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Implementing Leader Development That Counts

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Abstract
Effective leader development is too often the first casualty of high demands placed on leaders, from corporate America to the U.S. military. These entities' leader development programs and workforce feedback reveals insufficient strategies and competing priorities. Organizations succumbing to these obstacles unknowingly find themselves trapped in adverse cycles of leadership development, perpetuating undernourished talent and mediocre performance. This problem will not fix itself. Organizations must refocus efforts to understand and implement a leader driven, interpersonally focused, and culturally ingrained brand of leader development to maximize available talent and craft their envisioned organization.

Introduction: The Team's First Casualty Is Usually Leader Development

Competing demands on organizational leaders are absolutely destructive to talent development. These demands overload and derail even our best over time. The disruptive effect is similar to the freefall experience of U.S. military airborne operations. Upon exiting the aircraft traveling at 130 knots, the jumper freefalls six seconds as the main parachute deploys. In this turbulent stage there is complete sensory overload. The only appropriate action is inherently individual and short sighted—to keep a tight body position until the shock passes. Similarly, today's leaders are consumed with day-to-day operations, reports, mergers, and reviews. Just like the jumper, leaders must prioritize the immediate, and not the surrounding talent.

A U.S. Army parachutist holds a tight body position upon exiting the aircraft as the parachute inflates (Clark, 2018). The sensory overload is akin to overwhelming priorities facing today's leaders.

As the parachute fills with air, now seconds from impact, the jumper can at last gain awareness of the sky and ground. Overwhelmed with priorities, leader and jumper alike are likely to find themselves in unexpected or unwanted territory, drifting toward hazards. At this point, it is too late for major course correction. The team's underdeveloped leaders cannot adequately deliver in these conditions. Still short on fully actualized talent and long on competing tasks, leaders trapped in this adverse cycle must again reassume a tight body position. Effective leader development is the casualty once more. It is in this moment leaders realize their team is not making the leaders they want and need for their organization.

Defining the Problem: The Adverse Leader Development Cycle

Leadership development is lacking in both the military and civilian sectors. The Center of Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL) examined the quality of leader

development using survey data from across the force covering 2005-2016. In the ten-year survey, 'Develops Others' consistently ranked as the poorest leadership attribute across all leader cohorts with less than two-thirds rating their supervisor as effective and nearly one-fifth rating their supervisor as completely ineffective (Cavanaugh et. al., 2016, 89). In similar studies, Korn Ferry repeatedly found 'Develops Others' among the lowest of 67 ranked managerial skills (Orr and Sack, 2009, 9). Likewise, a Society for Human Resource Management study revealed over one-third of HR professionals rated leader development as 'a little' to 'not at all' effective with nearly half reporting necessary improvement to participant engagement ("Leader Development," 2016, 7).

This development gap is neither malicious nor deliberate. Rather, it is the result of constrained leaders and the breakdown of strategy to connect vision, leader, and subordinate preferences. These constraints incentivize short term performance over long term growth, creating results-based cultures and impersonal leader development systems. This near sightedness leaves organizations trapped in a cycle of adverse leadership development perpetuating underdeveloped leaders. As commonly occurs in organizational crisis, leaders face an apparent paradox whereby the right short-term actions are fruitless in the long run (Drucker, 2009, 3).

The Adverse Leader Development Cycle (ALDC)
(The ALDC traps constrained teams to perpetuate underdeveloped leaders)

Contributing Factor 1: Competing Priorities. The first key obstacle facing today's leaders is scarce time driven by competing organizational priorities. CASAL captured this effect with 25% of active duty respondents reporting workload stress as a serious challenge—a number that steadily rose across the survey's history (Cavanaugh et. al., 2016, vii). This trend coincides with the Army's adoption of the Sustainable Readiness Model (SRM) that transitioned the force from repeated low-intensity deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan to readiness for larger, full-spectrum conflict (Lopez, 2017). SRM greatly increased median Brigade Combat Team readiness, but at the cost of increased time constraints. This reduced the resources available, especially time, to develop talent. Leaders protect and allocate subordinate time based upon entrenched organizational culture, and if needed personal conviction. In perpetually stressed environments, cultures begin to focus on day-to-day results. As a result, leader development is increasingly volatile and inconsistent, reliant on the beliefs of individual leaders rather than consistent systems. Regardless of the organization, successful leaders will have to manage a

growing list of priorities without a growing list of resources; leadership development will likely only occur on their own time.

Contributing Factor 2: Strategy Breakdown. A second obstacle to leader development is poor organizational strategy. To be most effective, an organization's leadership development plan links both the strategic outlook and the changing desires of its workforce. This connects and enforces ends, ways, and means at each level. Leader and participant ownership is strongly correlated to this strategic connection ("Leader Development," 2016, 8).

Yet too many teams show a deliberate break between strategic vision, leader, and subordinate preferences. Like any other facet of the organization, a team's strategic assumptions on leadership development must match the changing environment. However, organizations are often unable to adapt their business theories to evolving reality (Drucker, 2009, 7). Forty-eight percent of HR professionals reported the need to improve the team's leader development support to corporate strategy—a staggering figure reflecting this key structural breakdown ("Leader Development," 2016, 21).

The Army Leader Development Strategy (ALDS) exemplifies how an originally holistic strategy can fall short by failing to align with the evolving desires of its workforce. ALDS and supporting Army leadership manuals combine for an incredibly holistic development regimen. The strategy features three developmental pillars training, education, and experience across three component domains including institutional (such as professional military ethic schooling), operational (time in deploying units), and self-development (U.S. Army, 2013, 10). ALDS captures key actions and attributes within each pillar and domain, guiding development throughout a leader's career.

However even the best development strategies can grow inadequate when not aligned with reality, in this case changing employee values and expectations. Army leaders prefer to work with other leaders strong in personal interaction skills such as role modeling, coaching, teaching and mentoring. An Army officer survey conducted by RAND identified these desired characteristics as second to only operational experience (Schirmer et. al., 2008, 24). This Army trend follows larger societal norms. Meaningful interpersonal relationships are commonly the missing piece for the entire millennial generation (Sinek, 2016). In world of high employee turnover and flattened hierarchies, information sharing replaces authority to garner worker loyalty (Drucker, 2009, xv). While not intended to be all encompassing, ALDS efforts underplay the critical effect of coaching relative to its evolving employee preferences. Unlike the overall conflicting priorities and constraints, organizational leader development doctrine at each level shows the greatest promise for positive action. For instance, ALDS can more accurately reflect the desires of the force by adding a fourth developmental pillar 'coaching' to formally require Army leaders across all domains to provide coaching, teaching, and mentoring to soldiers at every organizational level. Due to this strategic mismatch of preferences and execution, it is no wonder that Army leader development quality is marked by inconsistency (Schirmer et. al., 2008, XIX).

The opportunity cost incurred by these obstacles against efficient leader development programs is exceedingly high in future environments. Deloitte's 2018 Global Human Capital Trends Report projects an expanding role for organizations from normal business enterprise to social enterprise. Businesses will compete in environments characterized by an increasingly hyper-connected and empowered population searching for new sources of societal leadership (Agarwal et. al., 2018, 2-7). Similarly, the U.S. Army Multi-Domain Battle

Concept projects how the Army envisions land warfare from 2025-2040. The concept describes an increasingly complex and contested operating environment occurring above and below the threshold of armed conflict (U.S. Army, 2017, 5-7). In this future setting, teams must reorganize for constant change by improving their ability to systematically innovate (Drucker, 2009, 55). Organizations must recognize and break the Adverse Leader Development Cycle or risk going into these future environments with an inadequate and overtaxed cadre of trusted leaders.

Defining Components of the Solution for Frontline Leaders

As former Army Chief of Staff General Raymond Odierno once noted, an organization's people are its competitive advantage to negotiate challenges with positivity and efficiency (Odierno, 2015, 9). While frontline military and civilian leaders cannot solve competing priorities or strategic breakdowns, they are still the organization's lubricant that protects its people and accomplishes its goals. Leaders can implement better development procedures while operating decentralized within their team through three broad, interrelated components to succeed in the evolving future environment:

> #1 *Leader Driven*—providing purpose, foresight, follow through, and example.
> #2 *Interpersonally Focused*—empower through coaching, teaching, mentoring.
> #3 *Culturally Ingrained*—developmental culture facilitating mutual trust.

Component One: Leader Driven. A leader's impact on talent development is central in adapting to the organization's environment. Ninety percent of HR professionals believe it important to program effectiveness ("Leader Development," 2016, 8). This is seconded in the military where changes in leadership have "…a profound effect on the content, frequency, and quality of leadership development activities" (Schirmer et. al., 2008, XVII). Leaders, not HR specialists, must bring purpose and own the development of talent as much as the results. Ironically, driving leader development also entails ceding control and empowering others. Leaders exhibit Charles Duhigg's "leader modeling" both individually and in groups by actively listening, admitting mistakes, and resolving conflict in open discussion (Duhigg, 2016, 69). Teams with proven leaders that personally drive talent growth at multiple organizational levels maximize powerful in-group effects within the workforce. "Winners understand that learning, teaching, and leading are inextricably intertwined…It is hard-wired into everything they do" (Tichy, 2007, 14). The most successful teams expect managers to lead by developing others.

Component Two: Interpersonally Focused. Successful organizations will focus on individualized coaching, teaching, and mentoring. Interpersonal leader-to-leader development is the most impactful and efficient use of scarce leader time. HR professionals label coaching (70%), leader-to-leader development (68%), and mentoring (60%) as three of the top four most important development methods of the near future ("Leader Development," 2016, 9). These methods are key, especially for young leaders, to overcome the large skill and identity transitions necessary from an individual contributor role to leadership and managerial positions today (Cast, 2018, 42). Without interpersonal feedback, even the best talent risks derailing future performance (Cast, 2018, 13).

Coaching, teaching, and mentoring are most influential when leaders seek to develop talent "without boundaries," treating subordinate's personal and professional outcomes in equal esteem (Campbell, 2017, 62). This developmental mindset enables the leader to understand their people, what is truly monumental to them, allowing leaders to better anticipate how

others react and empower leaders to deal with conflict (Campbell, 2017, 133). Interpersonal development does not replace technical professional development required for specific roles. Rather, it is the primary means by which a team facilitates and delivers its talent development. Interpersonal development drives more positive externalities. Leaders can better manage workforce relationships that extend outside the organizational structure such as the customer or host-nation population. Further, this connection eases the ever-expanding automation and globalization that separate leader, worker, and consumer (Agarwal et. al., 2018, 7-8).

Component Three: Culturally Ingrained. Finally, successful programs must be part of a larger developmental culture facilitating mutual trust. A culture is derived from collective norms—unspoken group consensus—which develop over time to define appropriate behavior and serve essential roles in the shaping team member experiences (Duhigg, 2016, 45-46). Psychological safety is one such norm that acculturates strong team member behavior. Mutual trust and respect between members and echelons of a team enable individual action without fear of reprisal (Duhigg, 2016, 50). Trust optimizes individual risk taking within groups to best facilitate collaboration. Military and civilian research supports the importance of mutual trust. CASAL found mutual trust between senior and junior leadership is the largest factor to active duty leadership satisfaction (Cavanaugh et. al., 2016, 10). Google's Project Aristotle reported psychological safety, or mutual trust, as superior to all other group productivity components, including individual talent (Duhigg, 2016). Psychological safety will be essential for subordinate and leader to implement interpersonal development, in particular to give and accept feedback, make mistakes, and improve in a timely manner. Organizational cultures that embrace leadership development as an expectation rather than aberration, as a process rather than event, will find sustainable talent growth. Driven by engaged leaders and focused on its people, a team's leader development program can become a culturally engrained value to be truly leveraged as competitive tool over time (Tichy, 2007, 132).

Implementing the Solution for Frontline Leaders

Given the high costs of talent failure, leaders must take action to prevent cycles of adverse talent development. This requires concrete, tactical action by leaders. Leaders can negotiate known problems and integrate components of future successful talent development while decentralized into their piece of the organization through four steps:

> #1 *Commit to a Leadership Framework Model*—guide yourself and your team.
> #2 *Identify the Impactful Inputs*—understand your people and what is important.
> #3 *Make the Time*—invest in your people with powerful events.
> #4 *Identify the Measures of Effectiveness*—assess, learn, and grow.

Step One: Commit to a Leadership Framework Model. The first step to implement better leader development is to commit to a leadership framework. Frameworks provide focus and expectations to senior and junior leader alike, establishing leadership standards to measure developmental and performance needs. When linked with the higher organization's leadership development plan, frameworks can fill voids left by strategic gaps. Leaders can start with a known framework or adapt multiple models such as the U.S. Army Leader Requirement's Model: Character, Presence, Intellect Leads, Develops, Get Results (U.S. Army, 2013, 7) or Patrick Lencioni's Ideal Team Player: Humble, Hungry, and Smart (Lencioni, 2018, 153). Ideally an organization chooses a model to best fit the culture and people. A team's leadership model works best when driven by a shared vision, personalized to the collective future, and communicated throughout the organization. Leaders further democratize the

developmental experience and establish culture by building this framework with subordinates. Once established, the framework becomes a guide for both leader and team to focus scarce resources through turbulent days and competing priorities.

Step Two: Identify the Impactful Inputs. Leaders identify critical inputs to better understand their people and each other given known scarce resources. Impactful inputs facilitate 'teachable moments' that allow both leader and subordinate to draw and deliver higher levels of understanding from their experiences (Tichy, 2007, 62). The biographical sketch is one method that cuts the learning curve for both leader and worker, facilitating interpersonal development and a developmental culture. The sketch is a personal narrative shared between supervisor and subordinate focusing on powerful information such as passions, fears, crucibles, goals, personality type, and communication preferences (Campbell, 2017, 123-124). It is a tool of trust, allowing both sides to offer transparency early in the working relationship. The sketch also serves as a guided self-reflection exercise between leaders. Similarly, the 360-assessment allows team members to receive feedback tailored to the organization from all levels to truly see themselves. These assessments are best conducted when the team knows they are confidential, regular, and developmental not evaluation focused. Again, leaders drive this process by sharing their results to establish the environment of mutual trust and debriefing each team member on their individual results (Henschel, 2018). High impact inputs cut the learning curve for high tempo organizations and provide the foundation for interpersonal development within the team.

Step Three: Make the Time. Leaders must set aside time to invest in their people. Talent development requires predictable and visible placement on a leader's calendar to both fight off the urgent and broadcast commitment. Events include leader offsites, group project reviews, or counseling sessions. Of these, one-on-one coaching and counseling sessions between senior and junior leader are central to any program. Leaders review performance, focus goals, build self-awareness, uncover potential, and identify developmental barriers as part of personalized developmental plans (U.S. Army, 2012, 7-10). These sessions also offer the opportunity to gain team member commitment on expected future challenges. Leaders do this by individually addressing concerns and soliciting input, thereby aligning both the plan and team. Coaching and counseling sessions are maximized when leaders practice good listening techniques, displaying empathy and energy through informed questions to unearth assumptions and garner deeper, more influential results. Dan Coyle explains this phenomena: leaders must "listen like a trampoline" by absorbing and adding energy to the dialogue (Coyle, 2018, 162). Leaders can harness similarly powerful teaching moments informally during daily work. These opportunities offer regular feedback and extend influence outside the normal rank structure. High impact events form a team's interpersonal development core.

Step Four: Identify the Measures of Effectiveness. Finally, leaders identify measures of effectiveness to evaluate their program. Tailored to their team's leadership vision and framework, program evaluation allows even the smallest segment of the company to assess, learn, and grow by charting the progress of desired outputs. This helps an organization approximate its capacity for future innovation, an elusive but necessary requirement (Drucker, 2009, 104).

Each component of the leader driven, interpersonally focused, and culturally ingrained leader development brand is measurable. For example, a program's leader driven quality can be determined from the relative weight that coaching ability carries on performance reviews.

Next, a team's interpersonal focus is measured through the quality of junior leader counseling with their subordinates as teams commit and learn better techniques. Finally, organizational culture is assessed through climate surveys and focus groups to measure collective psychological safety and mutual trust. As these examples show, a proper assessment strategy blends objective sources such as survey data with subjective sources such as focus groups and senior leader observation to provide a holistic program evaluation.

Sound assessment criteria and program evaluation inform future changes for even lower level leaders. These changes can be small tactical tweaks to improve successive iterations such as a refined personnel on-boarding system. More importantly, these changes can also signal major strategic change for those listening, allowing leaders to see reality, mobilize resources, and guide necessary transformation (Tichy, 2007, 34). Those teams unable to adequately check the organization's pulse risk falling back into a cycle of adverse leadership development that perpetuates underdeveloped leaders and mediocre performance.

Conclusion: Sustaining Success in a New Reality

The inability to develop talent will continue to hinder future envisioned organizations, but with stakes higher than ever. Leaders can overcome the cycle that strangles talent and perpetuates mediocrity by committing to grow their people. In these times of uncertainty, the ultimate leadership test is "...whether he or she teaches others to be leaders and builds an organization that can sustain its success" (Tichy, 2007, 3). Successful teams that create leaders stockpile the cohesion and innovation necessary for any future challenge. As the missions of both corporate and military teams grow increasingly complex, an incredible uncertainty hangs over future employee and employer relations. In this new reality, leaders everywhere should ask themselves the following: why will my team choose to follow me into the unknown?

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