

Bankrupt Leadership Development?

Many of today's corporate and government leaders have lost the trust (and investments!) of both their employees and their stockholders. Here are four key best practices criteria for programs to successfully develop new leaders.

BY STEPHEN HAINES



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In a meeting with executive teams, we frequently ask the question, “Who wants to become a leader?” Hands quickly shoot up all over the room. However, the answer to that seemingly simple question is more complex than many imagine. Yes, leadership is the “stuff” that facilitates positive results. But while the rewards of leadership seem mighty, we should consider the personal cost borne by the leader in exchange for the privilege to lead. These costs can be fearsome, yet the rewards can be great. Most useful things in the world get accomplished because of good leaders in all walks of life.

The notion of leadership is the subject of much current debate. It also conjures up a variety of differing characteristics. Authors point to the dearth of contemporary leaders. Baby Boomers, who fill the vast majority of leadership positions, are characterized as a self-centered generation, too greedy and incapable of advancing leadership worthy of trust. Arguments persist as to the relative importance of leadership vs. management: “Leaders do the right thing; managers do things right.” In reality, organizations need both. As John P. Kotter says:

- “Strong management without leadership becomes static and bureaucratic.
- Leadership without management is volatile and can become perverted by egomania.”

It would be useful to have a road map leading us through the morass. The first thing to realize is that the current leadership development best practices are bankrupt—else why would the Gallup Poll (2001) say 74 percent of all employees are not engaged at work? That’s a horrible indictment of leadership and its development. Just look at the greedy leaders we have produced on Wall Street, in banking firms, in Congress, in companies and cities great and small. Instead of bankrupt leadership development, we advocate four key best practices criteria for successful leadership development programs.

1. It must be tied to your strategic plan, future vision, core values, and core strategies.
2. It must be focused on competencies, not surface, piecemeal training that is mostly knowledge focused (vs. skills, attitudes, and competencies).
3. It must be enterprise-wide, holistic, top down, and include in-depth immersion experiences at its core to focus on behavior change.
4. It must be embedded with ethical, character, self-mastery, and accountability issues throughout the development. Before you can lead others, you must lead yourself and earn your follower’s respect.

HOW TO BECOME A LEADER

Focus on two goals to increase your leadership skills in a more systematic and effective way:

GOAL #1: Develop an in-depth understanding of, and immersion in, leadership.

The truth is we are all leaders, just as we are all followers. There is a continual interaction in human activity that causes us to assume first one role, then the other. Looking at our daily lives, it is easy to see that in both professional and personal situations we continuously act in these different roles. We lead meetings and projects and contribute to the leadership of our families, communities, and churches. Conversely, the wise person appreciates that being a good follower contributes to the learnings of the good leader. One cannot lead who doesn’t first know how to follow.

GOAL #2: Apply that understanding to lifelong learning and specific leadership skill development.

Leadership requires a lifelong commitment to immerse yourself in it. An individual’s leadership style and skills can evolve throughout one’s lifetime. The best way is to continually immerse yourself in the art just as they do in boot camps and learning foreign languages. Peter Drucker has said that the only place we really develop leaders is through the four-year immersion experiences at the service academies (Annapolis, West Point, etc.). As a U.S. Naval Academy graduate from the Leadership Class of 1968, I agree with him.



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