



Developing Gifted Leaders

by Daniel D. Elash, Ph.D.

Does your organization develop outstanding leaders? Are you tapping all of the requisite leadership potential residing in your people? Is your organization becoming ever more focused, enthusiastic, savvy and fiercely competitive? Do you ever feel that your organization couldn't possibly do better?

If your answer to any of these questions is "no," then you've put your finger on a crucial competitive problem. Organizations need a deep and growing pool of leadership talent to work their will on their environments. As an enterprise, the abilities to accurately observe the marketplace, to assess your own effectiveness, to think robustly and execute ideas effectively are dependent on a solid core of leadership at every level of your organization.

If you are not relentlessly developing leadership talent from within, then, by implication, you are content to be sub-optimized. There is no way around it. If your people aren't stepping into leadership roles as circumstances dictate, if they aren't continuously improving as leaders, and if they aren't routinely making others better, then the organization is settling for "good enough" as opposed to "impressively better." Which outcome are you shooting for?

Defining Leadership:

Leadership, like intelligence, athleticism, or creativity, manifests itself in different ways in different settings. Most organizations don't adequately define what they're looking for in their leaders. The concept stays vague and therefore, the path to the goal is always murky.

I would like to offer a working definition of leadership, which is broad enough to serve the purpose yet specific enough to provide a referent. Simply put, "Leadership is the art of causing others to want to follow." It is an art because there are many ways to act to create the right conditions yet no way that works in all circumstances.

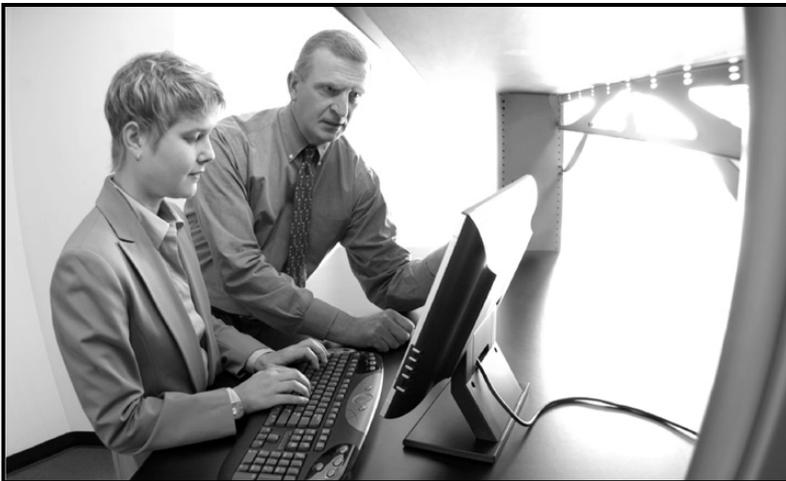
Leadership is personal, contextual and focused on a purpose. Emphasizing one element at the expense of another leads to inadequate or mediocre results.

"The leader must listen and instruct so that the team plays well together."

Personal - Your personality is the vehicle for delivering your leadership efforts. It is the sauce that flavors the meal. Yet, just as there is not one sauce for every meal, there is not one personality that defines a good leader. We'll never identify a leadership gene whose absence disqualifies one from ever acting in a leadership role. Neither is there a list of heroic virtues that is mandatory for leadership. Focusing solely on developing sets of character traits in aspiring leaders, while worth doing, is insufficient and needlessly limiting.

Contextual - Leadership is all about relationships, about causing results. First, there is the relation between the leader and the others. Any leader has to know how to cause these particular others to want to follow. Second, any leader has to be cognizant of the circumstances and the conditions that limit or enhance options for generating results.

Focused on Purpose - Leadership has to occur within a common purpose. If you are to lead others from where they are to somewhere else it is the shared purpose that provides the energy and enthusiasm required for movement.



Refocusing to Nurture Gifted Leaders:

If you want to get better at growing leaders you're going to have to take a hard look at how you're going about it presently. We cannot simply focus on the personality traits of the people involved. We cannot simply expose them to theories. We cannot assess what they do apart from what they cause others to do.

What can we do? We must focus on developing their skills in the arts and practices of leadership. Practicing the arts, getting and using accurate feedback and personal reflection on their developmental experiences are the key ingredients for developing leaders. Their practice should revolve around the context of their work. The feedback should come primarily from those they seek to lead, with input from managers, coaches or mentors adding additional perspective.

The Four Practices of the Gifted Leader:

There are four key practices that comprise the palate of the gifted leader. They are:

- Grasping
- Inciting
- Forging, and
- Transforming

Grasping- A leader's role requires a grasp of the big picture, the circumstances in which the company is operating. Grasping the big picture involves two components. A leader must routinely gather intelligence of what is happening both within the organization and in the world at large, and the leader must ensure that the business assumptions of the organization are continuously validated against those evolving conditions. Set the mechanisms in place within the organization for gathering and employing intelligence. It is only common sense that the more eyes and ears applied to these tasks, the richer the data. The leader must not be wedded to comfortable assumptions that rigidify the maneuverability of the organization as a whole. Efficiencies in working obsolete processes do not create the conditions for success.

Having the entire team gathering and analyzing intelligence ensures that a company's perspective doesn't become a mindset. Charging the leadership team with monitoring and grasping events and their implications for your business idea leads to the development of the organization's ability to keep the big picture in focus.

Inciting- Grasping the big picture is not sufficient unless it is used to incite the organization to make the right adjustments. It is the job of the leader to incite, to stir to action, the people in the organization. Insights and awareness must be shared. Their implications must ripple throughout the organization if there is going to be a focused, coordinated response to changing conditions, be they threats or opportunities. Of course the current assumptions must be managed, but this is the work of the people in their various functional roles. If leaders get sucked into day-to-day operations, they lose their ability to incite others to expand their perspectives.

Inciting a workforce means that those in the lead are deliberately working to help others to use what they are discovering as they do their work to continue to stay focused on the big picture. The stories that are told, the examples that are held up, and the instances of good practices have to be thoughtfully selected and propagated. Think of the conductor leading the orchestra. The leader must listen and instruct so that the team plays well together.



Forging- A leader must shape the organization's efforts to do the work. A leader can supply the pressure and force required to create an organization that stays aligned with changing conditions. In talking of force, I am not talking about bullying and pummeling. There is a force that comes from people staying focused as much on their purpose as on their form. How we must work is as important as what we must do

A leader is most effective when he or she uses the commitment, the purpose and the drive of the people in the company to ensure a thoughtful execution of its tasks. A leader can deliberately harness the energy of the workforce to fulfill its potential or she/he can hope that it occurs. Hoping is never as effective as ensuring.

Transforming- The work of a leader always involves transformation. A leader causes the parts of the whole to continue to evolve as circumstances change. Going from where we are today to where we want to be in the future requires the deliberate attention of people in the lead. This is where bossing and telling always fall short. It is the thinking of the workforce that is transformed in a successful company. People see themselves differently over time, they collaborate differently over time and they evolve their abilities over time. The leader needs to be

looking ahead so that these transformations are focused and purposeful.

Developing Gifted Leaders:

More of the same always results in more of the same. If you are looking to unleash the power of your organization, start by nurturing gifted leadership throughout the ranks. Define leadership clearly and expect people to practice the arts of gifted leadership. Create opportunities for people to practice those arts within their roles, within the circumstances of their day-to-day work.

Ensure that they get and receive feedback about their efforts to cause others to want to follow. A leader's effectiveness can only be judged by what he or she is able to cause others to want to do. Those being led will create more, adapt and adjust better, and will employ more effort and enthusiasm if they want to follow. Judge a leader by the positive movement of those who follow.

Finally, because how we pursue our purpose evolves as conditions change and events unfold, leaders must constantly be learning. This implies that they spend time reflecting on their experiences, that they seek input from others, and that they continue to experiment and expand their knowledge.

Establish your development efforts along these lines and you will be well on the way to filling your organization with gifted leaders who, in turn, generate a powerful competitive advantage.

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