Out-of-Classroom Experiences

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MARK JENNER is a human resource professional specialising in leadership and organisational development. He is passionate that organisations need more leadership but is sceptical about existing approaches to leadership development.

TRY THIS: ASK A SENIOR LEADER what experiences were the most influential in his or her development.

Chances are you'll be quite far down the list before a training programme or other classroom-based experience is mentioned. If ever. Rather than point to a training course; leaders will talk about a time when they stepped out of their comfort zone to rise to a challenge or deal with a crisis. Research supports this: most of what people learn about leadership comes from job and life experience. However, classroom-based leadership training abounds because it is easier to design classroom experiences than workplace experiences.

Because leadership development is a journey, the best experiences take place in the workplace. Taking on difficult, important human and organisational problems is the best way to develop leadership – leaders develop when they actually lead.

As a leadership-development practitioner, I work to create professional environments that encourage and nurture leaders in real time. This article explores how.

Learning leadership from experience

Not surprisingly, studies show that the more frequently something is experienced, the stronger its effect on future thinking and behaviour. Although every role involves some measure of leadership, most work downplays leadership tasks in favour of technical knowledge and performance.

As a result, leadership is under-represented in the catalogue of experiences someone acquires over a lifetime. In fact many organisational habits – the busy-ness, the short-term focus on results, the competitiveness – actually reduce the likelihood that true leadership
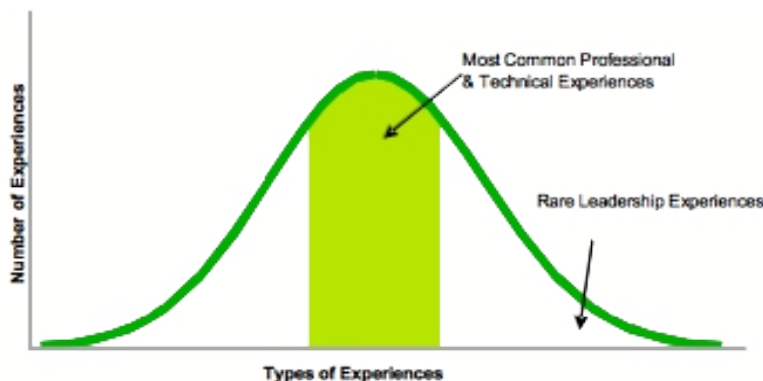
will ever emerge.

The global credit crunch highlights this fundamental flaw in normal leadership-development processes. Unfortunately, many organisations set priorities that present individuals with a pathway to non-leadership, channelling attention toward maintaining appearances, addressing short-term concerns, and competing with colleagues. While most of us would say these practices fly in the face of our leadership aspirations, we still participate in cultures that work that way.

Many everyday situations call for leadership. These situations are rarely planned; they are seldom met with a leadership response, and as a rule they don't lift individuals out of their existing mindset. Consequently, the experience is under-utilized, and it does not foster new insights, new values or new qualities of character.

Our leadership development philosophies look for remedies for this leadership breakdown in the domain of skills and knowledge. Inject a measure of self-awareness or strategic thinking – so the thinking goes – or teach the character traits of leader-heroes like Mandela, Gates or Obama, and individuals will meet future challenges with judgement, drive and influence. But the results are underwhelming. We see little proof that the huge investment in formal leadership training has significantly increased either the quality or quantity of leadership in our organisations.

The current picture

To understand how organisations use work experience as a way of developing leaders, the author surveyed about 60 practising lead-

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ership development professionals about the approach, commitment and efficacy of their efforts.

Only 16% commit more than half of their activity to experiential leadership development while 70% spend less than 30% of their time and energy on experiential leadership development. Encouragingly, 55% plan to increase their emphasis in the next 12 months.

Respondents were asked about the approaches they use to develop leadership from experience. By far the most popular intervention is personal development plans (84%). This is followed by mentoring from experienced leaders (70%) and coaching from line managers (65%). Action learning projects inside the current job are used by almost half of the respondents (47%). The least popular interventions are developmental projects outside the current job (21%), and the restructuring of job roles and goals to increase leadership stretch (23%). 63% have a leadership model that sets out the capabilities required of a leader in their organisation.

Respondents were asked which planned experiences are most effective in developing the

The Experience Bell Curve (Based on Deep Smarts by Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap, 2005. Harvard Business School Publishing)

capabilities in their leadership model. The top five most effective experiences are (1) projects with a high degree of complexity, (2) managing a bigger operation, (3) managing a turnaround situation, (4) exposure to senior managers, and (5) exposure to different business and/or functional perspectives. Interestingly social responsibility projects were considered least effective.

Designing jobs to provide developmental stretch is regarded as most effective leadership-development strategy. This is surprising and ironic because most of the same respondents reported that they do not use this approach! This highlights a paradox: we know that jobs are potentially the best vehicles for leadership development, but we don't know how to design them to fulfil that potential.

The process considered second most effective is the provision of support structures during transition into new senior-level jobs where individuals are confronted by greater scale, scope or complexity.

360-degree feedback was ranked third, action learning fourth, and facilitated opportunities for reflection fifth. Considered least effective were (1) boss accountability for their report's development plan and (2) developing lists of developmental opportunities available within the current role.
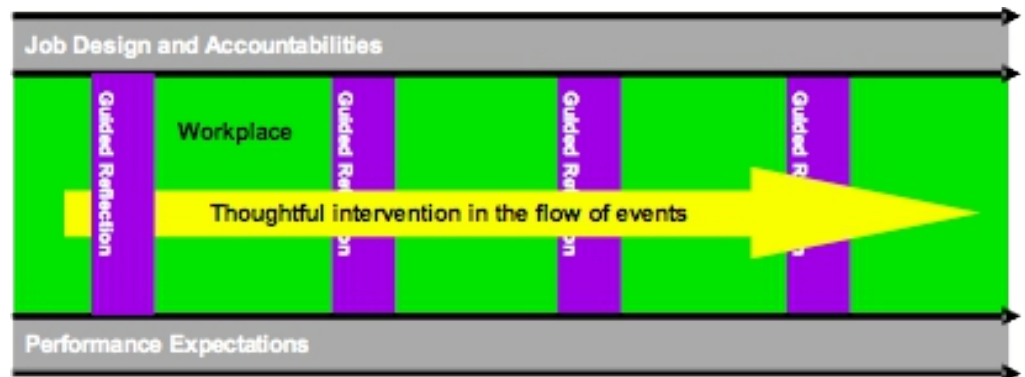
Encouragingly, willingness to move high potentials into developmental roles was quite common. Also, there seems to be top leader commitment to experiential learning and toward delegation of real responsibility. Respondents were less positive about three conditions often considered critical to effective experiential leadership development: time to reflect, tolerance for making mistakes, and developmental projects not core to the current job.

Designing work to unleash leadership potential

While challenging work assignments are linked to on-the-job learning, that link stops short of leaders and their development. Why? By its very nature, leadership involves taking risks,

confronting dilemmas, dealing with uncertainty, and building coalitions – in short, putting oneself 'out there.' Most planned work experiences cannot or do not present the individual with this level of challenge.

Imagine a workplace designed to unleash leadership potential. The environment would provide an enabling framework of principles, opportunities, expectations, incentives, and support, as follows:

The framework is not unlike action learning, but there are two important differences. First, the development is designed into the job and accountability structure, and second, the focus is on leadership rather than projects and problem-solving. Regular opportunities to reflect on actions and choices are critical. How have your actions and choices shaped the work environment, the way people approach their work and ultimately the results they produce?

Designing Leadership Development into the Workplace

The often frenetic reality of workplaces poses some serious obstacles for leadership development. However, small changes in existing processes, alongside deeper adjustments in attitudes towards work design and performance, can go a long way.

Here are some suggestions:

1. **Encourage people to find the leadership in their jobs.** All jobs can provide an opportunity to create a compelling result or to address problems and opportunities with integrity and personal commitment. Don't make leadership into a competency-collection exercise or, worse, something beyond reach.

2. **Build a coaching culture,** and give your managers and mentors tools and skills to nudge and tease the leadership out of the people they coach. Teams can also be wonderful crucibles for leadership action and leadership development.

3. **Encourage your leaders and facilitators to initiate tough team conversations** about the leadership challenges and the long-term implications for the organization.

4. **Create more time for reflection.** Reframe the time people spend together as an opportunity to reflect on events and actions, explore blocks to leadership, give supportive and developmental feedback, and plan next steps.

5. **Introduce peer coaching, communities of practice/inquiry, and mentoring relationships.** Use any of these to cultivate habits of critical reflection and systems thinking.

6. **Avoid dwelling on the problems of culture and focus instead on creating the positive conditions for leadership.** Redefine or redesign jobs so people engage in new patterns of leadership action. If people complain that the prevailing culture makes it too tough to lead, remind them that this is also an opportunity of leadership.

7. **Create a better balance of course-based and workplace leadership development.** Focus your leadership development activity on key experiences within jobs. Use case studies to demonstrate how jobs can develop leadership character.

8. **Create structures which enable people to think and talk about leadership.** Review your formal leadership programmes to ensure

they offer practical tools and frameworks which help participants lead and learn.

> ### Don't make leadership into a competency-collection exercise or, worse, something beyond reach.

Leaders, managers and HR staff can all help individuals author their own leadership stories while fulfilling their roles and responsibilities. Let's conceive of leadership and leadership development together, as the simultaneous advance of people and their organizations. ✍