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Leaders Developing Leaders

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As stewards of the organization, it is an obligation of senior leaders to energetically and deliberately lead the development of future leaders. The all-too-common act of “pulling the ladder up behind them” after rising to the top not only does a disservice to other high-potentials, it can be reckless. Without capable leaders, an organization’s future is at risk.

Senior executives have a duty to investors, the workforce, and other stakeholders to develop for the future and safeguard the long-term health of the organization. This includes ensuring the talent pipeline is stocked with future generations of leaders. The best way to do that is by actively and personally committing time, energy, and resources toward building a strong, deep bench.

What Does “Leaders Developing Leaders” Entail?

Leaders developing leaders is not “just” mentoring. It is a systematic commitment to invest time in developing those who have demonstrated high potential throughout their rise in the organization. An inspiring senior executive group can accelerate the development of future leaders by being great role models and by passing on their experience and wisdom. After all, employees don’t usually charge into work based on company mission statements, but they will when there are leaders who bring these visions to life.

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Active leadership is providing an emotional connection—understanding people and helping them see how their needs and talents connect to the goals of the organization. The result is the ultimate “force multiplier” that magnifies the effectiveness of the organization’s talent.

The Five Actions of Senior Leaders Developing Future Leaders

1. Modeling

When senior leaders hold themselves to the highest possible standards, they are modeling the right behaviors. This in itself is actively working to develop those they manage, providing examples to emulate and learn from. Bad behavior among senior leaders begets bad behavior throughout the organization. Even when a poor example of leadership somehow results in a “win” financially, it weakens the talent pool.

2. Creating Opportunities

It’s not uncommon to invest in developing leaders while the organizational structures work against them. The broad spans of control in many of today’s flat organizations can strip away would-be leadership roles, and some high-potentials may have their first leadership opportunity later than would have been ideal. Senior executives who are actively focused on development are purposeful in providing a variety of challenges and learning scenarios that allow people to lead early in their careers, when the risks are lower and the time to reap the benefits of development are greater.

3. Seeking the Unfamiliar

Some of the best occasions for development take place when the leader is put in a situation where they are unprepared. How will they react to an experience or situation that they encounter for the first time? It’s a laboratory for developing self-awareness and highlighting vulnerabilities, as well as strengths. This ideally happens in circumstances where the price of failure is not terribly high, but accelerated learning takes place when people are uncomfortable or even have setbacks.

The senior leader should actively seek these kinds of scenarios for those they manage, perhaps at a wider, more strategic, enterprise level and/or beyond the functional background with which they are familiar. Throughout this period, senior leaders should play an active role in monitoring progress and providing fast and frequent feedback and coaching.

4. Coaching Just-in-Time

Adult learning theory indicates that professionals learn best from their lived experiences. But in the complex environment of organizations, these lessons are not always obvious. Strong people developers must also be good coaches, effectively advising and guiding high potentials throughout their development journey.

This includes regular, in-the-moment feedback that both makes sense of what has already happened and—more importantly—provides useful direction for improved future performance. Ideally, a culture of feedback is fostered in which colleagues seek out, freely provide, and constructively receive useful, timely feedback. While it is admittedly rare in corporate settings, strong examples can be found in organizations such as the military and

professional sports, where it often facilitates higher performance.

5. Evaluating for Potential

Effective senior leaders sponsor a disciplined process to ensure regular assessments of high performers including their readiness for promotion and development opportunities.

It can be relatively simple and should include:

- 360 feedback, which is the most reliable and effective tool for predicting future leadership performance;
- A future leaders summit: for example, a half-day retreat for the senior leaders to discuss the specific potential of each high performer, including detailed conversations about candidates and their current and future roles;
- Outlining at least four potential candidates per role to ensure productive competition and a strong bench of future leaders; and
- Identifying potential, which is a much better predictor of success in roles of greater responsibility than just evaluating past performance.

The Outcome

By paying attention to and getting personally involved in the development of future leaders, senior executives demonstrate that it is a task as important as any other in the organization. This is not work that can be delegated. Executives must invest their time and resources, with HR supporting processes when appropriate.

The ultimate goal is accelerating the development of high potential leaders who feel supported, engaged, and see a clear development path forward. Prioritizing this earlier than you think you need to is the key to ensuring smoother leadership transitions based on a strong bench of leaders from which to choose.

About the Author

Lisa specializes in leadership assessment and coaching, organizational design, and CEO/executive succession. She supports executive team development, change management, and talent processes to strengthen organizational effectiveness.

About Pearl Meyer

Pearl Meyer is the leading advisor to boards and senior management helping organizations build, develop, and reward great leadership teams that drive long-term success. Our strategy-driven compensation and leadership consulting services act as powerful catalysts for value creation and competitive advantage by addressing the critical links between people and outcomes. Our clients stand at the forefront of their industries

and range from emerging high-growth, not-for-profit, and private organizations to the Fortune 500.