

# Developing Strategy Leaders

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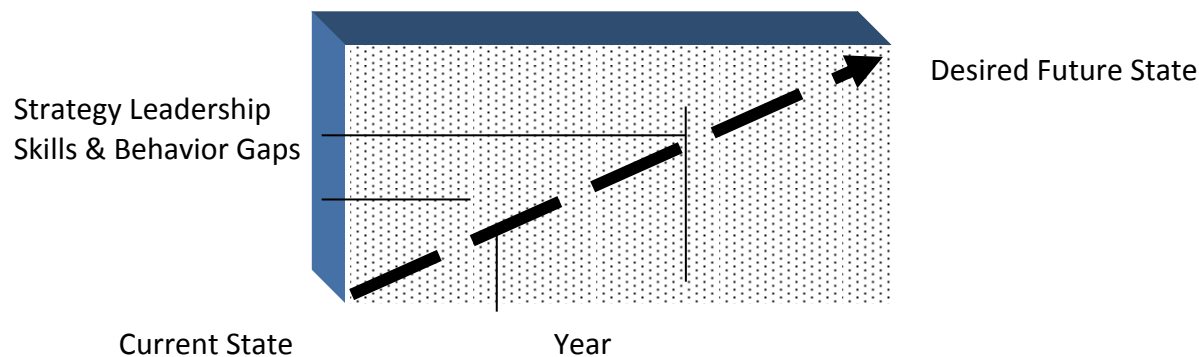
The size and complexity of modern organizations operating in turbulent, even chaotic, environments has put a premium on competent strategy leaders. This is particularly true in midsize and larger organizations who must prepare the next generation of leaders well in advance to take the organization forward. Looking at this challenge from a longer term perspective it is clear that managerial excellence alone is no longer sufficient for sustainable success. Military schools long ago recognized rapidly changing events on the battlefield required leaders not managers. Remember the old adage: Would you rather be managed or led into battle? They recognized that leadership development could not be left to chance.

The West Point Military Academy curriculum and the full range of 24/7 campus life activities are designed to develop future officers that have the ability to lead ***upon graduation***. This is hardly the case in business schools, where the emphasis is on understanding a body of knowledge and developing skill in how to use it. Of course, managerial and interpersonal skills are developed, but there is scant attention to the development of leadership attributes and skills. This is left to the graduating students and the organizations that hire them. This pattern of education results in the development of a world full of excellent managers, with little or no substantive *strategic leadership experience*, and no organized approach to developing leadership qualities in their management team-- and certainly not strategy leaders.

As the need for strategy focused organizations becomes more widely recognize, there will be a need for an organized approach to this problem. Consequently, we offer the following approach to address this growing concern. At best it is only an overview outlining the scope and complexity of the problem, and a preliminary process for developing a long-term approach to developing strategy leaders.

- **Understand the role strategic leadership and leadership development plays in enabling strategic success**

An effective strategy paints a precise picture of an organization's current state and its desired future state. It spells out what the organization must do to be successful in achieving the stated organizational objectives. In many situations there is a gap in strategic leadership skills and behaviors at both the individual and organizational levels. A thoughtful and complete strategy spells out the strategic leadership skills and behaviors leaders must possess and exhibit to achieve the vision of the organization. It too must address how the existing gaps will be filled. For this reason a stand-alone "strategic leadership development" objective should very often times be included in the strategic plan. This objective should be closely linked to the overall strategy of the organization and its current and future needs.



- **Understand the need for, and challenge of, developing strategy leadership**

Leadership aptitudes and skills are not the exclusive domain of executive leaders. Leaders and *leadership are required at all levels and in all functions where the organization strategy needs to be understood, accepted, and translated into the assigned work of the organization subunit, process, or project.* Managerial excellence is not enough (see the article: [Strategic Leadership is a Distributed Process](#))

Not all managers and staff involved in strategic management need leadership development. Corollary to that, those that are involved vary widely in their leadership needs, skills and types of development. Hence, a one-size fits-all program for leadership development is minimally effective at best, in addition to being expensive and time consuming.

Strategy leadership development is a long-term process requiring an organized approach. It provides for the development of individual leadership qualities to be developed in accordance with strategy-based needs, continuous monitoring, review, and revision, as necessary.

- **Assess individual and organizational needs for developing strategy leadership**

While leadership is an *individual* characteristic, it is exercised in *an organization* with constantly changing contextual and situational variables which impact strategic leadership needs. Thus, it is necessary to assess both individual competencies and organizational capabilities in order to summarize and prioritize leadership development needs. At this point in time, we have concluded that an assessment from both perspectives requires the combined use of at least the following well defined approaches customized to the needs of strategic management and the maturity of the organization:

- For individuals, a self-administered assessments of need, leadership development potential (both ideal and realistic), career goals, opportunities, and constraints are good places to begin. Senior leadership and peer assessments are vitally important too. Having the ability to connect with senior leaders and peers in a collaborative manner is a primary skill of strategic leaders. Creating a healthy environment where one can probe on major weaknesses that must be corrected and the strategic and operational challenges one will face in the future are fundamental. With this level of understanding a strategic leader can accept responsibility for his shortcomings and prepare to overcome them.
- For organizations, it is vital to carefully assess and identify gaps in current leaders and high potential new leaders within their organization. Based on these assessments, organizations can then support and invest in personal leadership development plans, and ultimately hold leaders accountable for generating organizational, as well as leadership results. Jared Bleak and Robert Fulmer have done a great job of describing this approach in their *Best Practices in Leadership Development Handbook*.<sup>1</sup>

- **Identify the alternative ways to address these needs**

There are many ways to facilitate the individual and organizational strategic leadership development process. Below we have outlined four approaches to consider.

- *Provide leadership learning and training opportunities.* Leadership books and training programs can and do make a difference in the development efforts of future strategic leaders. The question soon becomes “Should we send our people outside for strategic leadership training or should we try and develop internal resources?” There are certainly times when organizations attempt to do strategy leadership training in-house. Other times organizations realize that leadership training is not a core area of expertise and choose to send potential new leaders to outside programs.
- *Provide developmental or “stretch” assignments.* We know from our own lives that when a mature human being is placed in a new situation he is forced to learn or he will certainly fail. This everyday experience is equally valid and valuable in developing strategic leaders. By placing high potential leaders in new assignments with increasingly levels of challenge, it places demands on the “would be” leader to “stretch” his capabilities, acquire new skills and cope

with the anxiety created when one takes risks or faces uncertainty. Over time these new experiences build confidence and competence which can be drawn upon when faced with the next new challenge or opportunity. Examples of such assignments might include managing an employee performance problem, securing financing for a new venture, leading a project team with significant cultural, racial or gender diversity, managing a new product or service launch or negotiating the terms of an engagement with a new customer.

- *Provide mentors and coaches.* Carefully selected mentors or coaches can have a powerful role in building the strategic leadership skills and capacity of potential leaders or in filling gaps with existing leaders. By working with leaders on an individual basis they can help them be more strategic in their day-to-day relationship building and organizational experiences. They can gain non-threatening feedback, encourage the establishment of personal strategic goals, and help develop new behaviors to move the mentee down the pathway to future success. As importantly they can serve as a sounding board when decisions must be made when insufficient information is available to make a fully informed choice. Learning to make decisions under uncertain circumstances is a situation a strategic leader faces on a regular basis. Mentors can help existing and potential new leaders avoid making irrational decisions by serving as a sounding board.
- *Recruit and hire high strategic leaders or high potential leaders from the start.* As Jim Collins has taught us “Get the right people on the bus.” Nowhere is this principle more important than in bringing on new leaders. By recruiting and hiring new leaders who are strategic thinking oriented, flexible in their approach, and collaborative in nature, organizations are well positioned to increase the strategic leadership potential of their leadership team.

- **Select the combination of alternatives that best meets the needs of the individual and the organization**

As with everything in life there is no one way to develop strategic leadership in an organization or within an individual. It does begin with understanding the organization’s desired future state, having a plan to reach that state, an understanding of the gaps that need to be filled, an accurate assessment of existing and high potential leaders, and a willingness on the part of the leader, the would be leader and the organization to develop the necessary skills and capabilities. We’ve outlined four approaches and a recommendation for how to leverage them individually or in some combination to plug the gaps. The key is to match the approach with the strategic need of the individual and the organization.

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<sup>1</sup> Jared L. Blean and Robert M. Fulmer, Linkage Inc's, Best Practices in Leadership Development Handbook, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, San Francisco, Pfeiffer, 2009.