

## Meeting the Challenge... *Growing Leaders from Within*

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BY LYNDA JACKSON

Investing in leadership yields long-term dividends and delivers results that will bolster an organization long after the current fiscal period has passed. With current leaders and industry veterans approaching retirement age and an anticipated shortage of up and coming younger professionals, it is more important than ever to develop leaders internally, plan for succession and cultivate a workplace of empowered, business-savvy service professionals ready to win, impress and retain customers.

### Impending Crisis

Though most companies recognize the need for strong leaders, few realize how quickly a lack of leadership development can bring their company to the verge of a crisis. Many conditions have contributed to urgency in this area: an extended period of limited development, the imminent departure from the workforce of a large percentage of experienced leaders, a declining birth rate since 1973, greater workforce empowerment and the trend toward flatter organizations.

For many years, companies have focused on short-term profits and have limited their investment in professional development. What little was invested has been limited to function-critical training. The result is an impending famine of leadership skills, knowledge and experience as baby boomers retire and the personnel pool shrinks.

To deal with the shortages, companies must invest now in leadership development to maximize the productivity of their leaders without compromising quality. The good news is that leaders can be developed internally over a very short period of time without disrupting operations, slowing growth or reducing profits.

### Developing Potential Leaders

Not only is recruiting talent from outside an organization difficult, but it can damage corporate culture and employee morale. A leadership development program in conjunction with succession planning will help a company develop their future leaders while maintaining continuity, preserving legacy knowledge and bolstering morale — usually at a lower cost than going outside.

The highest customer satisfaction ratings go to organizations that empower their associates to make decisions and effect change. This forces organizations to place the responsibility of leadership within work groups and empower the workforce, not just the managers.

Today the goal is to elevate performance at all points-of-contact and control accidental leadership. Accidental leaders are those individuals who

others follow for reasons unrelated to position or job function. They exist at all levels within an organization and exert influence for good or ill in an organization. Employees who attract followers — especially those who have a positive impact on the behavior of others — have enormous potential that should be developed and unleashed. Employees who have a negative impact on the behavior of others can cause a multitude of cultural problems within an organization: low morale, high turnover, fiefdoms, stymied creativity, fear, inconsistency and even anarchy. They need to be rehabilitated, sequestered or dismissed.

Imagine the results if every associate demonstrated the character, commitment, intelligence and skills we admire in effective leaders. All of these enhance human resource value regardless of job function.

### Selecting Leadership Competencies

How does an organization go from no leadership development to a comprehensive program? The first step may be the most important: selecting leadership competencies based on the company culture and structure as well as business operations, strategies and challenges.

These competencies would include both functional tasks and soft skills. The selection process should be a collaborative effort among internal and/or external learning professionals, point-of-contact associates, managers and executives. Learning professionals have training and human resources development expertise. Point-of-contact associates can tell you what skills they need to do their job better. Managers assess competencies in relation to business objectives and market challenges. Executives synchronize content with the corporate culture. This collaboration should be continuous, with active participation in curriculum design, facilitation, analysis and content refresh.

Once competencies are identified, current training and learning opportunities can be evaluated and developed to support business strategies and maximize effectiveness. By identifying potential leaders and needed skills and competencies, studying existing on-the-job learning opportunities and training, formalizing processes, matching training with needs, and evaluating its effectiveness, an organization can implement a leadership development program tailored to its requirements and resources. **m**

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