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The Smarter Way Toward Self-Development

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Corporate leadership programs tend to be more generic than customized. But Boeing's approach to leadership training is self-directed and individualized—and it's paying off.

by Loren Gary

Tim Smith, a first-level manager at Boeing, knows a thing or two about leading during times of constant change. What with the downsizing that has intensified in the two years since September 11, he's gone from supervising engineers to supervising hourly employees, and he is currently on a special assignment that involves consolidating operations and relocating them into smaller plants both inside and outside the company. And he's had five different managers in the past fourteen months.

To help turn the challenges he's facing into occasions for learning and to further his own development as a leader, Smith is participating in Boeing's Waypoint Project. Established in 2000, this ten-year initiative brings together 120 volunteers from all levels of management in a joint exploration that seeks to turn their trial-by-fire experiences into an intentional process for improving leadership capabilities while accomplishing business objectives. At a time when training dollars are increasingly scarce, Boeing is taking a fresh look at leadership development. There is much to learn from what the leaders of the Waypoint Project and other leadership-development experts have found.

Staff from the Boeing Leadership Center (BLC) interview the volunteers throughout the year. Their findings are made available to all Boeing managers through an interactive Web site, which also allows them to take assessment tests, devise personal development plans, and identify training and stretch assignments.

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Participating in Waypoint is not only giving Smith access to a valuable body of knowledge, it is also helping him to identify key development goals. To stay sharp in his current operational responsibilities, he's taking classes on accelerated improvement that will enable him to maintain his certification as an instructor in lean management principles. And to position himself

for higher-level management jobs, he's taking a 200-hour course on program management at George Washington University and a two-week course to learn more about strategic leadership.

What puts the Waypoint Project at the cutting edge of leadership training in large organizations? With development programs coming under increased pressure to help an organization achieve or maintain competitive excellence, many organization-directed "push" programs have been found wanting. In such programs, the company selects a relatively small number of managers who have been deemed to possess the greatest leadership potential, gives them access to special educational and networking opportunities, rotates them through a series of high-level assignments, and carefully monitors their progress.

But these push programs can turn into little more than credentialing exercises when the participants aren't fully committed to the learning. Consequently, best-practice companies are combining traditional push programs with self-directed "pull" approaches, in which the individual has a high degree of choice and flexibility and thus is more responsible for his own development. The Waypoint Project is Boeing's innovative attempt to create tools to support such self-directed learning. And by making the insights it generates available to all managers, the company hopes to institutionalize the lessons learned from crucible leadership experiences.

A closer examination of Boeing's initiatives, combined with insights from experts about the state of leadership development programs in big companies, yields valuable recommendations both for managers who are looking to develop their direct reports' leadership potential and for those who are trying to plot their own career trajectories.

1. Focus on the job, not the classroom

"With all leadership development, the real driver is the work itself," says James M. Hunt, associate professor of organizational behavior at Babson College (Wellesley, Massachusetts). "The learning takes place through challenging assignments."

Interviews with Waypoint participants certainly bear this out: they reveal that 80 percent of a leader's development occurs through on-the-job activities and experiences, not in the classroom. In particular, says Paul Yost, manager of leadership research at the BLC, the research highlighted sixteen critical events in a leader's development, among them turning a unit or group around, starting a business from scratch, making the transition from a line position to a staff position (or vice versa), dealing with a problem employee, and handling your own mistakes or failures. The project's intranet includes a database of insight and advice from managers who've been through these experiences.

2. Look for the overlap between individual interest and the company's strategic needs

"Your leadership development efforts must be driven by the business strategy," says Mary Mannion-Plunkett, senior manager for research, evaluation, and communications at the BLC. "If the business units see the development activities as being separate from the work of accomplishing unit objectives, they're not going to follow through with them."

But one of the fundamental insights of adult education, experts say, is that you won't get anywhere if you try to teach people things they're not interested in. The way to resolve this tension between the goals of the individual and those of the organization is to look for the areas of overlap. The BLC's Waypoint site enables managers to develop personalized development plans that do just this. After reading about the competencies needed for handling a particular position or crucible experience, the manager can choose the ones she's most interested in working on and then find recommendations on how to acquire them.

Even so, the manager's motivation "can be very pragmatic," says Babson's Hunt, who is coauthor with James R. Weintraub of *The Coaching Manager: Developing Top Talent in Business* (Sage, 2002). "Some of the things people need to learn in order to be leaders or to rise to a higher-paying position—for example, how to handle conflict—may not be things that they love to do."

3. Remember that companies are dynamic—and so are the leadership skills they require

"It doesn't make much sense to try to define all the competencies of the ideal leader and then map out a rigid development process for acquiring them," says the BLC's Yost. "Markets and technologies change too fast for that to work." Instead, start by identifying the leadership skills that are likely to become more significant in your company in the years ahead. Entrepreneurial thinking skills, for example, are always important, but they're becoming even more so at Boeing in recent years as aircraft sales have declined

and the company has sought to identify more services that it can provide to both the commercial and military markets.

Take a broad-minded view of your company's strategic objectives and what skills are needed to accomplish them. For example, think about the circumstances under which it makes sense to let direct reports pursue interests that are not mainstream now but may well be so later on.


4. Know when to reach out

For all the advantages of pull programs, there are still times when push programs are invaluable. "When a manager is moving from one level to another or across functions, or just after a merger, when an organization is trying to blend two cultures—we find that during such times of transition, it's very important for us to be reaching out to people via push programs," says Mannion-Plunkett.

In addition, the Waypoint Project's research has identified six indicators that a manager needs a training "push" to keep his career on course. They include not seeking out job assignments that push him to the edge of his comfort zone, avoiding high-stakes assignments, not building networks and relationships internally and externally, and focusing on near-term performance goals to the exclusion of learning goals. Boeing's training programs for executives include discussions of how to avoid such potential career derailments—and how to help direct reports avoid them, too.

5. Now more than ever, you need to take responsibility for your own development

Push programs for high-potential managers still constitute the core of most firms' leadership development efforts, but a study of Fortune 200 companies by management professors Jon Briscoe of Northern Illinois University (DeKalb, Illinois) and Brooke Derr of Brigham Young University (Provo, Utah) reveals that today there's a much greater degree of individual awareness and involvement in the development process. "At the lower echelons, for managers up to about age thirty-eight, there's lots more experimentation and self-directed learning opportunities than before," says Derr, coeditor with Sylvie Roussillon and Frank Bournois of *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Leadership Development* (Quorum Books, 2002). But push programs for high potentials, which tend to kick in at around age forty, also have more of a pull element than they used to, he adds: "There's a lot of explicit contracting with the high potentials to make sure that the top leadership track is still something they want."

Fewer people are included in push programs these days, says Derr. To get noticed, aspiring managers have to take advantage of the development opportunities that the company provides. The good news is that the metrics for assessing leadership potential are much more transparent now. Says Derr, "Companies are much more likely to spell out what you need to do in order to make it into the future leaders group." 

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