



Your Opportunity Engine.

SUMMER 2016

TALENT EDGE

DISCOVER NEW OPPORTUNITIES

A man with a beard, wearing a dark suit jacket over a blue and white checkered shirt, is leaning forward against a light grey wall. He is looking back over his shoulder towards the camera.

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MILLENNIALS WILL
TRANSFORM YOUR
EMPLOYEE CULTURE

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BY VALERIE GRUBB

It's a pretty well-known fact that great leaders are in short supply. Don't believe me? Just review the headlines of your favorite news sites, and you'll be barraged with examples of terrible leaders doing terrible things (while the rest of us suffer!). As an executive in your organization, how can you develop a leadership development plan (LDP) for your high-potential employees that actually works both for employees and for your company? First, start with the basics.

Determining What Matters

Before you start looking at potential candidates in your organization, it's critical to define what competencies are important at your company. What does it take to be a great leader in your organization?

Competencies can vary by level (e.g., supervisor, manager, executive) and perhaps by business unit. In most organizations, however, fundamental competencies apply across the board. At the most senior levels, great leadership is typically linked to the following attributes:

- Visionary
- Inspirational
- Strategic
- Tactical
- Persuasive
- Decisive
- Ethical

Notice this list does not necessarily denote technical skills. Rather, it highlights a leader's ability to understand and process new information, make decisions (many times before all the details are available), translate those decisions or visions into action, and then rally the troops to get on board. Technical mastery may be a component on the leadership spectrum, but it certainly should not be the only criteria for leadership within your company (even if your company is technical in nature).

Your first step toward developing your LDP is to determine what matters most at your company. This knowledge will then allow you to compare your employees' current skills with the skills your company needs.

Identifying Candidates

Some programs allow employees to apply to participate in LDPs, whereas others specifically pick candidates who have been identified as high-potential employees. Regardless of how applicants come to you, you'll need to define the selection criteria by which you'll evaluate them.

Easy criteria include how much supervisory experience an employee has, for example. Other key criteria include traits such as the ability to learn new things, an interest in leading (don't assume that everyone

wants to be a leader!), the ability to engage in teamwork eagerly and effectively, a high confidence level, and any skills that are in alignment with the organization's future direction and growth. General intelligence is important as well, but it's not the only trait that guarantees success in a leadership role.

Using a numeric rating system (a scale of 1 to 5, for example) is helpful for accumulating and comparing input from multiple executive leaders. In addition to giving you an at-a-glance view of any candidate you're considering for an LDP, it also allows the opinions of less verbose leaders to carry as much weight as those from reviewers who vigorously campaign on behalf of their candidates.

Assessing Current Leadership Skills

Once you've established the competencies important for your organization and selected the participants for your LDP, it's time to measure each employee's existing skill set versus what he or she needs to have in order to be a great leader in your organization. Performance appraisals and 360-degree leadership surveys are just a couple of the powerful measurement tools at your disposal.

Another method for assessing current skill levels is to have participants answer a series of essay questions on how they would tackle specific problems built around the critical competencies you've identified. Their responses to each scenario can help identify specific skills they lack.

Another great option for assessing current leadership skills is to devise simulation activities that highlight an employee's ability to plan, organize, make decisions, and lead activities. Involving your senior leadership team in creating these activities can be a great learning exercise on its own (and sharpen the leadership skills of your current executives). If you've got money to spend, several outside companies offer observation-based assessments of your staff's current skill levels.

Developing Employees' Skills

Once you've identified the skills you want, it's time to develop them and take your employees' abilities to the next level. This should entail a formal plan for each individual—not a one-size-fits-all approach. Standard concepts can be taught in group sessions, but for everything else, you need to offer measurable, challenging, and time-

bound developmental activities tailored for each person.

Some possible activities include:

- Rotational assignments in areas needing improvement
- Projects that are in line with an employee's current skills yet still challenging in some fashion
- Classroom training or case-study analysis, with the results presented to senior management
- Individual coaching or mentoring from either an outside expert or a qualified internal executive
- Coaching and mentoring others in their growth and development
- Specific reading assignments with report-outs to senior leadership (including discussion of how concepts and practices could be utilized internally)
- Role-playing, with observer feedback
- Shadowing executives

In his article "Creating a Leadership Development Program," published in *Public Management* magazine in 2002, Robert Pernick wrote that leadership development

typically occurs in three related areas:

Technical. Technical training enhances the skills needed to perform the work unit's tasks and/or to oversee the work of others.

Conceptual. Here, the focus is on teaching the leader how to think in a more abstract and critical fashion... [These skills] include creativity, strategic thinking, and decisiveness.

Interpersonal. The ability to work effectively with other people is an essential determinant of leadership success.

Although some theoretical training methods are listed above, whenever possible leaders should receive their training in real-life scenarios: Nothing beats on-the-job learning. Real life (which includes real consequences) motivates high-potential employees to succeed. That said, it's important to understand that leaders in training can and may fail. Rather than crucify these young leaders for their mistakes, push them to learn from failures and apply their hard-won knowledge to future challenges.

Assessing Progress

Your performance evaluation systems should support development in the competencies you've defined as critical to your organization. In short, tie in what you're teaching with what you're measuring.

After an appropriate amount of time (perhaps at six- or twelve-month intervals), reevaluate your employees with the same measures used to assess their pre-LDP skill sets. Consistent and thorough assessments will tell you if you're seeing progress in each of your employees.

Summary

"The most dangerous leadership myth is that leaders are born—that there is a genetic factor to leadership. This myth asserts that people simply either have certain charismatic qualities or not. That's nonsense; in fact, the opposite is true. Leaders are made rather than born."

— Warren G. Bennis, *American scholar, organizational expert, and pioneer in the field of leadership studies*

Now is the time to start developing leadership talent at all levels within your organization. Rather than wait for leaders to knock on your door, make your own leaders. By building on the potential and drive of your current employees, you'll ensure the success of your organization now and in the future.

Valerie Grubb of Val Grubb & Associates, Ltd. is an innovative and visionary operations leader with an exceptional ability to zero in on the systems, processes, and personnel issues that can hamper a company's growth. Grubb regularly consults for midrange companies wishing to expand and larger companies seeking efficiencies in back-office operations. Her expertise and vibrant style are also in constant demand for corporate training classes and seminars. Her first book, *Planes, Canes, and Automobiles: Connecting with Your Aging Parents through Travel* was published in October 2015 and is available via Amazon and through your local bookstore. She can be reached at vgrubb@valgrubbandassociates.com.