

Fatal Flaws in Developing Leaders

By Steven C. Coats

One of the common themes of organizations is their desire to develop more and better leaders, for both today and tomorrow. In spite of their noble intentions, many, if not most of these efforts, fall short. There is usually some improvement in individuals, but the collective effort either never takes hold, or fizzles out after a relatively short time.

There are four common fatal flaws, which most frequently cause this development dilemma occurs. None of these will be a surprise as they are commonly known. However, the first three are frequently assumed to be done much more than they actually are. The last one just requires focus and persistence. Before we go any further, let me ask, what do you think might be the biggest culprits in derailing effective leadership development efforts? From your own experiences, what have you found most gets in the way?

Let's begin with fatal flaw number one. Managers from senior level down, simply fail to tell their people they expect them to lead. This is not a metaphorical statement. Few managers look each of their people directly in the eye and tell them, I expect you to be a leader in this organization. It is a fundamental part of your job, which must be done well.

Instead, managers walk their people through annual performance metrics, usually stressing the expected financial or other quantifiable key project results. This component often can determine as much as 70% of pay for the year.

Then, there are usually a couple of other categories, such as self-development, or community involvement (often based on level), and then something about living the organization's values, assuming there are some. Finally, there may be an add-on category about leadership development, which is frequently embedded somewhere in the self-development objectives. This, unfortunately, is how too many managers rationalize that they are clarifying their expectations around leadership.

The communicated message is pretty clear – make your numbers, and then in your spare time, continue to improve yourself and work on becoming a better leader. Compare that with a leader who tells her people:

I expect you to deliver on the results we have agreed to, and I expect you to be a great leader for the people throughout this entire organization. It does not matter how good your numbers are by themselves. If you are not providing the leadership this company needs you to provide, your pay and your opportunities for advancement will be severely limited. It is that important!

The point is this: because everyone has so much high priority work to accomplish these days, you must be very clear about how important leadership is. Otherwise, those development efforts will inevitably slip between the cracks. So a question for you is this. How clear are you with your people about the strategic importance of them

becoming better leaders? Do they view it as a “must do” or an option. I encourage you to be absolutely clear on your expectations of them to lead.

The second flaw is a bit seductive, giving the appearance it has been tended to, when in fact it has not. Assuming the expectation to lead is clearly made, there is a huge fog around what is actually meant by the phrase *be a leader*. Many organizations have not adopted a clear, concise, definable, model of leadership. For those individuals who do become inspired by and committed to improving their leadership, they discover they are not quite sure what they are supposed to do in order to know they are actually leading in the way the company desires.

Leadership is not some esoteric, philosophical list of academic concepts. It is a set of very specific, observable, applicable behaviors. A good model allows everyone to know what leadership is, what it looks like, what people are doing when they are leading, and how it differs from other activities. Too often, *Be a leader* becomes one more impressive sounding, but hollow mantra, similar to expressions such as “take it up a notch” or “raise the bar.”

Almost all companies with whom I have worked, have taken the step of developing a competency model, describing the various capabilities that managers at various levels are expected to demonstrate, in order to be deemed effective. Often, they are broad in scope, including items such as financial acumen, strategic agility, business savvy, and communications. Some competencies are more directly tied to leadership than others.

This is a useful starting point; however, it is not complete. For example, people development and having a cross-boundary mindset will no doubt be tremendous assets to

rising leaders. However, those descriptors fail to explain what the leader must be doing on a day to day basis to fully develop these competencies.

For over twenty-five years, I have worked with a specific leadership methodology, called The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership®, based on the original research of authors Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner. This model is described in their world-wide, best-selling book, *The Leadership Challenge*, now in its 5th edition. What has made this approach so well-accepted by organizations around the globe, are its evidenced-based research, and its immediate, hands-on applicability. The Five Practices describe very clearly what leaders are most frequently doing when leading at their best. This model is like an instruction manual for creating higher performing teams, increasing employee engagement, and inspiring people to do their very best work – all key outcomes of leadership.

Once again, here are a couple of questions for you. First, has your organization embraced any kind of clear and well-defined model of leadership, which explains what people will be doing when they are leading? And second, are you continuing to teach people how to continually further understand, develop, and demonstrate the behaviors which you agree are indicators - and measures - of desired leadership? People have a need - and a right - to know specifically what is expected of them, if they are to be able to get better. You need to have a proven, behavior-based leadership methodology, which clearly defines the behaviors you want leaders to demonstrate.

Flaw number three is a lack of context. The cause of this flaw is that the context is just assumed to be known and accepted by everyone in the organization, when it is not. Context sets the importance for leadership, explaining why it is a crucial expectation of

everyone. And with constantly changing circumstances, it must be reinforced time and time again.

One organization with whom I have worked, has done a remarkable job of frequently emphasizing the importance of leadership. Like many, they suffered a financial kick in the gut after the worldwide economic downturn in 2008. This company did not suddenly get lazy or wake up stupid one morning. They got caught in the crossfire of a variety of improbable events way outside of their control.

After weathering the storm, one of the lessons they learned was this. In order for them to be a great company, in a chaotic, unmanageable world, they would need to have great leaders – everywhere and at all levels of the business. This meant creating leaders, regardless of title, position or job, who were more willing and able to tackle tough problems, proactively respond to uncontrollable changes, and develop innovative solutions or breakthroughs ideas,.

They view leadership development as a key strategy for assuring continuing prosperity and achieving success in a future that will continue to be unpredictable and unforgiving. So now when people hear that they are expected to be leaders, they understand why it is so important, and why the company is making so much of an effort to develop and unleash more leaders. That is helpful.

Without a solid context, you will likely hear people refer to leadership development efforts as “the flavor of the day,” or just another self-promoting initiative from someone at the top, which, like a number of highly touted imperatives, soon shall pass. If you are hearing comments such as these, there is an issue of context. Continue to help people understand the business problem that

leadership development is addressing, and why it is a necessity for the organization going forward.

The last of the culprits impeding leadership development efforts is the most obvious – and the one receiving most attention. It is the lack of ongoing follow-through. There must be an intentional, purposeful and sustained effort to ensure people grow and become better as leaders. This is much more than an annual self-development objective to read a book or attend a workshop on the subject. It is a well-thought out and reinforced strategy of the organization. And it is something for which people must be accountable every single day.

Organizations have invested deeply in systems, processes, and cultural norms, designed to keep people constantly focused on current financial or project performance objectives (that big, first category in performance management plans). The first morning email for many retail managers is the spreadsheet showing the previous day’s results, as well as comparative numbers for the same period a year ago. In most organizations, formal meetings (or casual drop-ins) are held throughout the day to discuss project status and problems, movement in the sales funnel, new opportunities to increase sales, or innovative steps to overcome obstacles. And there are plenty of reports and other reminders to ensure progress on key performance indicators and goals is top of mind for everyone. The good news: people do not need to tie a string around their fingers to remember to do this kind of work. It is embedded in their DNA. The work is intentional, purposeful, and by all means frequent.

Can the same be said about the focus on leadership in your organization? Many of the best performers with whom I have worked, still have to remind themselves to lead,

because those behaviors have not yet become unconscious habits. And there are substantially less organizational tools to help them.

For example, the movement of prospects and opportunities through the so-called sales funnel is a topic of daily conversation in sales-driven companies. Yet, the movement of up and coming leaders (or other “key talent”) through the development funnel might be discussed once or twice a year. Another example is the “dashboard,” which is the constantly updated template showing movement in a number of key performance metrics. Call centers keep close tabs on received calls, holding times, conversation times, time to answer a call, satisfaction percentage on first attempt, and about everything else. They have deliberately invested in these measures in order to satisfy customers – and make enough money to stay in business another day.

Do you have a *leadership* dashboard? If so, what are the key measurements included? How often do you review it? Good for you – if you have this kind of process established in your leadership development efforts. If you do not, welcome to the club, as you are by no means alone. This concept is not about creating fifty ways to point out peoples’ leadership deficiencies. It is about helping everyone remain mindful of some of the most important aspects of leadership, when they are constantly bombarded with competing day to day demands of running the business.

To ensure that strategic leadership development efforts take hold, organizations must be thoughtful and intentional about the systems and other support mechanisms needed to reinforce its value and importance. Individuals are still responsible for continuing to learn and practice more effective leadership behaviors. It just makes it easier when the organization can provide some help. And merely offering, or footing the bill for a leadership workshop, is only a good start. There is just so much more that must be done.

Setting clear expectations about leadership, clearly defining it, establishing context, and providing ongoing support are the fundamentals for a successful organization-wide leadership development process. A flaw in any one of these will sabotage your best intentions. And never assume they will naturally take care of themselves. They won’t. They require effort from you – and everyone else in the organization.

Leadership, at the core, is a relationship between the leader and his or her constituents. Becoming a better leader for your people is ultimately on your shoulders. You cannot blame shortcomings of the organization for your own lack of growth as a leader. Regardless of the level of organizational support, you can still choose to keep learning, practicing, and improving in those capabilities, which inspire others to put forth their best efforts for you. My guess is the people around you hope you will make that choice.

Steven C. Coats is a Managing Partner at International Leadership Associates, a leadership development and consulting firm, and co-author of the book, [There is No Box](#).

To learn more about International Leadership Associates, please visit www.i-lead.com.