

Leadership Development Is a Global Concern

Kellye Whitney, Associate Editor

Can good leaders be developed or are they simply born? A new global survey commissioned by the American Management Association and conducted by the Human Resource Institute said that while some people display a natural affinity for leadership, others definitely can be developed.

“The development of leadership is considered to be one of the top two or three issues facing organizations around the world, and the competencies considered to be necessary for the practice of leadership are fairly consistent across different organizations large and small,” said Edward Reilly, president and CEO of the American Management Association. “The need for leaders to be competent at developing strategy, communication, to display consistent and ethical behavior are all characteristics that seem to transcend geographic regions, different backgrounds, cultures and people around the world.”

Furthermore, in addition to having the right tools and programs available to encourage and nurture leadership development, continuing organizational support also is necessary to support long-lasting behavior change. “You need top executive support. You need continuing mentoring, and you need programs that reinforce the practice of leadership inside the organization,” Reilly said. “Leadership needs to be seen as a basis for career development and needs to be rewarded. Consequently, you can’t send someone off to a leadership program and say, ‘OK, he or she is trained now’ and that’s it. You need to pay close attention to the characteristics of leadership and not necessarily evaluate people on, for example, whether they made their third-quarter numbers this year or not. Evaluate them on whether or not they have practiced the characteristics of leadership that we know make people effective as leaders.”

Reilly said this method of evaluation is not always easy because leaders frequently look for short-term solutions or immediate payback. Instead, leaders must be trained to be more creative and innovative, which will build organizations that take more risks. Few of these benefits are tied to short-term success. “After three or five years of installing an aggressive leadership program, if you haven’t been paying close attention, you’re not going to get the kind of change in your organization and culture that you need. And change is necessary,” Reilly said. “For continuity and smooth transitions of leadership inside your organization, you want your younger people to develop the leadership traits that they’ll need as they move to higher levels. We need to recognize that the pace of change that most people feel today is greater than it has been in the past, and we need to anticipate change with our business strategy and have leaders at all levels of the business who are capable of dealing with that. There are significant changes in the way we organize major businesses and organizations today. We’ve migrated from a very strict command-and-control structure that dominated business management thinking in the ’50s, ’60s, ’70s and even into the ’80s, and we’ve become much more devoted to flatter, faster-acting organizations, virtual organizations, outsourcing different pieces of what we do. Decisions need to be made faster. The notion of gathering information, processing it and filtering it through four layers of management up to senior management doesn’t work. Some great visionary will then decide what the course of action is and send

the instructions down into the organization, and by the time that's all done, you have lost terribly to your competition who has acted much more quickly."

There also is a difference between leadership and management skills. Basic management skills include planning, organizing and delegating, but mastery of pure management skills will not be enough to offer a strategic advantage in the marketplace. Companies need leadership skills as well. Critical leadership competencies involve communication, consistency, integrity, the ability to motivate and to set a clear vision for people. "Everyone in the organization is not entitled to develop his or her own vision, but it is important that for the senior people, this leadership thing doesn't kind of spring up from the middle and work its way outward," Reilly said. "The more senior people in the organization, if they are doing their leadership job well, will recognize that a vision becomes so important because if we're expecting independent action from people, they need to know what the eventual objectives are, what the vision of the company is and where it's trying to go so that when they need to make quick, independent decisions, they can make them in the context that's likely to produce the end results that the organization is looking for."

That's why leadership program content has to be specific, offer opportunities to practice newly acquired competencies and be consistently rewarded and measured on the job. Reilly said that companies that evaluate leadership performance in addition to normal operational and objective performance seem to have more successful programs than those that don't. "If they go back to their companies, and it's business as usual and the company doesn't have a regime of rewarding leadership, checking on it and mentoring and developing these people as they go along, it's one of the hardest subject areas to affect results," Reilly said. "Leadership, like a lot of skills, needs to be practiced. It doesn't just get learned and then filed away and you behave differently. Leadership is something you need to do day in and day out. You need to be aware of it, and it requires more support of the sponsoring organization."

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