



Leading with Character

An Overview of Talent Development

By Carolyn (Lyn) Turknett, M.A.

With global competition steadily increasing and demographic trends indicating that the talent pool will be decreasing, no organization can afford to ignore the identification and development of key talent. Given the ease with which business models can be copied, it could be argued that people – and the ability of those people to learn and lead – are the only sustainable source of competitive advantage. The fundamental attributes of an exceptional talent development process are outlined below.

Begin the process of identification and development early on. Every employee deserves an immediate and thorough orientation, and commitment will be greater if that orientation occurs in the first three days. High potential talent is an invaluable resource, and smart companies find ways to recognize that talent early. Val Markos, Executive Director of Leadership Development at BellSouth, cautions that it's tough to predict talent in young leaders, and recommends "casting a wide net."

Define the specific competencies that will be needed in the future. Good talent development requires that the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for leadership success in your industry be clearly defined. This is usually done by observing and interviewing high performers and through conversation with the executive team. While there is usually extensive overlap in the leadership competencies companies identify, an internal process of agreeing on those competencies assures buy-in and commitment.

Create a robust process for identifying high potential talent. Most companies use some combination of nomination by superiors and other methods, including review by groups of senior executives and assessment against identified competencies. Assessment can include

performance appraisals, personality assessment, assessment of cognitive capacity, 360-degree feedback and formal assessment centers. Many organizations use a Potential versus Performance matrix for coding those being considered. Increasingly, a strong foundation in character and a commitment to organizational values is a prerequisite for advancement. Company culture can also determine how high potentials are identified. Dell defines a high potential as someone who could reach director level in three years. Southwest sees every employee as having high potential, and promotes based on appraisal.

Building bench strength for the future is something no organization can afford to ignore.

Consider creating talent pools. Talent pools are groups of identified high potentials who are all being groomed for senior positions in the future. In the past succession planning was little more than replacement planning: who is ready if a key executive gets hit by a bus? Talent pools give the organization groups of high potentials who could rise to senior levels within business units, functional units, or as corporate leaders.

Develop through challenging experiences. People develop best with a combination of challenge and support. Rotation through a variety of positions in the organization is essential for development. People learn through managing large groups, through customer contact, through positions that require influence without authority, and through positions that call for leading change. Val Markos often pairs

challenging experience with coaching. "I believe that challenging people is the greatest development you can provide, but that experience can be leveraged with coaching and structured reflection. Not all people are natural learners."

Create best practice leadership development processes. In *Leading the Way*, Gandossy and Efron caution that even best practice may not be enough – organizations must put in place the processes that fit the culture and the strategy of the organization. Some of the components of the most effective leadership development processes are listed below.

Sponsorship and participation by senior executives. Leadership development research indicates that top-level support is essential. In the best companies top leaders are engaged in selection and mentoring of high potentials and are active as sponsors and educators in leadership development programs.

Assessment and gap analysis. Assessment linked to development planning is essential. Without good assessment, leadership development becomes "one size fits all." Targeted development requires assessment in the form of personality and leadership measures and 360-degree feedback.

Executive coaching. Coaching, whether by external or internal coaches, helps the individual accept feedback from the assessment process, create a development plan, and grow as a leader. High-level executives must develop the intrapersonal skills (such as confidence and emotional mastery), the interpersonal skills, the visionary leadership skills, and the business acumen of extraordinary leaders. Business skills can be developed in group training. Self awareness of intrapersonal, interpersonal and

leadership skill is usually limited, and these skills are more difficult to develop. Development often requires personalized coaching.

Large group experiences. Symposiums and seminars bring together large groups high potentials from across the enterprise. They build leadership and business skills while simultaneously strengthening leadership connections across the organization. Many leadership skills are effectively developed in large group settings.

Team projects/action learning. Action learning is a process, often used as a part of an overarching leadership development program, in which small teams tackle real work issues and at the same time focus on what they are learning - about the business, about leadership and about teamwork - and how they are learning. Teams often select from a set of issues identified by senior leadership.

An effective example: Gail Roddie-Hamlin, Chief Community Officer of the South Atlantic Division of the American Cancer Society, led an effort to identify and develop high potential talent when she was Chief Operating Officer of the Mid-Atlantic Division. (The Mid-Atlantic Division has recently merged with the Southeast Division to form the South Atlantic Division.)

Ms. Roddie-Hamlin is a believer in talent development, and, after participating personally in an effective leadership development program, championed creating a systematic program within her division. Candidates for the program were chosen through a combination of 360 review, manager recommendation and personal application. Twenty-one participants were selected from a pool of forty who applied.

A team of local staff leaders worked with Gail and an outside consultant to develop the program, and used Peter Senge's Learning Organization concepts as a foundation. Self learning – the responsibility of each participant for his or her own learning – was a core concept. Sessions in the

curriculum built on each other, and included a number of presentations by CEOs who presented their personal views of effective leadership. Senior executives were involved as sponsors and mentors. Each participant was assigned a mentor at least two levels senior in the organization, and both mentee and mentor were given guidance on structuring a successful mentoring relationship.

Action learning was a part of the design. Senior leadership selected eight projects that would be beneficial to the organization, and each team picked one project. Each team was assigned a facilitator who helped the team focus on learning from the experience. Project work took about six weeks, and at the end of that time each team presented to a group of C-level executives, including two officers from the national American Cancer organization.

Participants have been tracked after completion of the program, and many have been promoted. The program was judged to be quite effective, and has been repeated with improvement based on lessons learned. The newly merged division plans to replicate this successful leadership development process.

Talent development is a key to organizational success. Many organizations are looking for just the kind of outcome Ms. Roddie-Hamlin reports. "The graduates felt confident, built relationships with senior management, showed more initiative, and supported organizational goals more effectively." Building bench strength for the future is something no organization can afford to ignore.



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Suggested Reading:

The excellent 2003 article, "Growing Leaders for Turbulent Times: Is Succession Planning up to the Challenge?" in Volume 32 of *Organizational Dynamics* gives a good overview of current thinking around succession management.

William Bynam's *Grow Your Own Leaders* provides an excellent description of the talent pool concept and gives detailed information on processes for identifying and developing talent.

Ram Charan's *The Leadership Pipeline* describes the transitions a leader must navigate to get to CEO level, from managing a small team to finally managing an enterprise.

Leading the Way: Three Truths from the Top Companies for Leaders by Robert Gandossy and Marc Efron presents recent research on effective leadership development practices.

Conger and Benjamin's book, *Building Leaders : How Successful Companies Develop the Next Generation*, is a good resource for learning how leading companies design development.

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Turknett Leadership Group is one of the oldest firms in the Southeast experienced in leadership coaching and development. The Turknett staff consists of licensed psychologists, organization development consultants and experienced business leaders.

Using the Leadership Character Model as our principal guide, we specialize in services that positively affect retention, increase the effectiveness of leadership teams, and help organizations reach their goals.