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WHY LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FAILS

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WHY LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FAILS

According to one source, leadership training is a \$366 billion global business and 95 percent of learning organizations either plan to increase or maintain their current investment in leadership development. At the same time, many CEOs complain that they do not have enough effective leadership in their organization to bring about the change and level of performance needed. Why is leadership training failing? I have accumulated some reasons from my personal experience in working with others in this space.

1. We get started too late.

The average person has their first experience with leadership development around the age of 42. In fact, my personal experience parallels this statistic. By age 42, I had already been a manager for eight years and my company was not taking any steps to provide an effective leadership development process. So I took it upon myself to find my own process and that's when I truly experienced real leadership. Some of my first-time workshop participants are in their 60s! What a shame and what a waste!

Now I am teaching leadership development processes to engineering undergraduates so that they will have the knowledge before they enter the workforce. Every organization needs to start as soon as new employees are hired. Orientation should include development tools and expose new employees to a leadership philosophy that is part of the corporate culture.

2. We confuse management with leadership.

Organizations may provide plenty of management training courses, but they fail to understand the critical difference with leadership development. Both are important, and they are very different skill sets. We need to be good at managing *things*, such as processes, systems, budgets, projects, etc. However, we must also know how to lead the *people* who work with those things. With good management you may get the result you requested, and only what you requested. It is a compliance-based relationship. On the other hand, with effective leadership we may get more than we request and, more importantly, we can get what we really need. It is a relationship based on trust and commitment to you, the team, and to the goals of the organization. Followers who are properly

inspired will be willing to go the extra mile because leaders help them see the connection to their own interests and aspirations.

Leadership is NOT a position; it is a role that anyone in the organization should be able to take at the appropriate time and place. In fact, the norm should be that everyone understands a common leadership philosophy and is expected to hold their leaders and each other accountable for proper behaviors.

3. We start in the wrong place and at the wrong time.

Much like Reason 2, leadership development often begins only when someone has direct reports. Why wait? Prepare everyone for leadership so that your bench is full of leaders ready to step up.

The other problem here is that senior management believes leadership development is only for those in the lower ranks of the organization. In the past, I have been approached by companies asking me to create a leadership development process for their first line leaders only. When asked about their own involvement, they usually balk at the idea. "*I am already a leader, why do I need more training?*" My answer is, "*How can you support your leaders if you do don't speak the same language?*" Senior leaders must set the right examples, demonstrate the proper behaviors, and ask for feedback in modeling the desired development mindset. I like to say that building leadership within an organization is like painting a wall. Start at the top and let the paint flow down while you fill in the gaps and clean up the drips. Your goal is an "even coat" of leadership throughout the organization.

4. We treat leadership development as a training event.

Learning how to become an effective leader takes time and deliberate practice. It is not the same as learning a new software package or how to operate a machine. The process may begin in the same way with instruction, application, and practice. However, with training to learn a new skill, you can become proficient and then not need additional help. I have been subjected to annual fire extinguisher training for the past 40 years. Believe me, I know how to use a fire extinguisher.

Leadership development is different. It is not something that we need to check off on an annual training list. We start by learning

a leadership model based on some fundamental philosophy. We learn to practice the behaviors associated with this model through action planning and by taking deliberate measures to strengthen our ability to connect with others. Because leadership is a relationship-based activity, we need to take the time to get to know our direct reports, peers and leaders so that we can make the right connection. Nurturing these connections requires an active feedback mechanism to let us know what is working and what is not. Corporate leaders must understand this difference and commit the time and resources to support the development process. In time, it becomes part of daily life. Leadership is not something extra to do, it is what you should be doing already.

5. We do not follow up.

Building on Reason 3, leadership development is an ongoing process that may start with a workshop or other educational event, which then requires support and encouragement on a regular basis. The best organizations understand this need and create support systems within the structure to provide coaching and follow up refresher sessions.

Most importantly top-level leaders are constantly reminding the rest of the organization about the leadership philosophy and expectations through regular communication and by setting personal examples. As mentioned previously, leadership has a specific language. The more we use the language, the more others will make the connection and create the mental pathways in order to remember the model.

6. We do not connect leadership development to the other critical cultural processes.

Leadership is central to the success of any organization. To obtain the best outcomes, we need to create linkages from the leadership philosophy to other key processes such as performance management, compensation, strategic planning, and the overall mission, vision, and values. The philosophy may be designed by senior management, but it must be communicated and, sometimes, translated by every leader in the company.

For example, a vision may be created at the top of the organization for good reason and for a specific purpose. However, the content and context may be lost on the folks working on the shop floor. Every leader must be able to explain how their team impacts the vision by connecting their work to the vision using the familiar processes that they use and manage.

Perhaps one of the best ways to interlock leadership behaviors to performance is by using competency attributes that are directly connected to the leadership model. In that way, employees are regularly exposed to and measured against these behaviors.

7. We rely on others to do the work for us.

Going back to Reason 3, CEOs and Presidents too often delegate the job of leadership development to a Human Resources or Training Department. While HR may be very good at compliance and skill-based training, they may not be competent in the area of behavioral-based leadership development.

External resources can be a great help in designing and supporting your leadership process by introducing new ideas, models and philosophy. They may have a fresh perspective of what methods have worked for others and bring that critical information to you. With that insight, you can decide what is best for your organization. The senior management team should set the tone and texture of the leadership philosophy, based on the shared values of the organization, not a set of buzzwords on the website for customers and shareholders to admire.

As Stephen Covey liked to say, “begin with the end in mind.” Create an image of the ideal culture and define the leadership principles that will allow it to happen. Work with a professional to help develop the process and build the structure that will create a sustainable leadership development process.

Keys to Successful Leadership Development

Okay, I have been expounding on the reasons why leadership development fails. How can we have a better chance at success?

1. **Find a leadership expert to guide you in creating the best process for your company.** Remember that “you don’t know what you don’t know,” so find ways to open those blind spots, such as looking for a trusted and experienced professional in this space.
2. **Make sure senior leaders take ownership of the process and stay involved.** You cannot delegate this critical and strategic piece of your business. Manage this process personally. Use the “language of leadership” in every message so that your employees become fluent in the principles and behaviors.
3. **Develop internal champions to facilitate workshops.** You will need a group of leaders who have a growth mindset and are willing to be part of the sustaining educational process. Draft the “informal leaders” in the organization to help. Everyone listens to these people, especially when they can’t understand their formal leaders.
4. **Get your managers involved with teaching leadership principles to employees.** When your employees hear your managers talking about leadership and see them setting the right example, they will notice and follow. Managers also strengthen their knowledge and commitment when they learn the philosophy in order to effectively teach others.
5. **Develop a continuous learning and feedback cycle.** Every leader needs feedback to develop, and every follower should be expected to provide it. Create a “culture of coaching” in the organization that is a two-way street. In addition, provide opportunities for self-study. You will find out who is really interested in development by watching those who take it on as a personal challenge.

6. **Connect leadership development to other initiatives and management systems.** You should be able to see the connection from your leadership development process to the key performance indicators and other management systems that drive your success.

Now I know what you may be thinking. Where can I find the time and resources to accomplish all this work? Most companies are already stretched too thin. The reality is that you need to make this process part of what you do every day; work it into your normal routine. You must make it both an important AND urgent matter for your team. I adopted this strategy as a plant manager. Even though the rest of the company did not share my passion, I worked on bringing organization. After a few years, it was noticed, and I was asked to go overseas and teach it in the company headquarters. No quick or simple solution exists. Real and lasting change in a leadership culture takes time, planning and persistence. Don’t let anyone tell you it can be done in a training session.

Final thoughts

The thoughts shared here are some of the reasons why I believe the traditional approach to leadership development has failed us. So many of our corporate executives do not understand the wisdom from Marshall Goldsmith of “What got you here, won’t get you there.”

Why do we take our best operators, engineers, researchers, salesmen, etc., and make them responsible for other people without the benefit of leadership development BEFORE we subject them to that very difficult practice? No wonder our past is full of failure in this regard.

We constantly stress the importance of learning from failure. Yet in leadership development, we just keep doing the same thing we have always done. Amazing! You have the power to stop the madness. Become a leadership learner. Reach out for help and start building a better future for yourself and your team.

Leadership can be a competitive advantage for your company at every level. Don’t take it lightly. Others have, and most have failed.

About the Author:



Steve Skarke joins Pilko with 40 years of engineering and chemical manufacturing experience. He is currently a Professor at The University of Texas at San Antonio where he supports the Chemical Engineering program and College of Engineering in teaching process safety and facilitating student leadership development programs.

Steve is Chairman of the Board of the Kaneka Foundation, which he founded in 2014 to provide structure and governance to all of the philanthropic activities of Kaneka Americas Holding, Inc. in North America.

Steve currently advises the President of Kaneka Americas Holding Inc. by providing support in capital investment analysis, project management, manufacturing oversight, M&A due diligence, governance of ESG activities and leadership development.

Previously, Steve was Executive Vice President at Kaneka North America where he held a variety of positions of increasing responsibility in the manufacturing of specialty polymers. He was Site Manager and EVP of the main site in Pasadena, Texas responsible for all aspects of plant operations.

Steve received his BS, Chemicals Engineering from Texas A&M University; MS, Industrial Engineering (Engineering Management) from the University of Houston; and Executive Leadership Certificate from Rice University.

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- Texas Chemical Council – Board of Directors
- AIChE – Senior Member
- LaPorte Education Foundation – Board of Directors, President
- LaPorte Chamber of Commerce – Board of Directors
- Armand Bayou Nature Center – Board of Directors
- Texas A&M University – Chemical Engineering Industry Advisory Council

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