ago play in shaping business success and decline?
- which specific succession management practices and processes emerged as important factors? Which didn't?
- did proactive leadership development practice have an impact on business fortunes ten years later? Which activities made most difference?

Succession and talent management practices and proactive leadership development do predict survival and success. **High impact practices double the chances of organisational success ten years later.** The findings however challenge much conventional thinking¹, indicating important ways to refocus your leadership development strategy and implement tactics to speed up the development of your leaders.

¹ <http://www.pressdispensary.co.uk/releases/c991776.php>

Download the full set of results at: www.amazureconsulting.com/files/1/70080052/TenYearsOnSuccessionManagementOrganisationalSuccess.pdf

The cautious high flier

Since joining the bank as a graduate trainee fifteen years ago, **Chris** has progressed rapidly. Now a highly regarded professional in the Corporate Strategy function, Chris recently attended the bank's Advanced Leadership Programme. This initiative arose out of a succession process that had forecast significant gaps in the bank's top leadership group over the next 2 - 3 years.

Chris' career review during the programme has been highly positive. And a 360° feedback exercise indicated an impressive array of strengths. It also however highlighted a lack of self confidence, reflected in doubts about her ability to take a step up in leadership responsibility.

The bank is now reviewing Chris' options. Is Chris a long-term bet for further investment? Or is Chris' self confidence a constraining factor that will limit her future progression? What are Chris' development options?

The ambitious police officer

Simon rose through the ranks rapidly, becoming Detective Superintendent of one of the country's largest police forces by his mid 30s. Keen to progress further, he took part in the promotion process to advance into the pool of potential applicants for chief officer appointments. Successful achievement at an extended assessment centre will see him attend the Strategic Command programme, mandatory for future chief officers.

But the news is not good for Simon. He “failed” the assessment centre. The feedback highlighted a number of shortcomings: his judgement in dealing with complexity, and a lack of poise and subtlety in his interpersonal style.

Simon is now reviewing his options. Although his track record is impressive and he is still ambitious to make it to the top, Simon accepts his career is stalling.

He thinks he may apply for an MBA programme which his Force will sponsor. He is also contemplating a move to a different role in another Division. Or should he do something else? What?

The Sales Director's next step up

Paula joined the FMCG firm as Sales Director two years ago with an impressive background in several blue chip firms. Following an acquisition and reorganisation of the management structure, Paula is now being considered as a possible candidate for the MD role of a significant part of the business.

The Group CEO comments: “The issue is that Paula sees the business world only through a sales lens. She needs to broaden her horizons. Interpersonal skills, fantastic.

Motivation, no question. It's her strategic thinking and ability to connect up different activities that make me question her readiness for this role.”

The HR Director points out that six months ago, Paula began a coaching programme designed around her strategic analysis and decision making to support her desire to take a step up. And the initial signs are promising.

Can this executive coach work with Paula to support her move into a larger role? What further developmental input might Paula require? Or will she always be lopsided in her business outlook?

Difficult questions for leadership development

Each of these three case studies throws up difficult questions:

- **who develops and who doesn't?** Leadership isn't simply a set of techniques and tools. It is in no small measure a set of operating assumptions about ourselves, others, and how work gets done. Can anyone develop a leadership mind-set, or are some individuals much more developable than others?
- **which leadership talents are more or less developable?** Are some leadership skills and styles so "hardwired" within human nature they don't lend themselves to much change and improvement? Or, with sufficient time and energy, can any leadership talent be acquired?
- **which methods work best?** Do some methods consistently out-trump others? There is a spectrum of options, from business education and management training, to projects, mentoring and coaching and the wave of New Age wheezes. Which methods would receive a five star rating in a "WHICH" consumer research report, and which would be panned? Or is this simplistic, and different methods work for different individuals and issues? Do we know which method to use when?

To answer these questions we need to look at the dynamics of leadership impact and organisational performance.

Imagine we have a dataset for a group of 500 store managers in a large retailer. For each individual leader we have an index of their leadership capability, collated from 360° feedback, assessment centres and career interviews. We also have for each leader a consolidated measure of business performance for their store, a metric that factors in different outcomes: sales, service, productivity and employee engagement.

We plot the data, leadership capability vs. business outcomes. Would the graph be a random display, i.e. there is no relationship between leadership effectiveness and organisational performance? Or would a pattern emerge?

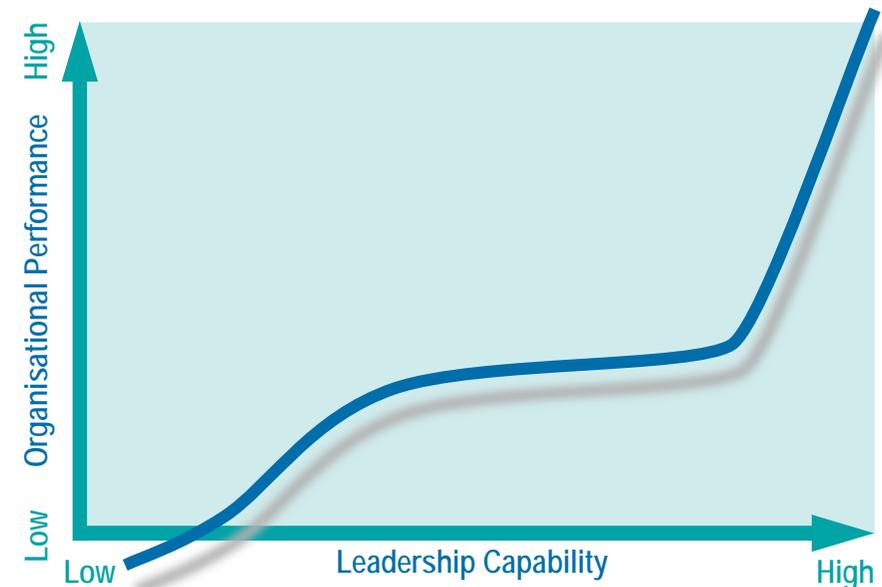
The dynamics of leadership excellence

Conventional wisdom assumes that step-wise improvements in leadership capability produce incremental gains in organisational performance. It's not a perfect correlation, but the pattern is one in which more inputs steadily drive better outputs.

This isn't what happens when you crunch the numbers argues Zenger in his analysis of the relationship between leadership effectiveness and performance outcomes¹

Low leadership capability will of course damage levels of organisational performance. And improvements in leadership effectiveness "at the bottom end" will provide initial gains in performance.

But then leadership seems to hit a "plateau" in which improvements in leadership effectiveness don't seem to produce too much organisational payback. Individuals at the 70th percentile aren't doing all that much better than those at the 30th percentile. Increasing levels of leadership effectiveness don't deliver correspondingly better organisational outcomes until individuals hit a "tipping point" of capability. This is the transition into a zone of leadership excellence where the organisational returns are spectacular.



What triggers this transition into the level of exceptional leadership that delivers outstanding gains in business performance? Luck and good fortune? Or something else? **Which strategies accelerate development towards the "tipping point"?**

¹ "The Extraordinary Leader" Zenger & Folkman

The seven principles of accelerated development

In “The Republic”, Plato sets out his vision for equipping leaders for the ideal political state. Mapping out the key steps in the process, Plato felt after 50 years of development, the candidates would be ready to rule.¹

Unfortunately we don't have 50 years development time. Organisations committed to building leadership capability will have to find ways to accelerate development.

- recognise that not everyone can be a leader
- start with the individual not the solution
- identify potential earlier rather than later
- development as a customised experience
- leaders lead by leading
- build an infrastructure to make it easy to develop
- leverage the power of diversity rather than demand conformity

“Plato advocated a leadership programme that took a lifetime, but we don't have that luxury.”

Jay Conger

¹ <http://www.strategy-business.com/press/article/8714?pg=0>

Principle 1: recognise that not everyone can be a leader

Most organisations rightly want to create a leadership ethos throughout the entire enterprise, one that encourages everyone at every level to use their initiative and make decisions. But this doesn't mean anyone can progress to positions of leadership responsibility.

Leadership, practised well, requires a complex array of values, fundamental skills, know how, character and wisdom. The development challenge for some individuals is simply too great. Accelerated development acknowledges that leadership requires a blend of talents and experience that not everyone can develop.

Accelerated development starts with a **clear map of organisational expectations** and targeted criteria to guide resourcing decisions. A focused one page blue-print that maps out leadership fundamentals at each organisational level may be more powerful than complex competency manuals that obscure the key requirements of leadership progression. And it should be a leadership blue-print that reflects the specific needs of the future organisation, not one that freezes the past.

Successful candidates are expected to demonstrate competencies in:

Communication: able to get one's message understood clearly by adopting a range of styles, tools and techniques appropriate to the customer and the nature of the information.

Resilience: manages personal effectiveness by managing emotions in the face of pressure, setbacks or dealing with provocative situations. Demonstrates an approach to work that is characterised by commitment, motivation and energy

Flexibility: adapts and works effectively with a variety of situations, individuals or groups. Able to understand and appreciate different and opposing perspectives on an issue, to adapt an approach as the requirements of a situation change, and to change or easily accept changes in one's own organisation or job requirements.

**Job advert for a gardener at
BBC Caversham**

Principle 2: start with the individual not the solution

Leadership development is about the psychology of personal change, and because human nature is complex, it is unlikely that a simple one-size-fits-all package will provide a definitive solution for all leaders. Leadership development needs to focus on the individual rather than the application of any one “theory”. For the individual we need to ask, what is:

the starting point?

What is the individual's current set of available resources?

Key themes to review are:

- cognitive capability and the range of talents in problem analysis, judgement and decision making
- interpersonal impact, and capabilities in empathy, social confidence and communication
- motivation incorporating a mix of values and attitudes that shape integrity, provide energy and a drive for achievement

Some potential leaders are blessed with an array of impressive resources, cognitive, interpersonal and motivational. Others have a much more limited range of capabilities to draw on. And others have advanced capabilities in specific areas, but lack personal resources in others.

the desired end point?

Where does the individual want to go? What is the individual's career focus?

- betting big long-term for the long-term to take on top management responsibility?
- building expertise to operate within a specialist niche?
- developing mastery to advance within a professional arena?
- becoming an organisational “jack of all trades”?
- or, planning an early exit to down-shift?

There is a range of career aspirations and options; different individuals want different things. Some individuals have high expectations; others are more modest in their aspirations. Some prefer specialisation within current capability; others want to extend their careers into new areas.

Principle 2: start with the individual not the solution

The development agenda is the distance between the starting point and the desired outcome. Modest current resources but high expectations of future success will require different strategies and tactics to those where resources are extensive and ambitions are more realistic.

Accelerated development is about the strategies and tactics to speed the process from the start point to the end goal. What are the options?

“*Napoleon knew what to do, and he flew to the mark; he would shorten a straight line to come at his object. He saw only the object.*”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Fill in the competency gaps

This strategy is the classic approach to development. The leadership career begins with an insight into what we don't know and can't do. And the leadership journey continues as we acquire additional knowledge and expertise and build new skills.

This is **leadership as the accumulation of expertise and skills in which more competency equals better leadership**. And if leaders keep acquiring sufficient breadth and depth of competency, they will build critical mass to take them past the tipping point into the zone of exceptional performance and organisational impact.

In this model, competency models map out the requirement, and business education and management training provide the typical solution.

It's certainly a tried and tested approach, but it doesn't seem to be working too well. Yes, leaders do need a certain level of capability across key functions and processes, but it isn't a strategy that is generating large numbers of exceptional leaders.



“*The first law of holes: when you're in one, stop digging. Abandon traditional leadership development practices, they're not working.*”

Ram Charan

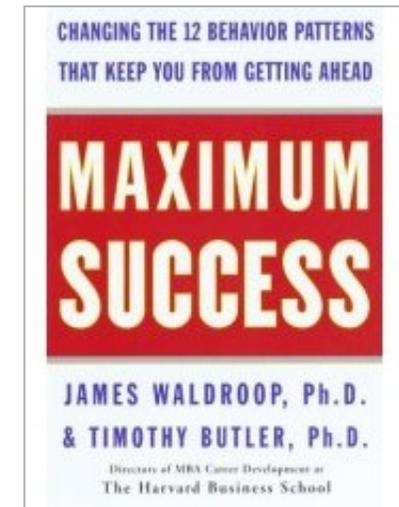
Find your flaws and fix them

This development strategy suggests that we can all become exceptional leaders, and then asks: why aren't most of us outstanding leaders? It comes up with a different answer to classical development.

We are our own worst enemies, being held back by our shortcomings and limitations. The tipping point of leadership excellence is less about acquiring an ever-expanding portfolio of new skills than stopping those behaviours that are counter productive and holding us back.

For success guru, Anthony Robbins, our limitations are our negative thoughts and feelings, patterns of thinking about ourselves that hold us back from “Awakening the Giant Within”. Waldroop and Butler of the Harvard Business School Career Development Programme map out twelve psychological themes - “inner demons”¹ - that constrain individuals from optimising their effectiveness and realising their full leadership potential.

Leadership development is less about filling in the competency gaps and more about tackling the underlying psychological forces that hold us back. The response: honesty and courage in finding and fixing the flaws that are blocking progress towards effective leadership.



¹ From “Maximum Success” Waldroop & Butler

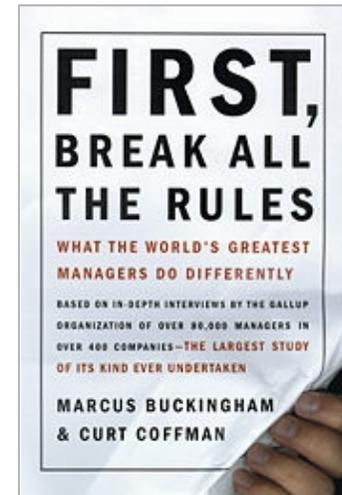
Play to your strengths

In the last few years, another perspective on leadership development emerged. Triggered by the “positive psychology” movement and pollster Gallup’s research, the strengths-based approach argues that much leadership development practice has got it completely wrong. Attempts to build excellence across all leadership talents are futile. And a focus on shortcomings and weaknesses has taken us nowhere. Instead the leadership development enterprise should be about identifying and building on existing strengths.

“First Break All The Rules” mapped out the new agenda. Based on their analysis of the “world’s greatest managers” Gallup identifies a fundamental insight:

“people don’t change that much; don’t waste time trying to put in what was left out; try to draw out what was left in; this is hard enough.”

This is a shift in emphasis towards a more hard nosed attitude to development, a perspective that favours nature rather than nurture in explaining behaviour, and one that is sceptical of personal change. The focus therefore is on locating the “naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling or behaviour” that represent current talents, and using these talents to build strengths, strengths that will move leaders into the zone of exceptional performance.



Strengths-based approaches have an obvious appeal. Fixing limitations has been the standard ploy in, for example, performance reviews, and it's hard work, for individuals and their managers. And the returns typically are modest.

Playing to our existing talents, to do what we do best is a much more enjoyable and rewarding development experience than grappling with what we find difficult, uncomfortable and painful.

So is strengths-based development the new paradigm for accelerated leadership? Here we accept the realities of human psychology and constraints of personal change. And we focus on identifying natural talents and finding ways to turn them into outstanding strengths.

“*The two assumptions that guide the world's best managers: each person's talents are enduring and unique; each person's greatest room for growth is in the areas of their greatest strength.*”

M Buckingham & D Clifton

The problems with a strengths based philosophy

- **it over simplifies leadership life.** Gallup's "greatest managers" are lucky; they seem to operate in a world different to that of most leaders. Leadership isn't "pick and mix", choosing only those challenges that will play to strengths and avoiding those that might expose any shortcomings.

It is true there are few "Martini Managers"¹ individuals who are extraordinarily effective "anytime, anyplace, anywhere". But a leadership outlook that only seeks out opportunities to exploit strengths is a risky strategy. Maybe there will be a world in which round pegs do what they're best at, and square pegs focus on their strengths, and everyone wins. But right now, the world is not organised in such an orderly way.

Like a business that relies on its current capability and is overtaken by more adventurous competitors, a leadership reliance on current talents will be out-manoeuvred in a tough business environment.

- **it misreads the psychology of human nature.** There are deep-seated and fundamental talents that represent organisationally valued strengths. Wise managers know the importance of selection in finding the right mix of talents when filling roles. But these same talents have the potential to be hazards; our shortcomings are often the "flipside" of our strengths. Strengths in achievement orientation, for example, can easily become damaging expediency, and a talent in analysis can also be played out in pedantic caution that slows down decision making.
- **it down plays the importance of context.** Strengths are not absolute; they are relative to the dynamics of the leadership situation. A strength in creativity is powerful when no one else is creative but the task requires high level of innovation. But it might not be such a strength with equally creative colleagues, or when the task is more about disciplined execution than blue sky thinking. Highly effective leaders understand the power of context, reading the balance of skills within the team and the nature of the challenge. And they adapt their approach to the requirement of the situation.

¹ www.amazureconsulting.com/files/1/24127127/whatsOnTheRadarScreen.pdf

Build versatility

If strengths based strategies have their shortcomings in the messy world of organisational realities, another perspective has gone further. The insight of the “Versatile Leader”¹ is that: **leaders often under-perform not so much because of any deficiencies but as a result of over-doing their strengths. Leaders become lopsided when, by over-playing some aspects of leadership, they downplay others.**

If some leaders lead with the “brakes” on (avoiding the challenges that might expose their shortcomings) and others keep revving the engine (over doing their strengths), versatile leaders know how to read the road to drive at the optimal speed.

The trick for versatile leaders is in managing the two fundamental tensions of leadership life: forceful vs. enabling, and operational vs. strategic. Forceful leadership takes a personal lead to establish control; enabling leadership encourages others to take the lead. Both are powerful leadership virtues, but need to be deployed at the right moment. Strategic leadership is about long-term positioning; operational leadership is short-term execution. Again both orientations are needed but at different times.

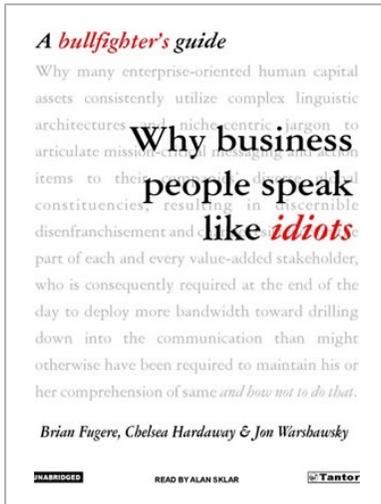


Versatile Leadership as managing opposing tensions

Versatile leadership understands the “power of both”, that leadership spans a spectrum of problems requiring different responses. Versatile leadership is that balanced outlook that responds with wisdom in a proportionate way to the situation. This isn’t bland leadership, but adaptability to take on a range of different challenges in the right way at the right time.

In today’s business environment, characterised by complexity, uncertainty and change, is versatile leadership a winning development strategy?

¹ “The Versatile Leader” Bob Kaplan



“Why Business People Speak Like Idiots” is an excellent critique of how corporate speak and business jargon is getting in the way of rigorous thinking and clear communication. And rigorous thinking and clear communication is undermined by:

- simplification to tell a “good story”
- simplification that creates exaggeration
- exaggeration that distorts the real message

Four different perspectives in leadership development:

- **fill in the competency gaps; acquire and build breadth and depth of competency**
- **fix the flaw; locate and tackle the barrier that is blocking leadership effectiveness**
- **play to strengths and build on natural talents to gain most leadership leverage**
- **become versatile to manage the opposing tensions of leadership life and adapt flexibly to different challenges**

They can't all be right. Are they all wrong? Or maybe they are right in some respects but wrong in others. What are the relative pros and cons of these different approaches?

Pros and cons of different approaches to leadership development

	PROS	CONS
Classic development: Fill in the gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ recognises that leadership requires a range of different skills and know-how■ maps out a comprehensive agenda for leadership development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ competency is unlikely to drive outstanding levels of leadership performance■ building excellence across all leadership processes and functions is unrealistic
Fix the flaws	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ highlights the shortcomings that are barriers to leadership effectiveness, and the counter-productive behaviours that produce derailment■ the insight that leadership can be as much about “stops” as “do more of’s” informs specific priorities for personal change	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ the assumption that excellence will emerge once limitations are removed is questionable■ some limitations may be deep-seated and not easily changeable
Play to strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ acknowledges the impact of fundamental traits on leadership effectiveness■ enhancing strengths has the potential to become a driver of excellence■ translating existing talents into strengths represents a developmentally easier project	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ the uncertainty and complexity of leadership throws up challenges outside of current strengths■ strengths, over-deployed, can become dynamics for derailment
Build versatility	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ recognises the complexity of leadership to balance competing tensions■ provides options in adapting to changing circumstances and flexibility to manoeuvre through different leadership situations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ developing the kind of adaptability of versatile leadership may be too ambitious an agenda■ versatility may be perceived as lacking a distinctive leadership outlook and passion

Principle 2: start with the individual not the solution

For some individuals, accelerated development happens when they rethink their goals to make them more realistic in line with their current capabilities. Other individuals, with extensive personal resources, need encouragement to think big and set themselves more stretching goals.

Play to strengths is probably the best strategy for a number of potential leaders. With specific talents targeted at advancement within a defined field, this strategy is more likely to build the kind of excellence that speeds progression.

Fix the flaw is the optimal strategy for those individuals held back by a specific limiting factor. And until individuals acknowledge and overcome this constraint, attempts to develop additional capability won't deliver the gains that will drive excellence.

Fill the gaps to become a super-competent leader is an unrealistic strategy except for the most supremely gifted individuals with extensive resources across the portfolio of cognitive, interpersonal and motivational talents. For most leaders, it may make steady progress but it won't produce exceptional leadership.

Versatility is a realistic strategy for most leaders who possess threshold capability across most leadership areas, and with significant strengths in specific areas. Here the agenda is probably a combination of: utilising their strengths whilst avoiding the excesses of over-deployment and developing practical wisdom to build the flexibility needed for different challenges.

Principle 2: start with the individual not the solution

Chris, our high flyer in financial services, has an array of starting resources but is unsure of her end point. Maybe with sufficient encouragement, she can develop confidence about herself and her ability to operate at the highest levels. Alternatively she may prefer to develop excellence in her current professional field.

If Chris is going to progress to top leadership, the development agenda must be more than one of “playing to strengths”. Speed of development is likely to be greater if she can grapple with the blocker of low self confidence. Confidence will make it easier to acquire new expertise and skill outside her functional area. Can Chris overcome her low self confidence? It might be difficult if it is a deep-seated part of her temperament. But if it is an outcome of current life and work dynamics, then a combination of mentoring from the top team and successful involvement in a high profile project might catalyse a different leadership identity.

Simon, the police officer, wants to become the first Chief Constable under the age of 40. But given the distance between his current capability and ambitions, can he bridge the gap? Is he being unrealistic about his future career prospects and now needs to rethink his expectations. Maybe playing to his strengths within operational roles will be a more rewarding career strategy than any attempt to fill the gaps in his leadership repertoire.

Paula the Sales Director might aspire to be a Managing Director, but can she develop the versatility needed of a MD? High impact executive coaching with an experienced and skilled professional should help challenge and stimulate Paula to rethink her current operating model of business and leadership success. But accelerated development will need to be based on a clear insight into Paula’s mind set. Does Paula possess the cognitive capability to incorporate more complexity and uncertainty in her decision making? Is she sufficiently motivated to commit time and effort to understanding the detail of other parts of the business?

Principle 3: identify potential earlier rather than later

Accelerated development focuses limited organisational resources on those individuals displaying leadership potential at an early stage in their careers. This isn't to advocate the kind of "fast track" programmes for the select few that can easily become self-fulfilling prophecies, but it is a strategy that emphasises:

- discipline in the review of the population from which leaders will emerge
- encouraging line managers to take their role as "talent spotters" seriously
- introducing support assessment systems to complement the line management perspective (e.g. 360° feedback)
- implementing talent reviews to create a wider organisational dialogue about individuals, their contribution and career options

If most high level leadership roles are filled by individuals around the age of 50, this isn't a long time for leaders to develop that combination of know how, capability, character and wisdom needed to operate effectively at senior levels. **The sooner potential is identified, tested and developed the better.**

Principle 4: development as a customised experience

Accelerated leadership development doesn't embark on organisational-wide programmes that throw resource at management populations in "spray and pray" initiatives. Instead development creates a highly personalised experience that takes into account each potential leader's current situation and future ambitions. This is the kind of development that arises out of a **shrewd insight into individuals' strengths and shortcomings as well as their career aspirations** to identify the strategies and tactics that will work best for the individual.

Accelerated development draws on a mix of different approaches for each individual leader, not fixing on one solution for everyone. The leadership development process will draw on a mix of options:

- **personal growth.** These are the activities that help leaders develop the self confidence and emotional groundedness that underpin leadership maturity.
- **skill building.** Some leadership skills are more trainable than others. Focused and structured interventions give individuals the opportunity to practice and enhance these trainable skills.
- **feedback.** Leaders need to know how they are doing, the impact they are having, and which strengths and shortcomings are most evident. High quality feedback at the right time helps focus individuals' development priorities.
- **conceptual awareness.** Leadership development isn't theory in a classroom. But individuals do need models to make sense of the complexities of leadership life and the strategic, commercial, governance, societal and ethical responsibilities of a leadership role.

“We need a conceptual part to ensure a clear model of leadership for participants to follow in their heads. Skill building to get everyone practising leadership with their “arms and feet”. Feedback to hone an awareness of where people are weak and need more experience as leaders and where they are strong and can act with confidence. Finally, personal growth to mobilize hearts and guts and to unfreeze our imagination and encourage us to take on new challenges and risks.”

Jay Conger

Principle 4: development as a customised experience

In tracking the impact of different development interventions on organisational survival and success over a 10 year period, job moves and coaching proved among the best predictors of organisational outcomes.

Organisations that were making extensive use of **job moves in 1998 were three times more likely to succeed**. And organisations that had developed a **coaching ethic in 1998 were twice as likely to be successful ten years later**.

Job moves and coaching out-performed classic management training and business education. Why? Probably because job moves and coaching provide highly personalised experiences, giving individuals the opportunity to develop within a context that is highly relevant to their situation in a way that classroom based development can't.

This isn't to abandon organisational programmes of business education and management training. But it is to emphasise the need to integrate formalised activity within the specifics of each participant's leadership circumstances.

“*Improvement in management and leadership development can come as much or more from improving the precision with which investment is made than by increasing the scale of the investment.*”

J Burgoyne, W Hirsch & S Williams

Principle 5: leaders lead by leading

Leaders are developing all the time, usually in an ad hoc way, through trial and error, and typically in a way that is frustrating for them as individuals, their teams and the organisations. Acceleration happens when individuals with leadership potential are provided, at the right time, with the kinds of experience that require leadership.

Accelerated development doesn't bypass the tough stuff. It knows that **the tough stuff is where most development happens** but it is insightful in identifying who is and isn't ready to face the demands of new and different leadership challenges.

The days of the succession planning “chess master”, that individual who orchestrated career moves within the leadership talent pool, are long gone. But accelerated development does require organisational creativity to identify which roles will stretch individuals to give them exposure to new challenges at the right point in their career.

Accelerated development requires more than steady incremental changes within “well trod career paths” but a willingness to take risks in appointing emerging leaders into roles with significant shifts in scale and complexity.

Identify **Triple A roles** to accelerate development:

- **Accountability:** where there are clear expectations of big outcomes against high profile strategic priorities.
- **Adversity:** giving emerging leaders the tough challenges which require them to dig deep and discover new qualities in themselves, not least courage and character.
- **Autonomy:** giving individuals the scope to do things their way. If leadership is largely about managing uncertainty and complexity, then its development cannot be summarised in a “how-to-check-list”. Give individuals the freedom and discretion to achieve results through their own intelligence, innovation and initiative.

Principle 6: build an infrastructure to make it easy to develop

Accelerated development isn't just about personal heroics, and the courage and resolve of progressive leaders prepared to take on demanding and risky assignments. It might propel their development and inspire the efforts of their colleagues, but it isn't a model for long-term organisational development. Neither does it hinge only on effective systems for talent identification, key as they are to setting a shift in the leadership agenda.

Accelerated development to sustain long-term organisational performance over time, depends on a consistent set of processes, from recruitment and induction through to succession planning at executive levels. This is **acceleration as the outcome of coherent and integrated policies and procedures**:

- structured induction to enable newly appointed leaders get up to speed quickly
- real time feedback systems to track leadership impact
- scheduling career discussions outside of the performance appraisal cycle
- ensuring that progressive leaders with a track record of developing great leaders are recognised and rewarded for their efforts
- connecting leadership development priorities to an ongoing review of overall succession opportunities and risks
- proactive retention for key leadership players
- engaging the top team fully in the process to ensure they operate as high profile and visible participants, not simply “rubber stamping” the annual succession plan

Principle 7: leverage the power of diversity

The attempt to create a generation of leadership super-stars is a fundamentally flawed resourcing strategy. Accelerated leadership recognises that a range of different leadership skill sets and operating styles will be needed to tackle different organisational challenges, but it is unrealistic to expect any one leader to possess the full repertoire of leadership excellence. Instead accelerated development adopts portfolio thinking, investing in excellence across a range of specific leadership talents.

Diversity is the biggest weapon in the armoury of accelerated development. This is more than attention to age, gender, ethnic background and other bio-demographical factors, important as they are in challenging stereotypes to access the best leadership talent. This is a strategy that doesn't assume every future leader must conform to a particular "look and feel" but encourages a variety of different approaches and outlooks. It is demanding in its insistence on key values of integrity and character, but it doesn't expect every emerging leader to be a clone of previously successful leadership. Accelerated development recognises that the anomalies, mavericks and eccentrics of organisational life may be key to the organisation's future.

Are Assessment Centres now part of the problem?

Assessment centres broke new ground in identifying leadership potential that wasn't being picked up in performance reviews. Fifty years on since their take up by organisations, do we need to rethink the fundamentals?

A senior executive at BMW comments on the current generation of managers: "they are smart, competent and very nice...but almost totally interchangeable." And one researcher puts the blame on assessment centres¹. The problem is that centres measure only what is easily quantified. It may be that those who do well are simply well prepared or have the right stuff for the assessment centre and not necessarily for the job. Sandra Siebenhüter calls it "gleichmacherei": "forcing things to be the same". Assessment centres, designed to extend the pool of available talent, are now doing the opposite: generating "managers with no profile".

At a time when organisations need a greater diversity of leadership skills and styles, check that your assessment centres aren't delivering conformity.

¹<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/money/main.jhtml?xml=/money/2008/01/16/cmmanage16.xml>

And accelerated development needs top management time

A good strategy is one that bridges the gap between the start point and desired outcome quickly and efficiently. Current leadership development practice isn't doing a great strategic job. Despite the expenditure, the outcomes are modest.

Implementing the principles of accelerated development will shorten the distance between where your organisation is now to where it needs to be in future. But accelerated development also requires organisational investment. Financial, yes. But more importantly, an investment of senior management time. Too often organisations attempt to compensate for a lack of top management interest and involvement in leadership succession and development by introducing a “solution”. Typically this is the kind of mandatory programme that gives the appearance of activity, but doesn't deliver results.

Implement the principles of accelerated development but make sure your top team has its foot on the organisational pedal.

About us

Established in 1994, AM Azure Consulting works with a broad portfolio of clients – in the UK and internationally - in the design and implementation of online services in recruitment and selection; management assessment, development and career management; online leadership tool kits, 360° feedback; performance management and talent and succession management.

If you are interested in our approach to talent management, our consulting expertise, assessment tools and talent planning software:

Call us: 44 (0) 1608 654007

email: officesupport@amazureconsulting.com

Or visit our website www.amazureconsulting.com for further information, including articles which you can download for free.

We:

- summarise complexity to provide solutions that are pragmatic and build and maintain momentum for our clients.
- help trouble-shoot the messy organisational problems to see the key issues, identify options and put in place actionable plans that make progress.
- cut to the chase to focus on the distinctive challenges of our clients. We enjoy the innovation that results from our clients with ideas and we help translate them into practical applications.
- draw on an extensive research base, library of resource and range of tool kits, and up-to-date thinking to help design and implement practical solutions quickly.