Where Do You Start With Leadership Development?
Developing a Strategic Framework for Leadership Development

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As a leadership development consultant, I am often approached by clients who want to develop a leadership initiative for their company, but simply don't know where to start. Because leadership can mean many different things to different people, they find that once they make the decision to move forward in leadership development, that they don't know what direction to take. They are often drowning in a sea of leadership development opportunity, but have limited resources to invest.

A leadership development initiative cannot be successful unless it clearly targets a specific business goal. When all is said and done, if the initiative doesn't positively impact the business, there's really no reason to do it. For this reason, I strongly encourage clients to get very clear about what they are trying to accomplish before implementing any single leadership development initiative. The starting point should be a business analysis as all leadership development should be grounded in business needs. Typical questions include:

- What are the needs of the business that are driving this need for change?
- What is the business need that's driving the need for performance improvement?
- What are the long-term issues the business faces and how can leadership development help accomplish these business objectives?

From this business analysis, you can begin to identify your leadership development goals. The type of leadership development initiative to be used is highly dependent on the particular goal chosen.

In my experience, there are four broad categories of leadership goals. Each requires a different approach in the design of leadership development programs.

1. The first category is about **building a bench-strength of leadership talent**. A bench-strength of talent means that you are trying to grow leaders from within to insure orderly continuation of the business. As leaders move out, you need a bench-strength of ready-now candidates who are able to continue and improve upon the performance of the business.

    Not every company needs a goal like that. For example, many high-tech companies, start-ups who are hiring from the outside, don't need to spend any time on building bench-strength in the initial years. However, if you're the U.S. military and you lose a General in the Army, you do not go to the Mexican Army to find a replacement. The U.S military grows 100% of their leaders from within. They must have a system and a process in place for developing their young leaders so that, as current leaders retire or leave the military, there are people who can fill their shoes and be ready to perform and execute immediately.

2. The second broad category of leadership development goals is about **using leadership development to transform the business**. This goal is appropriate when the future of the business is significantly different from the current way the business operates. The business will change only when the employees change. Leadership development can be a very effective tool for helping to move the business in a new direction by getting the leaders to think differently, while giving

them new skills, mindsets, and attitudes about change and help them to identify the specific actions that will be required to accomplish the change.

An example of a company that uses this objective very effectively is General Electric. Each program in their curriculum at Crotonville is targeted at a very specific business transformation. For several years, every executive that went through the Crotonville programs worked on how to make GE an "e-GE" (transforming them into an Internet company). Before "e-GE," everyone worked on making GE a boundary-less organization. Before that, every program was focused on helping GE achieve a Six Sigma culture. GE is a great example of a company that focuses its leadership development objectives on very specific business transformations. They stick with that goal exclusive to all of the other things that might be nice to do.

3. A third area of leadership development is just **helping leaders become more effective** at what they're already doing. This maybe sounds less exciting than business transformation, but it can be a very critical goal with significant benefits to the company. For example, the goal might be to help leaders become better people managers. The business strategy stays the same, but the goal becomes helping leaders manage their people more effectively in order to increase everyone's performance and to better execute the business objectives. Another typical need is improving business acumen. Companies are often surprised by their leaders lack of basic financial knowledge and improvement of these skills can lead to substantial improvement of business results.

   Sun Microsystems has been a good example of this type of leadership goal. In their case, the business was transforming on its own. What they needed were leaders who were better equipped at people management skills and executing business goals. Their leadership development wasn't about transformation. It was about building leaders' capability to achieve the direction that had already been identified.

4. A fourth area of leadership development goals centers on **helping leaders through critical career transitions.** For example, when a person moves from a non-management job to a people management job, there's a significant change in their role and their responsibilities. Using a leadership development initiative to support them in that transition can be very effective in ensuring that they succeed while avoiding the derailment that often happens during major career transitions. A move from non-management to management…a move from a manager of people to a manager of managers…a move from a director to a vice president…all of these signify critical career transitions that can benefit from leadership development support. It's a great opportunity to give a leader support because when they're new to a role, they are more open to input and feedback. During this time, they are more willing to accept help and it's a much more positive learning experience than trying to get someone to change the way they've always done their job.

   Johnson & Johnson makes extensive use of this goal as they tie many of their corporate leadership development initiatives to career transitions. The first time a person moves into a profit center role, they get support from the company to help ensure they will be successful in that transition.

Once you've determined your broad business goal, it becomes much easier to identify the leadership development activities that best support that goal.

If the goal is **building a bench-strength of leadership talent**, the development initiative ought to be built around creating a strong succession planning system and an effective career management system. Most companies do not have the resources to develop

every employee to be a senior executive. Succession planning systems must be designed that provide clear criteria for identifying the high potential talent that will most benefit from an extra investment in leadership development, specific identification of development needs and trackable development plans, and judgments about readiness for higher level positions. Development actions can include job assignments, coaching, mentoring, and targeted education programs.

If the goal is ***using leadership development to transform the business***, it is necessary to first be very clear about the goal of the transformation and then design a high impact, strategic leadership development initiative focused on understanding the transformation & identifying the actions required. Action learning programs are particularly effective tools in support of this goal.

If the goal is ***helping leaders become more effective***, you will need to conduct a comprehensive business & skills analysis to identify the gaps in skills that will have the most impact on business results.

If the goal is ***helping leaders through critical career transitions***, you will want to determine which transitions are the most important and then look for the best way to help in that transition, whether it's offering a formal education program…providing a coach…or any number of other techniques.

With clear leadership development goals, you will not only start out on the right foot, but you will make each step count. As you launch leadership development initiatives that consider the big picture and focus in on specific business objectives, you will have the opportunity to watch every initiative make a direct and positive impact on your business.

Author's Note: **Jim Moore** is a consultant with the Alexcel Group, where he helps clients build leadership development strategies and programs. His expertise includes the design of succession planning systems, leadership models, and customized executive education programs that help companies achieve their strategic objectives. Jim served as Director of Workforce Planning and Development at Sun Microsystems, Inc. where he was responsible for Executive Development, which included succession planning, executive selection and executive development, and for SunU, Sun's corporate university. He developed and executed education programs range from software engineering design to sales training to management and leadership development and targeted Sun's 40,000 employees worldwide. Contact Jim at JMoore@AlexcelGroup.com.