Don't bother putting leadership into people

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Most leadership training that is being conducted in corporate offsites is ill-advised. I make this bold statement because the intent of most of this training is to put leadership into people such that they can transform themselves and then their organizations upon their return. In this article, I shall address why the latter process is unlikely to succeed and what alternatives exist that can more effectively put leadership directly into the organization, where it belongs.

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The "List Approach" to Leadership

The sheer amount of investment placed into leadership training is enormous. Although no one has done a definitive study, an annual price tag of approximately $50 billion is often used. How is this money spent?

Most investment in leadership training subscribes to a "list" approach. What I mean is that the provider of the training typically has either an explicit or tacit list in mind of what attributes it takes to be a good leader. Trainees who attend the sessions are expected to learn and practice this list of leadership attributes. The presumption is that once they become experts in this list, they will have graduated into leadership. It should be noted that the list can be quite "scientific"—that is, empirically derived—and behaviorally complex, not only in its origin but in its measurement. The measures might also be assembled from a variety of sources—for example, using 360-degree feedback.

The problem with the list approach is that most trainees find that, as a leadership development method, it doesn't work that well upon their return to their professional homes. The main reason for the lack of success is that though they have learned the list of leadership, no one else in their shop has. What was covered in class, though well presented by instructors and well understood by trainees, may not necessarily jibe with organizational realities. Hence, the new knowledge and practices may have to be strategically tucked away by our junior executives as they discover that no one else has learned except for themselves. This very condition was acknowledged by Steve Kerr when he was once asked about the basis for changing GE's Leadership Development program. "It's Organization Development 101," he quipped. "You should never send a changed person back to an unchanged environment."[1]

The Position Approach to Leadership

A parallel drawback of the list approach is that a sizable portion of leadership development activity is devoted to preparing people for leadership, defined as upper managerial "positions."[2] I submit that this very presupposition is flawed to begin with as long as we insist that leadership is built into positions or people in positions and not into an organizational unit or organization as a whole. The presumption that appears to be taken for granted is that only certain people are eligible for leadership; the remainder have to take their place as reliable followers.

We can draw the conclusion that much of leadership development prepares some people to assume leadership over others who are the followers. The very nature of this relationship between leaders and followers may be outdated. Consider that there appears to be consensus on how our 21st century organizations are now being structured. We are witness to the breaking down of bureaucracy as more widely distributed, interconnected, and virtual forms emerge built on webs of information. Such forms require us to unlock the knowledge of our organizational members, empowering them to act on their own behalf and on behalf of their enterprises.

Robert Kelley described the qualities that make for an effective follower. He claimed that such people should have the vision to see both the forest and the trees, the social capacity to work well with others, the strength of character to flourish without heroic status, the moral and psychological balance to pursue personal and corporate goals at no cost to either, and above all, the desire to participate in a team effort for the accomplishment of some greater common purpose.[3] How many of you would like to see these same characteristics in your leaders?

If we have reached a point in our organizational evolution that we no longer need leaders "out in front," then in the same vein, we no longer need our followers "back in line." What are the implications of using the concept of follower within our knowledge enterprises since it connotes "doing what you are told" because you are less valuable than the leader? Might our leadership development efforts be better directed toward the role of leadership as a mutual social phenomenon rather than as a position of authority?

Managers and Leaders

Two other significant implications of using the list and position approaches in leadership development appear to disconnect from the realities of our 21st-century organizational environment. The first is the degrading of the role of manager in the construction of contrasting lists between "managers" and "leaders." The origin of this dualism probably dates to a classic 1977 article in the *Harvard Business Review* by Abraham Zaleznik,[4] in which he depicts the manager as a rational, bureaucratic, dutiful, practical, and unimaginative dullard but the leader as a visionary, restless, experimental, even "twice-born" dynamo. By twice-born, he is suggesting that leaders emerge because of not having had a secure childhood, thus allowing them a second shot to shine.

John Kotter[5] followed Zaleznik with his enumeration of distinctions between leaders and managers, though his classification was more benign. Kotter felt that organizations needed both leaders and managers, but each had a different role to perform. The manager is in charge of coping with complexity, while the leader handles change. Hence, managers focus on planning and budgeting, follow with organizing and staffing, and finish with controlling and problem-solving. It is interesting to note that these functions fall into traditional control tasks long associated with bureaucratization. Leaders, meanwhile, have a different set of functions, namely, setting a direction, aligning people to the direction, and motivating and inspiring them to fulfill the direction.

In developing leadership, what are the implications of saying that managers are one thing and leaders another? It is true that managers are usually bureaucratically appointed and thus have position power throughout the middle of the organization. But they don't have to be "hired hands" (the root word for management is "manus" from the Latin for "hand") who are condemned to a life of unimaginatively carrying out corporate goals or endorsing the status quo. Managers are hardly excluded from leadership. They need to work with their peers, bosses, subordinates, and others, and in this constant interaction, there is opportunity for leadership to emerge from anyone. What might be most impressive about the manager is not taking the reins but supporting others to take them as the situation warrants.

The Leader as Motivator

Another critical item on any list of leadership attributes is the practice of motivating. One of a leader's critical roles is to find the right combination of inducements to get subordinates to do things. In fact, what makes a leadership presumably transformative is when this motivation is designed to get subordinates to do things altruistically on behalf of the wider organization.

Although a noble goal, it is quite doubtful that motivation can be taught in one setting to be applied in another. Even if through proper diagnostics one could determine the right combination of inducements, there is an even more fundamental question of whether it is possible to motivate another human being to begin with. As Bill Drath and Chuck Palus have noted, "people are already in motion."[6] Much of motivation theory and practice seems to be suggesting that people are somehow static, awaiting a signal from the leader to propel them into activity.

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I am not suggesting that motivation does not exist; rather, it may have to rest within the individual who can choose how and whether to motivate him- or herself. In this regard, a leader may be able to work with others to shape the contours of motivation already in operation. And perhaps the purpose of leadership is to help individuals find ways

to channel this already existing motivation toward personal meaning and contribution to the greater good of their unit and organization.

The Contribution of Work-Based Learning

Given the aforementioned contradictions of transferring learning detached from its practice that arise from using the list or position approach to leadership development, consider an alternative method known as *work-based learning*. Largely based on the principles of action learning, it is a gateway to collective leadership. In brief, work-based learning:

1. views learning as acquired in the midst of action and dedicated to the task at hand;
2. sees knowledge creation and utilization as collective activities wherein learning becomes everyone's job;
3. demonstrates a learning-to-learn orientation that frees learners to question underlying assumptions of practice.[7]

Expressly merging theory with practice, work-based learning recognizes that the workplace offers as many opportunities for learning as the classroom. Such learning, however, needs to be centered around reflection on work practices. Hence, it offers people faced with the relentless pace of pervasive change an opportunity to overcome time pressures by reflecting upon and learning from the artistry of their actions.

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Work-based leaning subscribes to the contextualized view that learning arises not from the transfer of representations from one mind to the next but from the social relations embedded within a community of practice.[8] The context for learning is not taken for granted but is critically considered as learners adapt to new problems by reflecting together on their assumptions.[9] Theory emerges, therefore, as much from hands-on practice as it does from *a priori* conceptualizations. Further, work-based learning calls for replacing the acquisition of skill with the development of meta-competence. Meta-competence is competence that transcends itself. Rather than focus on job-specific skills, participants learn situation-specific principles that can attend to the variability in work demands.

Work-based learning uses many diverse technologies, but primary is the deployment of action projects, learning teams, and other interpersonal experiences, such as mentorships, which permit and encourage learning dialogues. Learning dialogues that arise from direct peer observation are often most insightful. One of the most extraordinary features of the International Master's Program in Practicing Management[10] is the managerial exchange program in which participants pair up across companies and spend a week at each other's workplace, observing each other and exchanging reflections. The exchange opens mangers' eyes to their own problems but as mirrored in a different setting. At PAREXEL International, a global biopharmaceutical services company, managerial participants in the company's work-based Developing Future Leaders program work in teams on projects that in the first year of operation were sponsored by the CEO and COO. However, in the midst of action, team participants are asked to slow down and reflect in learning teams to digest the action and to provide feedback to one another and to their team as a whole.

Leadership Development Through Work-Based Learning

Through work-based learning and its dialogic approaches, participants over time appear to surface a different form of leadership that is less characterized by the "great man" model and more by a collective form that I refer to as "leaderful."[11] This term is new but is required because the idea of involving everyone in leadership and seeing leadership as a collective property is quite distinctive from the archetype of leadership based on its root definition as the "person out in front." It also falls in some respects into the domain of "shared leadership," which has roots in empowerment, self-directed work teams, and in self-leadership.[12] However, unlike some traditions in shared leadership, leaderful practice is collective rather than sequential or serial.[13]

The Tenets of Leaderful Practice

Leaderful practice is based on four critical tenets referred to as "the four c's." The leadership of teams and organizations can be collective, concurrent, collaborative and compassionate. In brief, collective leadership means that everyone in the group can serve as a leader; the team is not dependent on one individual to take over. Concurrent leadership means that not only can many members serve as leaders; they can do so at the same

time. No one, not even the supervisor, has to stand down when someone is making a contribution as a leader. Collaborative leadership means that everyone is in control of and can speak for the entire team. All members pitch in to accomplish the work of the team. Together they engage in a mutual dialogue to determine what needs to be done and how to do it. Finally, in compassionate leadership, members commit to preserving the dignity of every single member of the team, meaning that they consider each individual whenever any decision is made or action taken.

The link between work-based learning and leaderful practice can be established across all four tenets, but collective leadership is most particularly dependent on learning as a pervasive quality that characterizes the entire organization. If everyone participates in leadership, then no one needs to stand by in a dependent capacity. Everyone is primed for learning. In such an organization, members surface their insights, become comfortable questioning their suppositions, willingly seek feedback, experiment optimistically with new behaviors, reflect mutually on their operating assumptions, demonstrably support one another, and exhibit a humility that recognizes the limits of their knowledge.

An Appreciation for Practice

Practitioners also develop an appreciation for practice in two of its meanings. First, like artists, who use practice to bring a sense of balance, proportion, design, and beauty to their creations, practitioners may use practice as an ongoing process of experimentation, skill-building, attention, and reflection.[14] The Boston Consortium for Higher Education (a network of top administrators among Boston's world-renowned institutions of higher learning) sponsors the Susan Vogt Leadership Fellows Program. Fellows participate in a year-long activity to develop their own and each other's leadership potential, among the practices of which are collaborating on an experimental project to benefit and potentially transform the Consortium's member universities as well as the Consortium itself.

A second meaning of practice derives from viewing field settings as apt loci of learning. In the field, learning can be targeted to actual problems faced by the enterprise in question. It can also be applied just-in-time and in the right dose to be helpful. Eventually, the distinction between a project as a place for learning and as a place for work becomes blurred. The Learning and Development Group at the Educational Testing Service (ETS) experimented with this very process when

they changed the Learning for Business Results leadership development program in the past year. Originally, each participant developed a project at that person's own work site. In the most recent version, according to Chief Learning Officer T. J. Elliott, the entire team of participants chose a single corporate-wide project and worked on it together.

As is the case at ETS, while working on their projects in work-based learning, participants typically assemble into learning teams where they begin to question one another about their project experiences. In due course, they also extend their inquiry to each other's professional and personal experiences. They come to know learning as a collective process that extends beyond the individual. In the learning team, the questioner learns as much as the speaker; indeed, the entire group learns to learn together as all members become mutually responsible for the decisions and actions of the team. They come to realize that people at all levels in the organization no longer need to protect themselves, especially if the position leader can open him- or herself up to the challenge of others.

Attributes of Learning Leaders

Learning leaders can be characterized by a number of attributes:

- They commit to their own and others' continuous learning-in-action, freely exchanging knowledge;
- They develop a personal self-consciousness that values reflexive self-awareness, develops insight, and engenders a commitment to examine their own defensive reactions that may inhibit learning;[15]
- They develop the capacity to make contextually relevant judgments;
- They develop a peripheral awareness of others;
- They extend time to their colleagues, to listen to them and to suspend their own beliefs during precious moments of empathy;
- They develop a systemic perspective that understands organizations as an integrated set of relationships, not as bastions of isolated expertise.

ARAMARK's action learning-based Executive Leadership Institute in its well-catalogued 11-year history has graduated 358 managers who not only endeavor to exemplify these attributes but who, according to Lynn McKee, executive vice-president of human resources, have contributed to the company's transformation into a collaborative culture

that values partnerships, teamwork, and business-line integration.

The Role of Reflective Practice

Henry Mintzberg, referring to action learning as second-generation management development, asserts that action learning often emphasizes action at the expense of learning. To Mintzberg, learning is not doing as much as reflecting on doing.[16] There needs to be some conversion experience to link the practice in action learning with theory and insight so that any tacit knowledge can be captured and surfaced as learning. The most prominent of such conversion experiences is reflection, especially reflection that is concurrent to the experience and collectively brought out in the company of others—what is often called "reflective practice." Unfortunately, it is often overlooked, so much so that the firm Leadership in International Management (LIM) trademarked their practice as "action-reflection learning."

Reflective practice has a number of other distinctive features that permit its consideration within the branch of learning referred to as praxis. First, it is not merely a cognitive or mental process, but it is also a behavioral process. It can involve others as opposed to being an individual experience. It is typically concerned with critical inquiry, probing into the deep recesses of experience. Lastly, it often requires some facilitation to help learners reframe their knowledge base.

In order to be proficient, managers need to bridge the gap between theory and practice and to learn from their own workplace environment. As they engage in public reflective practices, they create genuineness among one another. They don't need to fragment their work and their personal selves. It is expected that this degree of openness over time will secure a high rate of commitment to one's organization. As one piece of evidence, consider that at SUPERVALU's Work-Based Learning program for middle managers, program director Monica Abrams reports that after the first three years of the program, all but two of the 82 program participants stayed with the company.

Leadership development—let's call it "leaderful" development—can be designed to release the leadership potential in everyone. People don't need to wait for their marching orders from those who have been trained to lead them. Members of the organization should be thoughtful contributors, not physical appendages. The net effect of leaderful development has enormous bottom-line implications, not to mention its endorsement of the steadfast values of authenticity, trust, humility, and compassion.

Endnotes

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[10] See Mintzberg, H. 2004. Third-generation management development. *T + D,* 58 (3): 28–38.

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[13] See Pearce, C. L., & Sims Jr., H. P. 2002. Vertical versus shared leadership as predictors of the effectiveness of change management teams: An examination of aversive, directive, transactional, transformational, and empowering leader behaviors. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice,* 6 (2): 172–197.

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[15] See Argyris, C. 1982. *Reasoning, learning and action.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; and Senge, P. M. 1990. *The fifth discipline.* New York: Doubleday.

[16] See Mintzberg, op. cit.; and Mintzberg, H. 2004. *Managers not MBAs.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

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