

How to Build a Successful Leadership Development Project

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Foreword

“How do I know if I am getting a return on my investment?”

I have wrestled with this question since becoming part of the ‘leadership’ industry in 1985.

Of all the questions that are asked by customers, this one consistently presents providers like Mitchell Phoenix with a challenge to answer with surety. Unlike technical or process training there are rarely simple outputs that can be measured in leadership development (even this phrase has a certain ambiguity). If there were such simple metrics our clients would be employing them and the question would be redundant. In addition, if we accept that the outputs of leadership development are likely to be complex, there is rarely a full understanding within the organisation itself of what the indicators of progress or material gain might be.

This paper sheds light on how to set up a successful project that:

- identifies the results from the project which can be measured
- explores how to measure them
- and ensures that the project yields those results

Recognising the Overall Need

Firstly, what is the problem? Presumably your organisation has a sense of what it needs to achieve in broad terms and in detail - strategy, business plan, distributed goals etc. There will be people in place (mostly) and the wherewithal to achieve the goals. All of these lend themselves to analysis and verification: what is the current capability to enact the organisation’s strategy?

If there is a perceived lack of leadership in your organisation, this implies two things:

1. An observer (or observers) has compared the current standard of leadership in the business with a higher standard known to exist elsewhere (at a previous company, at a higher level of management, etc) and found it wanting
2. This observer understands the drag on business performance that poor leadership exerts, and the potential boost to business performance that higher quality leadership will provide

Needless to say, where there is no perceived gap between current standards of leadership and a higher standard, the link between leadership and business performance will not be understood, and there will be no investment in leadership development.

If we are going to measure improvements in leadership then what is it that we are to measure? We are all likely to have a definition of leadership, and who is to say if my definition is better than yours? Let's sweep this debate aside for now, it requires time not available in this paper and is not entirely necessary. What counts is your recognition of potential. At this stage, it is enough if you and/or your organisation have recognised a leadership gap to exploit and the potential to exploit it. Here are some clues as to the extent of that potential:

- * Ownership of initiatives and/or goals is patchy
- * Blame culture when things go wrong
- * Complaints of phoney reward systems
- * Pockets of 'resistance to change'
- * Upward delegation prevalent
- * No trust between people and divisions
- * Gaining commitment is like herding cats
- * 'Yes but' begins every sentence
- * ...and finally the simplest of all – you prefer not to battle against it!

These are the symptoms of poor leadership. There is a neutral position where leadership is adequate and displays few of the negative factors and some positive attributes. Most organisations occupy this position.

Some occupy the following, more desirable, state of visible and positive leadership. Here are some clues in this category:

- * You have resolved most of the above list
- * The hearts and minds of your people are won over
- * There is an appetite for improvement
- * Meetings concentrate on the future goals
- * The organisation focuses on the customer
- * Induction is taken seriously
- * A positive air of purpose pervades the organisation
- * People are considerate and empathetic
- * Merit counts

How to Build the Project? – A Five-Point Plan

Introduction

Both the above positive and negative scenarios will benefit from the same approach; you will see as we build the leadership development project that it will affect both good and bad aspects of organisational behaviour in a positive manner.

Gather Support – Top-Down

It is quite likely that an incoming senior executive has identified the opportunity for improvement, maybe a promoted MD, CEO or someone brought in with recent experience of greater leadership capability in another organisation (competitor perhaps?) This sponsorship is the best possible start point for gathering support from the board and will be a natural step to engage the wider management population.

Three levels management need to be converted for the culture change to take effect. This means CEO, board and senior operational management. In a large organisation you will also need to engage the best of the next tier down to make it complete and secure. After that, leadership by example and sweeping demand for better practice will permeate the business. In the longer term, standards of behaviour have to be rigorously applied and defended. (This latter effect will be determined by the quality of leadership thinking delivered by the development project itself).

What happens when only HR or a more junior group have identified the need? Clearly we have to build more support into the senior operational areas and the CEO has to be sold on this need. By highlighting concrete examples of sub-optimal behaviour; raising questions about succession, ownership of goals, poor meeting management, and crisis culture we can lay the groundwork for a decision to be made. In addition, issues of falling standards of recruitment and greater attrition can be flagged. Lack of choice and quality in promotions and honest performance review will further bring the messages home. Leadership profiling tools can be brought to bear to display, empirically, the opportunities for personal growth.

There has to be acceptance of this need at the highest levels. Ready & Conger (see end note 1) in their analysis of why leadership development projects fail, identify lack of ownership as the principle ‘pathology’ in their 2003 paper. Their solution, ‘everyone should own it’, is long on good advice but short on how to achieve it. Here are the five principal steps needed.

•The Five-Point Plan

1. Engage the 'Top' Manager in the Project

That person should attend the event(s) and sponsor the events for the next level. If the quality, preparation and content is right for the CEO/MD level and maturity then the next stage will run with little further effort. This crucial step also ensures that demand is applied to learning new approaches and changing practices, the CEO role is to set the example and champion new ideas.

Without internal 'demand to change', little will change and eventually the market will force changes from outside. This external pressure begins with customers taking flight and progresses to takeover and, in the extreme, liquidation. When these latter events occur it can be said that the leadership of the organisation exists outside the organisation.

2. The 'Top' Manager Sponsors the Next Group, and so on...

Top manager and next level agree and set out what is required as overall outputs. These outputs should be self evident, can be measured or perceived as in place, and include personal gains for each individual involved in the events.

Here are some examples:

1. Overall Outputs:

- * Fast and secure ownership of initiatives and goals throughout the top management team. No blame
- * Problem solving distributed down the organisation
- * Decisions are faster, made at lower levels and more secure
- * Contact (email, meetings, telephone calls) is swift and purposeful
- * Delivery dates are met or exceeded

2. Individual Outputs

- * Forward focus, no excuses, on time delivery
- * Faster commitment to group decisions
- * Delivery of projects and initiatives visibly improve
- * Personal preparedness is measurably better
- * Time made available to staff
- * Performance management in place & to a higher standard
- * Succession plans in place & updated to plan
- * Development plans for all staff members & diarised review

3. Record Results

Outputs should be reported, recorded and agreed in consensus at the highest level. Such reports are made to the group involved and treated as part of the management agenda for the period of development. Gains in leadership strength are expressed in the context of business projects and initiatives. Individuals are challenged to show direct connections between changes in their leadership (and management approach) and the business gains made. Changes can and should include ways in which managers now engage their complement of staff, and how those people create new business results.

How do we measure these results? It is easier than you may imagine if the development project is professionally designed and implemented. Visible and measurable progress will be self evident if it has occurred. The results must be 'visible' for measurement to be possible; if they are not visible they are probably not there. If they are visible and perceived then the next problem may be that they elude traditional measuring techniques. For example: How can improvements in preparedness be measured and how can links be securely attached to business results? It is possible and we at Mitchell Phoenix can demonstrate how that can be achieved by your organisation in our development projects.

Note - **Productisation of leadership projects** (*the roll-out of a pre-packaged leadership 'product' across all groups*)

This is the third 'pathology' that Ready & Conger identify in their analysis of 'Why Leadership Development Projects Fail'

In Mitchell Phoenix development projects this problem is deftly eliminated. Uniquely, Mitchell Phoenix designs all projects based on output not input. Think of the project content as solely designed to stimulate business results and it becomes clear that the problem of 'one-idea' and 'one-size-fits-all' product based training falls away.

Our projects infuse your day-to-day practice of leadership and management with a development component that stimulates personal change and business results. Results are delivered, verified and recorded

4. Leadership and Management Approaches are Added to Personal Matrices

From the start of the development project, performance reviews should be amended to include the visible outputs of the project. Reward systems can be re-aligned to reflect these additions and periodic meetings between individuals and line managers should have the project components added to the agenda. In this way, managers and staff track changes and gains, and make adjustments where needed. These meetings are built into Mitchell Phoenix development projects in a way that is valuable for both parties and the business.

5. The Complete Project is Reviewed and Adjusted to Reflect Unfolding Gains

As leadership strength is gained and becomes visible within the organisation, the management approach improves measurably and business culture changes the project needs to be adjusted in consideration of such changes. The focus for the in-house project-themes can be adjusted, new levels of management engaged in the project, protocols made mandatory (meetings, email, performance review, development appraisals, recruitment and induction). Most of the work is complete; the culture has been changed and requires simple maintenance and periodic refreshment. In addition to completing the project the organisation can make significant changes to simple procedures:

1. Change recruitment practices to include a conversation about the business culture a new employee can expect and how they can fulfil their role
2. During induction, ensure that new employees meet with people who have championed the new culture and been part of the transformation
3. Change performance review documents to include elements of the new culture and assess progress against standard expressions of competence
4. All employees should be on a personal development plan (beyond the achievement of business goals)

Leadership development has been initiated, executed and completed by many organisations, few of which can recognise or articulate what the benefits have been. Here at Mitchell Phoenix we have partnered organisations that consistently make business gains from our projects. These gains are visible, recorded, verified and reported at all levels within the business. The practices and approaches we refine with our clients remain part of their culture in the long-term and remain with them after our participation is complete. These are not idle claims; the facts are recorded and reported within their businesses.

Footnote:

1. Why Leadership-Development Efforts Fail Douglas A. Ready and Jay A. Conger

Additional Reading

- For more information, call our offices or log into our enquiry pages at www.mitchellphoenix.com
- Mitchell Phoenix and the Kirkpatrick Training Evaluation Model: www.mitchellphoenix.com/resources.htm

Evaluating Training Programs: The Four Levels by Donald L. Kirkpatrick ISBN: 1881052850

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As Managing Director of Mitchell Phoenix, he is regularly involved in the design and implementation of major culture change projects aimed at unlocking the potential of complete management groups.

He is sought after for speaking engagements, seminars and workshops on how organisations can grow leadership.



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