

Changing the Conversation

*on
Leadership Development*

by David Parks



The Only Thing Worse . . .

. . .than a low-grade conversation is no conversation at all!

Yet, according to current research, leadership development strategy is not afforded the rigorous discussion and attention required. This is a problem!

Research from Deloitte University Press⁽¹⁾ states that 86% of HR and Business Leaders cite leadership as a top issue. Fully 50 percent of Deloitte's respondents rated their leadership shortfalls as "very important." Yet only 6 percent of organizations believe their leadership pipeline is "very ready"—pointing to a staggering capability gap.

This story is consistent with other research from Brandon Hall⁽²⁾ where 36% of organizations say their leadership development practices are still below average or poor. ***Half the organizations said their leaders are not skilled to effectively lead their organizations today, and a startling 71% said their leaders are not ready to lead their organizations into the future.***

But what's the solution?

Do a quick Google search on 'leadership development' and you'll get a gazillion solutions. Authors, gurus, workshops, books, white papers etc. All offering some 'unique' panacea to common leadership ailments, or so it would appear.

The market is vast, overwhelming, confusing and it suffers from its own self-created 'Flavor of The Month' or 'Program du Jour' syndrome.

Slick marketing and messaging invites you to simply buy a solution, a 'workshop in a box' approach to development. Feature rich and codified into a nifty 5 or 7 point plan, these programs are not bad for basic development, but they could do so much more. They offer a safe and predictable solution suited to a risk averse decision maker or decision-making committee. But are they really going to become the fabric and foundation of the way leaders lead in your organization? Leadership development is a journey. It's personal, it's challenging, it's messy and both inspirational and 'perspirational.'

Change the Conversation

Low-grade, low-leverage conversations about leadership development tend to hover around which workshop should we do, how much does it cost and playing one solution provider off against another. I believe a different conversation needs to take place. Get clear on business outcomes and the behaviors that will drive them. Reframe a big bold vision for your leadership development:

Imagine the front page of the Wall Street Journal or Harvard Business Review in one year's time singing the praises of your approach and the results.

It is time to change the conversation and shift to a high-octane approach that will fuel and propel your leaders to that next level.

Start with the big question ***“why leadership, why now?”*** Put yourself in the shoes of the CEO and ask the question again? Even better, get on the calendar of your CEO and the exec team and ask the question. This will provide the clear line of sight between business strategy and the behaviors required to drive the strategy, plus this is the first step in securing executive support.

Why to How?

Equipped with a clear picture of the needs, wants and business imperatives, it is time to ask, “What is going to do drive success?” Review the models, the books, and the vendors. Read the research on best practices from organizations such as Bersin By Deloitte, Brandon Hall, Elliott Masie, The Conference Board and other reputable sources. Benchmark what other organizations have done (successfully) such as General Electric, Qualcomm, American Airlines and other notable organizations.

Filter this research through your own lens of good pragmatic sense for your organization, and then design your approach.

This is where it makes sense to bring in an experienced partner who has been there, done that and brings a wealth of intellectual property, proven methodologies, models, 360's, case studies etc. Notice the switch in my terminology from vendor to partner. Never underestimate the importance of chemistry, fit and feel. What will you look for in a great collaborator?

Getting It Right

There is no second chance to make a good impression with a leadership roll out. For large, mission critical initiatives, it is always wise to do a pilot. Populate the pilot with key people who you believe will contribute valuable feedback and be the best evangelists for the program upon launch. Marketers refer to this as “pull” marketing (versus “push.”)

Creating “pull” in the organization - where the reputation of the initiative takes on it’s own positive, promotional force of energy. This is the ultimate form of promotion and endorsement and is actively carving and creating a new leadership and learning culture.

Be careful what you wish for, as great leadership development deployments have a ‘flywheel’ effect. Done right, they gain momentum quickly and demand comes faster that you might expect from farther reaches of the organization.

Once launched, the challenge becomes achieving “stickiness and sustainment.” How do you ensure the learning sticks over time and sustains behavior change and drives business results?

Stitching it Together

Design a complete development experience and be sure to secure the appropriate “environmental support” from senior leaders and others.

Think about it, you are creating the cultural norm for how leaders act, behave, get things done and move the performance needle.

This demands a very intentional process. Without it, you get a default culture which invariably results in disengagement, chaos, confusion and underperformance.

Building leaders and culture change doesn't happen overnight either.

Consider an experience over 6 or 12 months incorporating elements such as a 360, a workshop, a webinar follow up, personal coaching, action learning, accountability trios, an advanced workshop and even a graduation. All stitched together in a logical, iterative flow that makes sense for the learner population. Masterful design requires accomplished embroidery, creating a rich tapestry of experiences to inspire, move and lift the learner's skill set to a whole new level.

What's the golden thread that stitches your masterpiece of a leadership initiative together?

Put yourself in the shoes of the learner population. Curate an experience driven portfolio of options that serve up the right programs, in the right media, at the right time, in the right duration delivered by the right people.

Time For Action

Invariably the biggest challenge when it comes to launching a leadership development initiative is, in behavioral economics terminology 'Status Quo Bias.' Yes, exactly, it is easier and more comfortable to just leave things the way they are. Leadership is an action verb, leaders challenge the status quo, they make things happen.

Leadership Development professionals might do well to reframe how they see themselves. Think more like a lightning rod for change, an agent provocateur, a masterful embroiderer, a creator of magical learning moments, a multiplier of positive leadership interactions and ultimately a deliverer of extraordinary organizational outcomes.

So no more low grade conversations about mediocre, dated or lack-lustre development options. The future of your organization depends upon it. Let's talk about bold, high quality initiatives that deliver outcomes worthy of front page coverage.



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References: ⁽¹⁾ Deloitte University Press. Leadership – A Perennial Issue. Feb 2015. ⁽²⁾ Brandon Hall and Harvard Business School Publishing. State of Leadership Development 2015: The Time to Act is Now. July 2015.