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The next generation

Develop your company's future leader

Question:

Leadership development/succession planning is a concern at my company. The executive leadership team (ELT) is comprised of five individuals, two of whom are nearing retirement, including the president/CEO. We want to do a better job of preparing the people who will lead the company in the future, including the other three members of the ELT, who we hope might help us transition. In the past year, we've tweaked the succession planning process in light of some strategic planning and discussed where we want the company to go so it can continue to perform well. We're now turning our attention to developmental matters. What is the best way to position this? What are some suggestions for the kinds of development we should be offering? Thanks.

Answer:

As long-standing readers know, my firm belief is that leadership effectiveness

determines organization effectiveness. If you want your company to build upon its foundation, then investing time and effort in fine tuning succession planning and leadership development processes is a most worthwhile undertaking.

The right way to position this, then, is as a strategic issue. This is not some ancillary human resources project. Rather, this is an initiative that will send a positive ripple throughout the organization, as follows:

1. Improved leadership drives gains in employee productivity and satisfaction.
2. Employee gains in productivity and satisfaction yield process improvements.
3. Process improvements can drive differentiation in the marketplace and heightened customer satisfaction.
4. Differentiation in the marketplace and heightened customer satisfaction can result in revenue gains.
5. Revenue gains can produce increased returns to stakeholders.

What are the key elements of a comprehensive leadership development process? The following four elements are integral, serving as "pillars."

1. Infrastructure

The program must be positioned with executive-level sponsorship and involvement. It must be adequately resourced and visible. It must be grounded in the emerging organizational context characterized by the culture (i.e., "how we do things around here") and organizational life cycle.

2. Talent assessment

An objective mechanism for measuring and cataloguing leadership capabilities must be documented and defined. How will the organization identify leaders or those

who aspire to lead? Once identified, which leadership-related competencies will be measured? Using what instruments? How will the data and information be gathered and reported? How will it be used?

3. Talent development

The organization will need to make a commitment to ongoing provision of leadership development activities. The programming should be stratified (e.g., front-line, mid-manager, executive) and target organization-specific leadership competencies. The idea is to be prescriptive about "how we lead around here," in light of the corporate culture and organizational life cycle mentioned above, in No. 1. You are developing your leaders, not somebody else's. From my way of looking at it, an organization that does leadership development well understands this and builds and deploys performance-based learning programming that reflects its unique environment.

4. Program evaluation

In a world of measurement, it is an axiom that "what gets measured, gets done." So, relative to the elements associated with Steps 1-3, above, I would be remiss if I did not emphasize the importance of gathering a variety of formative and summative evaluation data to allow for responsive fine-tuning adjustments. Both internal (i.e., reaction, learning) and external (i.e., behavior, results) criteria should be utilized as a basis for demonstrating the utility of the leadership development effort. At the bottom line, the question that needs to be answered is, "Did the organization realize gains as a result of its invest-

ment in leadership development?”

Obviously, the context in which you operate will have a lot to do with the manner in which you address these foundational elements. One size does not fit all in this instance. Clearly, the implication of the “four pillars” outlined above is that an integrated, comprehensive system is better than a “cut and paste” approach that strings together a variety of elements with no common grounding or foundation.

Stephen Covey’s adage, “begin with the end in mind,” is applicable here. If the goal is to make things up as you go and hope that it hangs together so that every so often an effective leader emerges, then feel free to ignore what I have outlined. If, on the other hand, the goal is to build a sustainable organization by providing sustained excellence in leadership, then you must follow my suggestions. If the goal is to build a dynamic, adaptive organization, then you must build a dynamic, adaptive leadership development system.

At the same time, while the system is an important part of the solution, it might not be entirely sufficient on its own. Individual differences must be addressed to build a truly effective leadership development system. Not all people are the same. Not all people have what it takes to be great leaders. Bringing out best in each person becomes an ongoing quest. Cultivating the full leadership potential of participants must be emphasized within the leadership development initiative.

So, helping people to truly see where they are in their own leadership development journey is an important consideration. Helping them to take ownership of their ongoing leadership development is

critical. Researcher Robert Quinn and his colleagues have done great deal of work on the topic of leadership and managerial “mastery.” They offer a three-step model for encouraging individuals to pursue mastery, as follows:

1. Learn about yourself

Complete a self-assessment. Write up a self-evaluation report. Have others evaluate you. Discuss your skills with someone who will be honest. Keep a journal.

2. Develop a change strategy

Identify specific areas in need of improvement and set specific goals. Identify role models for your weak spots. Read relevant books. Identify and participate in relevant learning programs.

3. Implement the change strategy

Be honest about the costs of development. Develop a social support system. Evaluate your progress on a regular basis and modify your approach if needed.

In summary, by attending to both programmatic and individual elements, an engaging and thorough leadership development system can be built that will set the stage for smoother transitioning as the organization moves forward. Career development, replacement planning, and succession planning will be advantaged. In the end, the leaders who become involved, the employees they lead, and the stakeholders who are served will all benefit.

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