

Developing Effective Leaders

BY JON WOLPER

A recent Roffey Park survey, *The Management Agenda 2016*, found that nearly four out of five HR managers believe developing appropriate leadership and management styles is the main challenge facing their organization. TD spoke to some of the industry's suppliers to find out their thoughts about the most important qualities for a leader, the challenges they face, and more.

Leadership styles

"Our research shows what an appropriate leadership or management 'style' looks like is actually a demonstration of various behaviors that can be grouped together," says Evan Sinar, chief scientist and director for the Center of Analytics and Behavioral Research at Development Dimensions International (DDI). "For example, leaders need to be ambidextrous between execution and engagement; they need to spend valuable time interacting with, not just managing, their teams; and they need to live out the role of a catalyst leader—one that sparks action in others—and bring out the best in others."

Others agreed that there's no one way for a leader to act, necessarily, as personal preferences, ability to adapt, and shifting circumstances all factor into effective leadership styles. "We do not subscribe to a one-size-fits-all leadership style approach," says Nash Musselwhite, vice president of sales and marketing at Discovery Learning Inc., adding that DLI encourages leaders to develop techniques

that best fit the people and situations they find themselves in—and combine those with their own personal styles of leadership.

"Unfortunately leaders rarely have the luxury of choosing their circumstances," says Sam K. Shriver, senior vice president of commercial operations and product development for the Center for Leadership Studies. "Their circumstances choose them. Irrespective of your personal preference or comfort zone as a leader, you will routinely be required to respond to a wide spectrum of challenges and opportunities. 'Extending your reach' as a leader in that regard is mission critical."

Leadership capability

According to the Roffey Park survey, 54 percent of private sector HR managers don't believe in their organization's leadership and management capability. That shows the importance of developing leadership styles among managers—and experts agreed that leadership is facing challenges.

“The quality of leadership is barely improving—and that’s according to both HR managers as well as leaders themselves,” Sinar says. According to a recent DDI study, he said, only 25 percent of employees feel they are working for their “best-ever” leader. Meanwhile, just 37 percent of leaders say their development programs are effective. That leads to a potential stagnation in leadership, and employees subsequently can lose confidence.

According to Shriver, “there is no doubt there are many organizations that struggle to attract and keep high-caliber talent. And the primary reason those organizations are experiencing retention challenges stems from the fact that those employees observe leaders on a consistent basis that are afraid to make decisions, and/or set high standards, and/or hold people accountable, and/or take meaningful steps to earn employee trust.” Similarly, Musselwhite references Gallup research that found about 70 percent of U.S. employees are disengaged.

Improving managers

So, in many cases, the quality of managers needs to change—throughout an organization. “If they don’t already have it in place, and they should, organizations should be frantically developing a robust leadership development program based on competency gap analysis,” Musselwhite explains. “These organizations can begin by focusing on the director level and up, but the most effective HR leaders also recognize the need to invest appropriately in midlevel leaders and high-potential employees as well.”

Shriver explained “mini-change initiatives” as a positive way to produce change. That refers to creating training aimed at nontraditional stakeholders; for instance, tools designed to help the manager of the person going through training, or specific plans for senior leadership to communicate support for key skills.

In DDI’s Global Leadership Forecast, leaders were asked to identify the development methods that they found most useful. On average, they preferred developmental assignments,

formal training, and coaching from their current manager. Considering less than 40 percent of HR managers said their leaders have high-quality effective development plans, according to Sinar, it’s important for organizations to take steps to improve their managers’ development.

“Leaders today need to develop and grow other leaders—leadership development is not a job for HR, but an important challenge for leaders themselves,” Sinar says.

Effective leaders

So, what are the most important characteristics of an effective leader? How can someone be the kind of person labeled a “best-ever” leader by their employees?

According to Sinar, “DDI research shows that the most critical skills for leaders include coaching and developing others, identifying and developing future talent, managing and successfully introducing change, inspiring others toward a challenging future vision, fostering employee creativity and innovation, and leading across countries and cultures.”

He also mentions “the ongoing battle between IQ and EQ,” or cerebral quickness versus interpersonal skills—and the fact that DDI’s data show that leaders need a combination of both to get their teams to execute while remaining engaged. Shriver, meanwhile, says the most important word is “credibility,” which leaders can gain by being able to make tough decisions quickly, taking the steps necessary to establish trust, and by never stopping the learning process.

According to Musselwhite, it starts with integrity.

“Integrity should be at the top of every list of most important leadership traits,” he says. “Integrity is followed closely by transparency, the ability to inspire, be adaptable, influence others, and lead through periods of change and ambiguity.”

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