**Developing Leaders for a Complex World**

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The complex and ambiguous conditions of this century are unlikely to respond to the old school of leadership. Old norms were honed in a different environment – one in which it was perhaps easier to view one position as right and the other wrong, easier to predict, to forecast, to control.  But despite today's complexities, many notions of leadership remain deeply embedded in the conditions and assumptions of the last century.

What perspectives and skills are needed to lead organizations today?  How do we help future leaders develop?

The answers require recognition of a shift that is occurring at three levels:  in the nature of work – role of leaders – as well as in the process of development itself.

All three of these spheres are moving from a requirement to perform to an external standard to one of tapping into an internal reservoir – from executing against plan to creating in the midst of complexity.

Consider first the nature of work.

We come from a world in which there was a best practice, an optimum way of getting the work done. Leaders needed to define that path and communicate it clearly, to cascade the message. Leaders helped individuals understand the rules and gain the skills necessary to execute at maximum effectiveness. Through standardized execution and performance to plan, we achieved scale, quality, and cost.

Today, much of our work depends upon discovery – our ability to form insight, to make connections, to sense and understand emerging needs.  There is no explicit path, only a goal.  As individuals, we are challenged to invent as we go – to develop new approaches – to interpret and respond complex signals.

In this new work, the role of a leader shifts.

In the past a leader needed to articulate the course ahead and hold individual employees responsible for completing quality work on time. This was done through various forms of direction and measurements, and assessed execution against standards at annual performance reviews.

Now individuals hold themselves accountable for their part on the project, and communicate with other team members to ensure work is done well and delivered in the right timeframe.  The role of a leader becomes contextual – creating the environment in which this work can best be performed – assembling the conditions for success.

Through my research, I have defined four key roles of a contextual leader in complex times:

- Building the organization's collaborative capacity – 'wiring' the organization, literally and figuratively, in ways that allow the easy flow of information and ideas throughout
- Disrupting with diversity – insuring that the organization has a continual infusion of new perspectives – that it's people are immersed in, rather than protected from, the complexities of today's world – and that there is an appreciation of the value of diverse points of view
- Asking great questions – framing the challenges facing the business in ways that are evocative and inspiring – ways that invite the broad organization to invest in creating innovative solutions
- Conveying meaning required to tap discretionary effort – understanding what makes being part of this organization special, why people choose to work here, and what we must provide in return to maintain their commitment and passion for the work at hand

How do we help individuals develop the skills necessary to provide contextual leadership? What are the implications for leadership development?

Consider the difference between coaching an athlete to compete in a well-understood discipline – let's imagine a swimmer -- versus training an elite fighting force to embark on an uncertain mission.

In the first, one can focus on fine-tuning the mechanics of execution. Of course, there are opportunities for continually refining the approaches, but a primary role of the trainer is to help the individual execute each stroke to the highest known standard. However, in the second, the coach must equip individuals with a broad set of skills and knowledge, a reservoir to draw from depending on the specific demands of the complex environment they find.

Today we are developing leaders for a workforce that will not execute against a well-understood set of routines, but one that must have an inner reservoir of insight, perspectives and understanding to adapt as the situation requires.

In the past, important lessons were ones related to approaches and metrics: questions of what, when, how, and how much.

Now, the most significant development opportunities are those designed to allow participants to discover inner capabilities and build resources to draw upon: why and who.

Our development efforts must focus on helping future leaders:

- Build their own network and appreciate the role connections play in today's world
- Understand their own biases – and appreciate the value of diverse points of view
- Create paradigms for shaping questions, for making sense out of seemingly overwhelming and disparate data
- Connect with their authentic selves – what they care about, what they value – what they want to share with others.

How do we help individuals develop these skills? Approaches include:

- Provide talented individuals with the opportunity to form strong, trust-based relationships with others throughout your organization.  Don't pit peers against each other.  Make extensive use of project-based work, encouraging teams to form and re-form across the organization.

- Expose individuals to the varying logic and legitimacy diverse individuals.  Help them understand how history has shaped our ideas of 'normal.'  Insure that they develop insight into their own biases.

- Help them develop a 'tool box' of frameworks for sense making.  Create exercises, perhaps using computer simulations, to put them at the helm of organizations in complex circumstances.  Allow them to experience how their daily decisions can affect the business as a whole.

- Give them time and guidance to discover their authentic selves.  Move out of the classroom.  For example, send groups to developing countries to get them out of their comfort zone.

Development, like leadership, must evolve from helping individuals conform to a pre-set standard – to providing experiences that help participants understand more deeply who they are as individuals, what they care most about, and ways to use their strengths to create a positive context for work in the organizations they lead.

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