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FOCAL ARTICLE

Recasting Leadership Development

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Abstract
To the extent that leadership is learned, it is learned through experience. This article begins with seven conclusions about the role of experience in leadership development, ponders the reasons that what is known is so rarely applied, suggests some ways to put experience at the center of leadership development efforts, and concludes with a series of recommendations for practice and for future research.

It turns out that using experience effectively to develop leadership talent[1] is a lot more complicated and difficult than it appears to be. But Einstein's advice was to ''make things as simple as possible, but not simpler,'' and he was no slouch when it came to taking on difficult phenomena. Experience—not genetics, not training programs, not business school—is the primary source of learning to lead, and although our understanding of this kind of experience is far from complete, it is absolutely the place to start. This article begins with seven reasonably sure bets about the role of experience in leadership development, ponders the reasons that what is known is so rarely applied, suggests some things that can be done to put experience at the center of development, and concludes with recommendations for practice and for research.

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1. The focus of this article is on developing people with the potential to become effective executive leaders in an organizational setting. Although there are many definitions of leadership, most of the research upon which this article rests was done on managers and executives, and the terms *leadership talent* and *executive talent* will be used interchangeably.

Seven Sure Bets

It may be true as has oft been said that there is nothing sure in this world but death and taxes, but there are some things we have learned over the last decades about experience that come close to sure bets, or at least odds-on favorites. Here are seven of them.

1. To the extent it is learned, leadership is learned from experience. For most audiences this is an easily accepted statement, one so obvious that no additional proof is necessary. It is comforting, however, that there is some evidence to support it. Research on twins done over the years at the University of Minnesota has looked at all manner of personality and other traits, consistently finding that 30%–50% of the variance can be attributed to heredity. When Arvey

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and his colleagues used the twin study paradigm with the criterion ''leadership role occupancy,'' they found 30% explained by heredity but the vast majority (the remaining 70%) the result of experience (Arvey, Rotundo, Johnson, Zhang, & McGue, 2006; Arvey, Zhang, Krueger, & Avolio, 2007).

2. Certain experiences matter more than others. Study after study across organizations (e.g., Douglas, 2003; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002a; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988), within corporations (e.g., Valerio, 1990; Yost, Mannion-Plunkett, McKenna, & Homer, 2001; Yost & Plunkett, 2005), and in other countries (e.g., Recruit Co., Ltd., 2001) report that successful managers describe similar experiences that shaped their development. These experiences can be classified roughly as early work experiences, short-term assignments, major line assignments, other people (almost always very good and very bad bosses or superiors), hardships of various kinds, and some miscellaneous events like training programs. There is really no need to do more research on this topic unless a particular company needs to say the findings are uniquely theirs.

   Somewhat less certain is the resulting folklore that there is a ''70-20-10 rule'' [I have not found an original published source, though the percentages clearly come from data reported in McCall et al. (1988) and Lindsey, Homes, and McCall (1987)] that ''experience'' should consist of 70% challenging assignments, 20% other people (in the original data these ''other people'' almost always were either excellent or terrible bosses and senior executives who, more often than not, were neither good coaches nor mentors), and 10% programs. Although the rule of thumb makes a positive contribution by increasing the emphasis on on-the-job experience, it also misleads by suggesting that coaching, mentoring, and programs are effective when used as stand-alone interventions. In fact the best use of all three is in support of on-the-job development, most especially in real time as job experiences unfold.
3. These experiences are powerful because of the challenges they present. From the original study forward (see especially Lindsey et al., 1987), the elements that make an experience powerful, as well as the specific elements that make specific experiences powerful, have been identified (see McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlot, & Morrow, 1994, for the definitive empirical study). Essentially whatever makes an experience challenging—the unexpected, high stakes, complexity, pressure, novelty, and so on—is what makes it a potentially powerful learning experience.
4. Different types of experiences teach different lessons. It is hedging a bit, but a reasonable probability statement can be made about what lessons each type of experience offers (see, e.g., the appendices in McCall and Hollenbeck [2002a] and Lindsey et al. [1987]). More to the practical point, if one can identify the challenges that make a given experience powerful, then it follows logically that what one might learn is how to handle those challenges. In a start-up, for example, there is a lot of excitement about doing something new, but one of the challenges is that no one knows exactly how to go about it. The leadership challenge, and therefore what must be learned, is how to take advantage of that energy and move forward when there is no roadmap to follow. In a turnaround, the challenges include diagnosing at a deep level what is broken and, that done, restructuring the organization, so the required learning includes understanding what drives the business and how to design (or, more

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accurately, redesign) the organization to achieve it.

There is no magic to discovering what is in an experience—that is essentially a logical exercise. The difficulty comes in determining whether or not a specific person will actually learn what the experience offers.

5. Jobs and assignments can be made more developmental. Because the elements that make experiences powerful are known, experiences can be developmentally enhanced by adding those elements to them. High caliber learning experiences require complementing challenge by providing feedback on *learning* progress (DeRue & Wellman, 2009) and sometimes by adding coaching. Again, nothing exotic here—just straightforward application of what is known. Assignments can be enhanced without forcing a person to change jobs, and timelier and better feedback and coaching can increase the probability that a person will focus and learn. This is so straightforward one has to wonder why it isn't done all the time.
6. People can get many of the experiences they need in spite of the obstacles. Although many relevant experiences obviously occur early in life or off the job, still others, such as screw ups and personal crises, cannot be (or at least should not be) manipulated directly. But when it comes to bosses and assignments, whoever decides who gets what job controls developmental opportunities. Whether an immediate boss or some succession planning process makes the call, getting people into the experiences they need is a matter of knowing who needs what experiences, having the experiences available, and being willing to put developmental moves ahead of other priorities. Ultimately matching developmental needs to developmental opportunities is a matter of intentionality.
7. Learning takes place over time and is dynamic, with all manner of twists and turns. Unlike the linear accumulation of knowledge and ability one might hope for, the path to mastery is filled with serendipity, accidents, dead ends, and do-overs. As one executive put it after making the same mistake a second time, ''Damn it, I just did it again. But at least I'm aware of it this time!'' Instead of adding competencies block by block or building incrementally on existing strengths, as some would suggest, growth occurs in fits and starts, sometimes incrementally, sometimes radically. Development at various career stages may require giving up strengths, adding new strengths, correcting flaws, or otherwise reweaving the tapestry of strengths and weaknesses as time and circumstances demand. Indeed it is well documented that failure to develop new strengths or to deal with weaknesses can result in derailment (Finkelstein, 2003; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002b; McCall & Lombardo, 1983).

   Timing appears to be quite important to learning, both in terms of providing meaningful help during important career transitions (see, e.g., Hill's [1992] research on first-time managers; Charan, Drotter, and Noel's [2001] ''critical career passages''; and Gabarro's [1987] stages of ''taking charge''), and in the juxtaposition of experience with an individual's readiness to learn. As an example of the latter, one newly promoted executive told the author that ''there is a lot of politics at headquarters and I don't have time for that.'' Despite the fact that an essential part of his new job was influencing those very executives at headquarters, and that learning to do that was the essential challenge in his promotion from a largely technical managerial role, he was not yet ready to acknowledge the value in acquiring that ability. Apparently learning

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from experience is less likely when people are not yet ready to embrace the lessons that are offered.

Despite Sure Bets, the Money Is on Other Horses

There may be more than these seven sure bets, and some may not be quite as sure as we would like them to be, but the leadership development field has come a long way from a singular emphasis on training and educational programs as ''the way'' to develop executive talent to a better understanding and acceptance of the central role of experience. But the theoretical elegance of the competency approach and its utility in integrating human resource (HR) systems still trumps the inherent messiness of experience-based development, at least among most HR practitioners. Either there are too many pieces still missing to implement a truly experience-centered development approach, or the lack of control over assignments and who gets them, or both, lead many in HR and talent management to seek the seemingly safer and better known haven of integrated competencies, 360-feedback, performance management, training interventions, and HR processes. This is not without justification, as there are still some really tough nuts to crack before experience-based development will win skeptical hearts and minds (Hollenbeck, McCall, & Silzer, 2006).

Although it may not be so clear to HR professionals, it is intuitively obvious to most executives that leadership, to the degree it is learned at all, is learned on the job (i.e., from experience); therefore, it should be easy to get them to buy in to an experience-based development approach. From their perspective, leadership is developed by simply doing what comes naturally to them, i.e., giving leaders challenges. Consider the following recipe for developing managerial talent from automotive guru Carlos Ghosn, CEO of both Nissan and Renault:

> You prepare them by sending them to the most difficult places. . . . Tomorrow's leaders get their training by dealing with today's challenges. You have to take the ones with the most potential and send them where the action is. . . . Leaders are formed in the fires of experience. It's up to the head of the company to prepare a new generation and to send them to hot spots as part of their training. . . . (H)e must choose . . . the future managers and directors . . . not because they're someone's protégé but because they've faced difficult tasks and accomplished them (Ghosn & Ries, 2005, pp. 152–153).

The common wisdom is that reaching executive ranks requires ''earning your stripes.'' Doing what comes naturally, executives identify potential (''I know it when I see it'') and throw those with it into the fires to test their mettle. An example of that is Mark Hurd, who replaced Carly Fiorina as CEO of Hewlett Packard (HP) and is credited with resurrecting HP, who was identified early on and received much of his leadership development during his tenure at NCR.

> ''Our theory on people was that you give them responsibility,'' says Gilbert Williamson, a CEO of NCR during Hurd's rise. ''To my knowledge, every time we threw Mark out the window he landed on his feet. So we moved him up a floor, and he landed on his feet again'' (Lashinsky, 2009, p. 96).

Although the *idea* of developing leadership talent through experience is an easy sell to line executives, it is surprising how few organizations actually do it effectively. This is true despite a research trail that generated enough knowledge for organizations to use experience more systematically if not entirely programmatically. Much of what is needed has been around for some time now, and the tools exist to handle selection, feedback, support, and other processes essential to learning from experience. But in spite of

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increased knowledge and acceptance, the HR community has been slow to embrace the idea that on-the-job experience should be the driving force in development and not just one option among equals that include training, mentoring, rotational programs, coaching, and development programs of various types.

In short, there is no reason that experience-based development can't be done effectively, or at least more effectively. Why isn't it? The heresy I propose is that the culprit lies in executives' drive for results coupled with a paradoxical lack of understanding about development and in HR professionals' parochial perspective coupled with a misplaced need to exert direct influence over what they see as the leadership development process.

How We Shot Ourselves in the Foot

As these things go, our understanding of what it takes to build an experience-based leadership development process is quite advanced. There are, to be sure, some areas that need more attention, most especially a better understanding of potential and how to assess it at various stages of a career and a clearer picture of what can be done to insure that the desired learning from an experience actually occurs. But the ''knowing-doing gap'' (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000) in this case is not the result of these gaps in knowledge, large as they may be. More than enough is known to do a pretty good job of putting experience to work. So what, then, keeps it from happening more often and with more sophistication? The answer to that question lies deeply embedded in the assumptions, beliefs, and practices that influence many line executives and many HR professionals.

First, and perhaps most daunting, are assumptions about what people can learn (or, stated perhaps more accurately, about what they can't learn). Sometimes explicit but more often not, the belief that leadership is something you either have or you don't undermines efforts to use experience for development. It is clearly an advantage that executives are willing to throw people into fires or out of windows (translated: give them challenges) because that provides opportunities to develop. But it can be a decided disadvantage if those executives are doing it to see whether those thrown into fires emerge unscathed or those tossed from windows ''land on their feet.'' In that case experience is less about development than about testing, and because of that there is little investment in helping people learn from the experience. So, although many things can be done to increase learning, the assumption is that the truly talented will figure it out without any help. In the practical world, this argument cannot be disproved because there is no mechanism for discovering if those who did not ''land on their feet'' might have developed if only they had had some help.

Changing executives' beliefs about the nature of leadership is tough and not made any easier by those who argue that people don't change and therefore should be played only to their strengths (for a detailed analysis of the flaws in this argument see Kaiser, 2009).

The second obstacle is no less damaging for all of its obviousness. Results are achieved short term; development is a longer-term proposition. It can be difficult to get some executives to think long term about the strategic needs of the business, much less about long-term individual development. When it comes to important and challenging assignments—the very ones with the most developmental potential—the pressure to choose the proven candidate over the one who might learn the most is often overwhelming, especially in tough times. Keeping people doing what they already know how to do, and do well, gets results even at the risk—even likelihood—that doing so will derail those talented people at some point in the future.

Like the belief that you have it or you don't, there is no easy cure for a short-term perspective. A maniacal focus on results cripples efforts to move people into new things, to track growth over a career, and to hold managers accountable for developing their people.

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Short-term thinking is bolstered by (or perhaps causes) the third factor, a misplaced understanding of the true cost of development. The bottom line in leadership development is elusive at best, and attempts to measure it tend to emphasize visible and to some degree quantifiable HR expenditures on training programs, coaching, consulting fees, tuition reimbursement, and the like, not to mention the expense of the HR staff itself—all things for which costs can be calculated. Unfortunately, return on those costs is much harder to determine because at best they have indirect effects on the bottom line. HR programs have indirect effects to the extent that they operate to improve the effectiveness of the actual source of development—experience—which in turn partially influences the quality of leadership, which in turn is only one factor determining organizational performance. Looked at in isolation and with unrealistic expectations, HR programs make excellent and easy targets for cost cutting.

The actual cost of development is in the opportunity costs associated with the learning curve as people take on new things, plus whatever is invested in helping them learn from those experiences. The return on that investment is the long-term impact of higher quality leadership talent on organizational performance—itself a difficult thing to assess.

The fourth issue is connected to the first three. What priority should development have among all the priorities of the business? If it is construed as something separate from the strategic business needs of the organization, even if in support of them, it competes with other things that need to be done. It is a legitimate question just where in the priority list developing leadership talent should be, and it is no surprise that it ends up somewhere down the list. If talent can be bought, how much effort should go into internal development? How long is long term, and what do you do if the time horizon for developing talent is longer than the time horizon for the business strategy? The answers to such questions are not obvious.

Even if senior management places an adequate priority on development and puts resources into it, turning it over to HR to implement can be a mistake. Many HR professionals don't have sufficient understanding of the strategy, jobs, and people to use experience effectively. Lack of knowledge, coupled with the ambiguity inherent in using experience to drive development, can increase the appeal of competency models that boil leadership down to a list of attributes that can be developed using an integrated set of known tools and methodologies, from training to performance management. It is a comforting illusion.

As I have argued elsewhere (Hollenbeck & McCall, 2003; Hollenbeck et al., 2006; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2007), experience makes a much better foundation for development than do competency models. What organizations are looking for is competence not a list of attributes. Successful leaders have different styles (Herb Kelleher, Jack Welch, and Anne Mulcahy were all successful leaders, but they achieved that success with their own unique styles), and equifinality rules (there are equally effective but different ways to achieve the same outcome). A single set of competencies applied to all leaders can create a common language for talking about leadership and even an integrated system of HR policies and practices. But to the extent that there is no one ''best'' way to lead and that experience drives development, this approach focuses development effort in the wrong place.

Even common HR applications that appear to take advantage of experience, such as job rotation and action-learning projects, often fail to make full use of the accumulated knowledge about how experience teaches. Job rotation certainly can broaden one's perspective, but unless the assignments are chosen carefully to build an individual's ability, it can be a very inefficient and incomplete approach to development. In an action learning model, where teams in a training program tackle organizational problems, the teams sometimes focus so intently on solving the

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problem that learning takes a backseat. Even worse, in some cases, the problems that are the heart of action learning may not be important to senior management, or the recommendations may not be taken seriously at senior levels. In such cases, the project may be seen as ''make work'' and can even backfire, generating cynicism rather than development.

Betting on a Different Horse

It is one thing to acknowledge an imperfect world but quite another to engage it knowing full well that there is no perfect solution. What follows are some imperfect strategies for putting business needs and developmental experiences at the center of development.

Go With the Flow Rather Than Fight It

Article after article talks about the necessity of top management support and how difficult it is to ''sell'' them on the value of various HR endeavors. Why spend so much time and energy trying to convince ''senior management'' to buy in, support, and fund various initiatives when, as noted earlier, there is little need to sell the value of challenging assignments? Why not start there instead of trying to change their minds? The catch is that although executives like the idea of challenging their top talent, at the same time many of them make some nasty assumptions that get in the way of actually using challenging experiences to develop that talent. The apparent paradox flows from deeply rooted beliefs that leadership, or executive talent, or whatever you want to call it, is a natural gift and very difficult if not impossible to develop. Thus the advantage of executive receptivity to experience-based development is in some ways negated by their skepticism about development. There is just enough truth in their point of view to reinforce it—as noted earlier, a significant amount of the variance in leadership role occupancy is explained by heredity (Arvey et al., 2006, 2007). Further, the belief held by many executives that people have ''it'' or they don't is not eroded no matter what happens when talented people are thrown into tough assignments. If they figure it out and do well, it proves what the executive suspected all along, that they have the right stuff. If they don't, then failure simply proves that they didn't have it after all.

The temptation is to fight this self-fulfilling and counter productive perspective. Measurement tools are created to offset subjective judgments about talent and performance, and ''hard'' data are collected to ''prove'' that investments in various development activities pay off. Then these data-based tools and conclusions are built into executive processes like succession planning with the belief that rationality will prevail and the decisions will be more objective.

The futility of this approach is apparent in the example of one representative senior executive team the author observed as it went through the succession-planning process. The HR staff had worked for weeks putting together comprehensive dossiers on the people who would be considered in the session. Available data included systematic performance reviews, work history data, 360-degree feedback summaries—a rather impressive collection of relatively hard data. But as the session unfolded, virtually no reference was made by any executive to the data in the folders in front of them. It was not that the data were inaccurate or irrelevant; rather, it was already obvious to these executives that the people they were discussing were impressive or they would not even be in the pool for discussion. Data supporting the obvious were not all that useful, so the conversation turned to other things (see Table 1).

It is easy to be critical of the discussion—after all, these kinds of comments sound purely subjective. But these executives were extremely bright, and there was clearly energy in the discussion of these people, so instead of criticizing what was happening, would it be possible to use it? What if these were the right conversations or, if not right, the conversations that were

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Table 1. *The Language of Executive Assessment*

- She's a fine engineer, but there are contracts on her life in Divisions A and B.
- He has trouble working with others. We don't have time for that.
- He's a big bag of warts, but he's really smart.
- It's a tough job dealing with GE, but she's done it very well.
- He has really gone out of his comfort zone.
- He was Y's product marketing guy and did very well.
- She builds a team beyond belief.
- He understands the story.
- She is relentless getting cost out and will deliver what she promises.
- She is a better strategic thinker than Y is.
- That takes him out if he limits himself to Scotland.
- She's ready for something more.
- If we move him do we risk making the dominoes fall?

Table 2. *Making Sense of the Language of Executive Assessment*

Derailment

''Flaws'' that have been tolerated may no longer be tolerated.

- She's a fine engineer, but there are contracts on her life in Divisions A and B.
- He has trouble working with others. We don't have time for that.
- He's a big bag of warts, but he's really smart.

Challenging assignments

An emphasis is on relevant and revealing experience.

- It's a tough job dealing with GE, but she's done it very well.
- He has really gone out of his comfort zone.
- He was Y's product marketing guy.
- She builds a team beyond belief.

What makes a person valuable

They favor people who understand what needs to be done—who ''get it''.

- He understands the story.
- She is relentless getting cost out and will deliver on her promises.
- She is a better strategic thinker than Y is.

Availability

People are considered only if it is practical to move them.

- That takes him out if he limits himself to Scotland.
- She's ready for something more.
- If we move him do we risk making the dominoes fall?

going to take place regardless of whatever objective data or processes someone foist upon them? Could slight deflections channel that energy to achieve better outcomes?

Looking more deeply for the meaning beneath the short-hand phrases and sometimes glib comments, these executives were in fact talking about the same things research had discovered; only they were putting it all in their own lingo and framing it with their particular lenses (see Table 2). Many of their observations were about derailment and how the weaknesses of some people had, to this point, been overshadowed by their strengths and accomplishments but were no longer acceptable. Other observations took into account the kinds of challenges these people had faced and what facing those challenges had revealed about their capabilities. Still other assessments focused on particular challenges that the business faced and how a certain candidate's prior experience demonstrated an ability to ''see the big picture.'' And other evaluations focused on contextual issues, specifically whether a candidate was willing to move to get needed experience or if there was an adequate replacement if a candidate were to leave the current job.

In other words, these senior executives were talking about derailment, challenging assignments, what experiences make a person valuable to the company, and availability or willingness to take on new and challenging assignments—all things that have surfaced in decades of research on how executives develop. To be sure, there was a heavy dose of Darwin in the room—much more ''get the best people into the job'' than ''get the right jobs to the best people''—but close enough. Why not go with it but create two succession-planning events, one geared toward selecting the best person

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for each key job (the traditional replacement planning use of the process) and another one to select experiences needed to further develop high potential people? Neither requires changing the nature or philosophy of the executives, and they avoid surfacing the nature/nurture issue. The first session is what they are used to doing. The second simply asks them to identify the key challenges facing the business and to identify the experiences their best talent should get to prepare them for those challenges. The selection decisions are made for a business reason.

Embed Development Seamlessly in the Business Strategy

Linking key challenges facing the business to experiences that talented people should have, as suggested above, is not as easy as it sounds. It is not enough to make ad hoc decisions around particular individuals. There must be a way to identify what experiences are important given the strategic needs of the business. In other words, to be a priority, development must be embedded in and integral to business success. This can be accomplished in several ways.

One way to identify experiences that would prepare leaders to carry out the business strategy was developed with the senior team of a major international corporation (McCall, 1998). The CEO and his direct reports identified three strategic initiatives they agreed were key to the future of the business. In three groups, one for each of those initiatives, they listed the leadership challenges that each strategy would present, then identified where talented junior managers could learn to handle those challenges. Not surprisingly they came up with company-specific versions of the experiences identified by research on important developmental experiences (McCall et al., 1988)—certain special projects, working for certain model bosses, and various challenging assignments. These specific developmental opportunities, identified by the senior executives as crucial preparation for the strategic challenges, now could be allocated to individuals in the high potential pool.

A similar endeavor with the senior team of another company took a slightly different tack. This company was organized into business units that produced quite different products for different markets, as well as into the usual corporate staff functions such as finance, business development, and HR. The business strategy called for leaders with cross-business and cross-functional perspective, but it wasn't obvious how much experience, for how long, or in how many of the businesses and functions, was actually needed. Nor were they clear on exactly what should be learned from such moves other than ''broader perspective.'' To help them answer those key questions, the senior leaders of each business and function created two charts. The first was a list of things a manager would have to master (be good at) to be successful in that business or function. The second chart was about things even a successful person would not be exposed to or would not have to master in the business or function, as well as anything negative that might be learned while working there.

Because most of the executives had worked in more than one of the businesses or functions, this proved to be a relatively easy task. Not only could they identify specific aspects that must be mastered, but even the ''negative learning'' came out readily. These lists of ''what needs to be mastered'' for each business and function were used to identify what could be learned from an assignment there, and in conjunction with the lists of ''what could not be learned'' it became the business rationale for making cross-boundary moves to develop talent.

Another large corporation struggled with silo mentality created by careers spent in a single line of business or function. Instead of working across boundaries to solve strategic problems, the businesses fought or undermined what they saw as ''bureaucratic processes'' foisted upon them by staff functions; and staff units felt hamstrung by ''uncooperative and parochial'' line managers. Neither side respected the other, much less would consider a cross-boundary

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move to gain a broader perspective or working together to solve problems.

The senior executives in each of the line units and staff functions were asked to consider what experiences they could give people from the ''other side'' that would allow them to understand the issues from their perspective. One of the line units, for example, needed financial data in a certain form but was unable to convince the finance organization to give it to them in that way. They came up with some short-term project assignments that a finance person could participate in that would help him or her understand why the data needed to be a certain way. The finance organization, doing the same kind of exercise, came up with some temporary assignments in which a line person could get a sense for what was involved in making changes in data reporting. The subsequent exchanges allowed both parties to benefit and eventually led to strategic solutions to the problems at hand. And, because the individuals returned to their home bases, the resulting level of understanding and cross-boundary relationships led to better cooperation as new challenges developed.

In short, when it comes to using experience to develop people, line executives are an easy sell. They readily accept the philosophy of learning in the trenches, and their own experience can be framed in ways to link the business strategy to needed experiences, to find those experiences in the organization, and to identify what might be learned from them.

Use Ongoing Business Initiatives—Not HR Processes—for Development

If senior executives readily accept the value of challenging experiences and, with some guidance, can identify where those experiences are, what they can teach, and who might benefit from them, then HR programs and processes are not necessary for development to occur. In fact, perhaps the less HR language used and fewer HR-initiated processes, the less chance that attention will be diverted from where it should be—on experience. Maybe in an experience-centric development world there is no need to impose a different language (e.g., HR speak ''competencies,'' which Steve Kerr [2009], former vice president of Leadership Development and chief learning officer at GE under Jack Welch, described as ''HR playing with its food'') or to overdesign a process by imposing formidable forms and procedures. Perhaps instead attention could be focused on taking advantage of ongoing business initiatives by making deflections that enhance their developmental power.

As an example of such an opportunity consider the task forces created by Carlos Ghosn to save Nissan. The major problems that were threatening the very existence of the company had been identified, and, not surprisingly, they required cross-functional solutions (Ghosn & Ries, 2005). So Ghosn created several cross-functional teams (CFTs) to tackle the major problems:

> Each CFT was to consist of about 10 members with different functional experience and a proven track record drawn from the ranks of middle managers. . . . Each CFT was headed by a pilot, typically a middle to upper-middle manager who possessed two important attributes: extensive front-line experience and strong personal credibility. To impart authority and stature, Ghosn assigned two leaders from the executive committee representing different functional areas to each CFT. . . . Their role was to act as team sponsors and facilitate the team's work, particularly by removing organizational barriers (Yoshino & Egawa, 2003, p. 2).

Needless to say, participating on one of those task forces was a very challenging assignment that included intense time pressure and presenting recommendations directly to a very demanding Carlos Ghosn. It is clear that the people on these task forces had to learn in depth about the problem they were tackling and about functional areas other than their own, come

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to understand and work with people from other functions and levels, and create a recommendation backed up with facts and figures! Even though development was not what prompted Ghosn to structure the experiences the way he did or to pick the people he chose, everyone involved was being developed. What an opportunity, with just a little tweaking—for example, by influencing who was chosen to participate or providing feedback along the way—to turn this into an even more powerful learning event, with the learning outcomes not left to chance!

Lou Gerstner in his diving catch rescue of IBM chose a similar strategy for solving the major strategic challenges facing the business (Gerstner, 2002). Once again cross-functional task forces tackled serious strategic challenges to the business, and those chosen to serve on them not only were tested but had a unique opportunity to learn.

Such opportunities are all around as organizations go about confronting strategic challenges, especially now as the global economic meltdown has everyone scrambling to survive and thrive. If only someone is there to tweak it by identifying the special developmental opportunities created by the key challenges facing the organization, influencing how those challenges are attacked, keeping development needs in mind when selecting who will be involved, and providing an opportunity for reflection during and after the event. There is a role to be played in developing people through experience that neither the immediate boss nor the HR generalist is able to play very well.

Create a New Role to Assist Line Executives

Clearly there is a need for another player in the development game who brings a different perspective and plays a different role—a ''wise counselor'' of sorts. This someone needs to understand the people and their developmental needs, the online developmental opportunities in the organization and what they might teach, and the strategy of the business as it dictates both. This someone then is the knowledge resource who is able to take advantage of opportunities as they appear in the flow of things and to influence who gets what experience. To exert this influence with line management, where such decisions are actually made, this someone must be credible as well as knowledgeable.

The role closest to this is titled ''business partner'' in some organizations, a title less relevant than the responsibility as an advisor to senior managers on people matters (including development) as they occur in the day-to-day operation of the business. These people report directly to the line managers they support, with a possible dotted line into HR (rather than the other way around). They frequently have a limited HR background but are thoroughly grounded in the business and its strategy, and gain their credibility with line management through their practical knowledge and maturity. Their role is to help their charges recognize people with potential and take advantage of developmental opportunities that appear. They keep track of high potential people over time and to some extent across bosses, and do what they can to help people learn from their experience. The very informality of the nudging and tweaking process is what makes it work.

Focus Attention on Learning From Experience, Not Just Having It

You don't have to spend too much time around managers and executives to notice that reflection is not their strength. Ever since Mintzberg (1973) brought together the diary and observational studies of managerial work, it's been clear that the norm is many activities engaged in at a fast pace. Managers ''just sort of dash around a lot.'' If this was true 30 years ago, before Blackberries®, lean processes, virtual teams, and working across global time zones, then it is even more so today. Although it may be good news if all that activity means more is getting done, the implications for development are not so positive.

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One victim of the peripatetic managerial life style is systematic development. Even if executives believe in the role of experience in development, they are not necessarily dedicated to consistent application or to building systems and processes to support it. In other words, their proclivity is to deal with talent (at least high-level talent) one case at a time, as circumstances require and context dictates. And, although the immediate boss, for a variety of reasons, has the most direct influence on a subordinate's development, immediate bosses rarely have the time nor the inclination to make developing others a top priority. Even when it is a priority, they are probably not very good at it. As a result, talented people may have a career-long personnel file, but in reality have started over with each new boss. There is no cumulative record of what they have learned or consistency in how they have developed over time.

Given these and other forces working against a full commitment to development, there is no substitute for educating developing leaders on how to take responsibility for their own development. This of course is not a new idea, but it's not obvious to people how to create a meaningful plan based on experience, and even when the principles are understood it is not easy to actually create and carry out such a plan (McCall, 2009).

The ideal personal development plan would describe what the person needs to learn how to do (based on the business strategy or his or her personal goals); identify the experiences that could offer those lessons; find a way to get the needed experiences; and create the necessary feedback, support, and incentives to actually learn the lessons sought. But short of all that, there is a simpler way to get more learning out of whatever assignment one has.

As part of a research project on how people learn from experience, I contacted a small number of newly promoted executives biweekly and asked two simple questions: ''What have you done since we last talked?'' and ''What, if anything, have you learned from it?'' At first it was a challenge for them even to remember what they had done in the previous 2 weeks, given the relentless pace and performance pressure of the executive job. But fairly quickly, in anticipation of the next contact, they started paying more attention. By simply being aware of what they were doing and what they were learning from doing it, their experience became richer. As one of them said at the end of the study, ''I never knew that asking dumb questions could make so big a difference.'' Some of them even began asking the same dumb questions of their high potential subordinates, and as a result created a learning environment in their unit.

Much of development is a matter of attention. If people can learn to keep learning in mind, more of it can happen.

Shift the Focus to Mastery

Paying attention to learning begs the question of what needs to be learned. I have used the term ''leadership'' rather loosely in this discussion of development, as if what is known about it might inform a development agenda. Yet, despite some progress, the concept of leadership even today seems just as fragmented and unconvincing as when Warren Bennis wrote his classic summary of the leadership field in 1959 (Bennis, 1959). The ubiquitous competency models with their finite lists of general attributes fare somewhat better but still fall short in fundamental ways. Not only are they limited in breadth and usually quite general, but they imply a single set of attributes to something that obviously can be accomplished by people with many different attributes. And, the more-is-better perspective ignores the complex relationships among strengths and weaknesses and the dynamics of derailment that, among other things, include strengths becoming weaknesses.

Is there an option? Our interviews and surveys of successful executives produced hundreds of descriptions of the experiences that had shaped them and literally thousands of the lessons they said they had learned from those experiences. Reducing

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both to empirically justifiable and useful categories was a harrowing task, and of the two resulting frameworks it was the experiences that received the preponderance of attention. But it is the framework for understanding the lessons of those experiences, however, that has the most potential for helping people think through their own development.

The thousands of lessons were first sorted into 32 categories, which in turn were divided into five large chunks that reflected what leaders must be able to do: Set direction and build an organization capable of achieving it; align through influence or direct authority the various parties needed to achieve the strategic goals; develop the temperament to cope with the ambiguity, pressures, frustrations, and excitement of the job; set, live, and enforce the values that define the organization; and continually grow their own and others ability (see Table 3).

These represent the basic demands of the leadership role. These demands can be met in remarkably different ways, but all leaders face them. Leadership is about creating a context in which other people will bring their talents to bear on the strategic issues of the organization, and that context is created by how effectively leaders meet these demands. Looking at leadership development as acquiring the expertise to meet these demands avoids the monotheistic search for a single style, personality, or set of abilities common to all leaders, the vain search for a ''one best way,'' that has led repeatedly to dead-ends. Instead it focuses us on the variety of ways that ''mastery'' in meeting the demands of the job can be acquired.

More importantly the *lessons* of experience by definition confirm that leadership can be learned. No doubt some people have natural abilities that help them meet some of these demands, but others with different natural gifts were able to learn how to do those things, and they learned it through experience. This is consistent with the extensive research on the acquisition of expertise in other fields of endeavor (Ericcson, 1996; Ericcson, Charness, Feltovich, & Hoffman, 2006), that has recently appeared in the popular literature (Colvin, 2008). Among other commonalities (see McCall & Hollenbeck, 2008, for a detailed explanation), acquiring leadership expertise requires mastery of a large domain of knowledge, skills, and abilities (mastery of the demands); occurs over a lifetime of effort; requires years of intentional effort and practice; involves certain kinds of teachers

Table 3. *The Five Demands of Leadership*

Leadership: Creating a context in which other people can reach their full potential in serving the organization's mission. Context is created by the ways a person in a leadership role addresses the five demands described below.

1. *Setting and communicating direction*: Establishing and communicating the purpose, vision, mission, point of view for your part of the organization, and creating an architecture such that structure, processes, rewards, and human resource practices are consistent with that direction and each other.
2. *Aligning critical constituencies*: Through the use of authority, persuasion, negotiation, or other means, making sure that the people and groups necessary to achieving the mission understand it and are aligned with it, and that those who are obstacles to it are dealt with.
3. *Developing an executive temperament*: Developing the ability and confidence necessary to cope effectively with the pressures, ambiguity, complexity, and frustrations of a leadership role.
4. *Setting and living values*: Through actions as well as words, conveying and reinforcing what the organization, and you as a leader and person, believe in and stand for.
5. *Growth of self and others*: Taking the necessary actions to insure that one's self and one's people continue to learn, grow, and change.

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at crucial inflection points; and demands ''playing on edge'' (recognizing what the next step toward mastery is and moving toward it rather than staying with what you already know). Further, just as research on expertise has emphasized the importance of desire and discipline to becoming world class, research on potential (Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997) documented similar qualities in international managers and executives rated by their bosses to be highest in potential.

Support the Pursuit of Mastery

One reason few organizations fully exploit what is known about using experience is that, inevitably, responsibility for it devolves to the HR function but HR does not rise to the opportunity. Instead of bringing powerful tools and processes to bear in support of experience, they all too often are not integrated at all, are used piecemeal, or are integrated around some other less useful principle. We have the tools to support learning from experience but not the perspective to use them for that purpose. After all, to use experience effectively there must be ways to (a) identify people with potential; (b) identify the important developmental assignments, other people, and so forth; (c) get the people who need them into the experiences they need; (d) help them learn from the experiences they have; and (e) track individual growth and development over time. Clearly there are HR practices and methodologies that could support each of these necessary components. Take, as examples, the following:

- Selection methods, such as the group assessment of executive ability described by Sorcher and Brant (2002), could be used equally well to assess potential, learning from experience, and development over time—by adding or focusing questions around those issues.
- Performance management, in addition to the annual or semiannual appraisal of job performance, could include accountability for and measurement of specific growth objectives, and provide a platform for recording cumulative developmental progress.
- 360-feedback tools could be used to address observable growth and development, or lack thereof.
- Coaching could be used not only to help individuals learn more from their experiences but also to help their bosses do a better job of creating development opportunities and the context (including accountability) to enhance learning from those opportunities.
- Succession planning could be used to marry people and experiences, build in accountability, and provide specific feedback to individuals on what they are expected to develop.
- Training and development programs could be timed to support people going through difficult transitions, be designed to help people learn to better manage and learn from their own experiences, provide space and processes for reflection on and integration of experience, or simulate experiences that are too rare or costly to provide real time.

In addition to these traditional tools and practices, new ones developed specifically to support learning from experience are beginning to appear. Yost and Plunkett (2009), for example, have developed a number of simple, online tools that managers can use for self-assessment, identifying potentially useful experiences, and making more of the assignments they find themselves in.

In sum, there is much we know how to do that could be brought to the table of experience.

Conclusion

This article began with seven ''sure bets'' about experience and leadership development, considered why that knowledge often

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is not applied, and suggested some practical ways to put experience at the center of development. Where does this leave us?

Some very dedicated people with very good minds have taken a swing at this, but despite all the years of research, best practices, handbooks of this and that, technological advances in data storage and handling, new concepts and measurement techniques, the difficulties remain. Ironically, could it be that selection is ultimately the key to development? If leaders are selected and promoted who (a) understand that leadership is critical to the business, (b) accept that talented people can learn to lead, (c) believe that they learn it through experience, and (d) have a longer-term perspective, then the odds are good that they will model development and hold others accountable for it. If we then can develop ''wise counselors''—people who understand the strategic issues, know what and where the challenging experiences are, know who has potential and their strengths and weaknesses, and understand how experience works—to help executives tweak on-the-job experience for developmental reasons (and maybe even provide timely support to help people learn from their experiences), then maybe we will have pushed the envelope as far as it will go as long as fallible human beings have to lead imperfect systems.

With the ''right people on the bus,'' the crucial issue for practice is rethinking development with strategic challenges and on-the-job experience as the driving issues. From there it is possible to redesign and reconfigure tools and processes to support and strengthen the development of talent.

From a research perspective, the focus should shift from the recent emphasis on ways to measure the impact of HR programs to better understanding how to use experience more effectively. But enough is known about experiences and what and why they teach. More is needed in three crucial areas:

(1) A key issue in developing talent through experience is deciding to whom to give the experiences. Some research (e.g., Spreitzer et al., 1997) has attempted to address that issue in the context of development, but our understanding of potential is rudimentary at best (see a recent review by Silzer & Church, 2009). It is possible that there are many or at least multiple forms of potential that are equally likely to blossom, that potential changes over time and after experience, and that there is much to learn from the existing research on how experts become experts that applies to the leadership arena.

(2) Work on the transition from individual contributor to manager (Hill, 1992), on passages (Dotlich, Noel, & Walker, 2004), crucibles (Bennis & Thomas, 2002), expatriate assignments (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002a, 2002b), and the leadership pipeline (Charan et al., 2001) all suggest that for leadership, as is true for the larger concepts of careers and life stages, transitions are crucial. But much remains to be learned about which ones are most central to leadership development and what can be done to help talented people get through them successfully.

(3) It is clear that learning from experience is not automatic, that not everyone learns from experience, that people may learn different things from the same kind of experience, and that prior experience affects what can be learned from current experience. But it is not as clear what the obstacles are to learning from different kinds of experiences, or on the flip side, what might enhance it. Until more is known about these aspects of learning from experience, efforts to intervene effectively to enhance learning will continue to be hit or miss. And because so much of learning from experience depends on the learner's insight, useful research might explore what reflection looks like in a managerial world and how to stimulate it.

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Although life and leadership development may never be totally predictable, the cost of leadership failure is too high to accept less than our best efforts. It is time to focus on the most promising and potentially powerful developer of leaders, experience, and to do what we can to use it in the most effective ways possible to shape the kinds of leaders needed for the future.

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