

DEVELOPING LEADERS FOR REAL

Proven Approaches That Deliver Impact

Developing Leaders for Real – ENDORSEMENTS

“Over the last few years, it has become increasingly clear to most providers, prescribers and consumers of leadership development programs that too often, the impact of these programs is much less significant and durable than the world rightfully expects from them. This stimulating book examines the causes of this situation and proposes a number of excellent and diverse principles and practices that will help improve it. It is an essential read for anyone – academic or practitioner – interested in making leadership development the game changer that the world needs it to be if we are to tackle the world’s problems more effectively.”

Jean-François Manzoni, Professor of Leadership and Organizational Development and President, IMD

“As someone who has worked both in commercial and in development, I have spent most of my career looking at performance and seeking the best ways in which to help others, particularly leaders, realize their full potential. I am delighted to finally find a book that brings to life a collection of thought provoking, ‘real world’ examples of Leadership Development. I was struck by the timeless nature of the underpinning principles and excited by the evidenced and proven practical examples shared, finding myself going back to chapters particularly relevant to me currently. I would highly recommend ‘Developing Leaders for Real’ for any professional involved in Leadership Development who has a curious mind and believes there must be better ways in which we can help leaders be their best self. You’ll find your answers here!”

Richard Brooke, Talent Director, AMEA/APAC, Bacardi

“Ever noticed how your leaders often don’t seem to apply formal learning? Why? Because, ultimately, the learning journey is deeply personal and fraught with complexity. There are thousands of books that purport to tell you how get it right. I finally found one that delivers on the promise: its evidenced, globally relevant, written by people who walk the talk and topped off with a how-to guide. What more can a learning professional ask for?!”

Tania Hector, Global Head of Learning, Nestlé

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

From Harry: To Keek who sustained me throughout the writing of this book.

From Anne: To my husband, Andrew and my daughter, Natasha, with love and gratitude.

From Ian: To Jane, David and Lucy – for being there.

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FOREWORD

I once worked with a distinguished leader of a large organisation. Whenever things went awry (unfortunately, quite often) he tended, like so many leaders, to blame his direct reports. According to him, it was always their fault. Not surprisingly, they had a different version of events. Among other things, they complained that he was moody, indecisive and failed to take them into his confidence.



I, an impartial outsider with no axe to grind, was invited to help the leader work out what he could do to improve relationships. For an agreed period, I met with the leader bi-weekly for a two-hour session. We always started with a review of what had happened since we last met. He would look in his diary and describe various happenings, some that had gone well and, inevitably, some that had not gone well. With the latter, he always insisted that it was because other people had let him down. I would invite him to reflect on whether he could have handled the situation differently, but, despite my best efforts, I always drew a blank. He could not or would not accept that his behaviour might have been a contributory factor. He remained adamant that other people needed to change, not him.

Sadly, in my experience this sort of intransigence is not unusual in senior people. The notion that they, not just the people who work with them, could benefit from some learning and development too often falls on deaf ears. This is why developing leaders is such an intriguing challenge: a challenge greatly eased by the ideas offered in this book.

Leaders (though few will admit it) are lonely people with few, if any, confidants they can trust. They wrestle with a constant stream of uncertainties: how to let go and yet stay in touch, how to know what's really going on in their organisation, how to decide between conflicting priorities, how and what to delegate, how to motivate people, how to stay focussed on long-term strategies when current problems are pressing, how to stay positive on

off-days, how to admit they were wrong/have had a change of mind ... the list is endless. Perhaps the biggest problem is an underlying fear of losing control, especially as every organisation has a built-in propensity to fail and being in control is illusionary! It reminds me of the lonely navy commander who would use the ship's tannoy system to announce from the bridge:

Now hear this,

Now hear this.

This is your captain speaking,

This is your captain speaking.

That is all,

That is all.

Little wonder that leaders either crave certainty, longing to be told The Answer or convince themselves they have seen the light and write boastful books full of homespun hubris.

So, being a leader is fraught with uncertainty and the only lifeline is, I believe, to become an effective learner, using everyday experiences as the raw material. However, most leaders are puzzled by people like me who extol the virtues of experiential learning and even go so far as to recommend that they should be role models for continuous development and create work places where learning is built into the way things are done, actively encouraged and supported. Mistakenly, most leaders believe that learning is something that only happens in formal classrooms or lecture halls or on didactic courses. The idea that everything that happens, nice or nasty, planned or unplanned, provides an endless stream of learning opportunities, waiting to be reflected upon and converted into useful insights and improved actions, is somehow viewed as not 'proper' learning. Or perhaps, deep down, leaders are worried that they might be caught learning, with the implication that they, like all ordinary mortals, are 'work in progress': developing leaders.

This book has some wise and welcome recurring themes. Here are just four:

- Leading is multifaceted and complex.
- Effective leadership is situational, rendering simplistic 'one size fits all' formulas totally inadequate.

- Experiential learning (i.e. ‘real’ learning) is the key to continuous development.
- The most appropriate learning for leaders is self-led, and preferably supported with help from a dispassionate listener.

I have lost count of the number of times I have been approached by organisations inviting me to design a course that would meet a perceived need, usually in my case to improve teamwork or the effectiveness of management meetings. I quickly learnt that there were two big snags with these invitations. Firstly, since I had not been involved in any diagnosis, I was expected to proceed on the assumption it was sound and true. Secondly, in effect I was being invited to collude with the conclusion that a course was the answer. I therefore used to rebel and insist on having direct access so that I could observe the team meetings first hand. Once access was gained, I was not only free to carry out my own diagnosis but, even more importantly, I could kick start the learning process by providing feedback, asking questions and encouraging reflection. Having inveigled my way in, I gambled that the participants would value the process and forget all about the initial request for a course! It mostly worked but what a shame to have to resort to subterfuge to make the point.

None of the contributors to this book would pander to requests for ready-made answers. Instead, in an accessible and evidenced way, they share their carefully considered views about the subtleties and complexities of helping leaders to develop. Since, like it or not, leaders shape organisational cultures and too many of them are toxic, what could be more important?

Dr Peter Honey

October 2021

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This book could not have been completed without the assistance and support of many people, not least our contributing authors from around the world who have so willingly shared their skills and expertise. Neither could we do what we do without the energy and enthusiasm for learning from the many leaders with whom we have worked over the years, nor without the unfailing and invaluable support of our families and friends.

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DEVELOPING LEADERS: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

ANNE GIMSON, HARRY GRAY AND IAN CUNNINGHAM

A group of senior leaders from a global organisation are engaged on a leadership development programme. The leaders only met yesterday and yet they are openly exploring with one another their opportunities, difficulties and vulnerabilities, both business and personal. Over the following 12 months, they continue their learning journey together, finding and implementing solutions to their leadership challenges in an open, curious and action-oriented manner. Fast forward to a few years later, one of those leaders shared the following as part of a reflective evaluation of the long-term impacts of the experience:

I entered the programme as a successful senior leader with 20 years in the supply chain function and this was very much how I 'identified' my professional self. And yet I was not happy. My personal experience of this leadership development approach was very deep – career and to some degree life changing. It gave me the space and challenge I needed to re-frame how I saw myself. It opened up a world of possibility in my mind and gave me the confidence to drive an action plan within my existing organisation that was personally transformational. Five years on I am essentially living the vision I set for myself and this would not have been possible without the programme. I am happier, more fulfilled and excelling in my new direction, having taken on an increased depth and breadth of responsibility twice since my initial transition.

When I reflect, I feel that the ‘magic ingredient’ is the safe peer-to-peer learning that is generated from the approach. It addresses both professional and personal worlds recognising we are all human and this is quite different to what I had experienced before. It encourages deep holistic conversation, support and challenge at a level that generates motivation for change and action that is quite remarkable.
(Senior Leader, Global FMCG Business)

This personal and real account of the positive impact leadership development programmes can have on the lives, self-efficacy and performance of leaders should be commonplace. But it is not. We are not saying that learning interventions should result in every participating leader changing their career focus. What we are saying is that programmes that purport to help leaders to learn to be more effective should be located in the real lives these leaders are living, should be focussed on the real work in which they are engaged and should enable them to further understand how they best learn. Participants should be assisted to take a strategic and whole-person evaluation of who they are as a leader and how they can more effectively enact their role in their real world – in their organisation, with their family and friends and in their place in society at large.

Those of us engaged in this important work are rightly challenged to create interventions that deliver a return on investment measured in hard business results – leaders who will create new products or services, higher profits and larger cost savings. And we are asked to achieve this under increasing time pressures and budgetary constraints. However, recent research has clearly demonstrated that improvements in these external, numbers-based results come from forms of leadership that engage and enable every member of a, preferably diverse, team. For example, research by Korn Ferry concludes that 70% of the climate in which a team operates can be dictated by a leader’s behaviour. In turn, the efficacy of a team’s climate can result in a 30% performance improvement (Korn Ferry Hay Group, 2016). If we look at just one aspect of diversity, gender, McKinsey has identified a 48% performance differential between the most and least diverse companies (Dixon-Fyle, Hunt, Dolan, & Prince, 2020). And yet, according to what our leaders say, all too often we continue to miss the mark in the interventions we put in place to support leaders to create these climates.

Evidence abounds that much of the circa \$50 billion global spend on leadership development fails to deliver results, either for the individual leaders

or the organisations they are leading. From the extensive range of surveys and research over the last few years, examples of this collective failure would include:

- Only 11% of 500 global executives felt that their leadership development efforts achieved desired results in a McKinsey survey in 2017 (Feser, Nielson, & Rennie, 2017).
- The Conference Board Global Leadership Forecast 2021: only 23% of leaders rate their leadership development programmes as ‘high’ quality, with HR rating their bench strength at an all-time low of 11% (Neal, Boatman, & Watt, 2021).
- A global survey by Korn Ferry found 55% of executives rank their leadership development return on investment (ROI) as ‘fair to very poor’ and they would throw out and rework half of their current leadership development approaches if they could (Korn Ferry, 2015).
- Ashridge Business School in the UK surveyed CEOs and senior executives of organisations participating in the UN Global Compact. Only 7% of these senior leaders said that their organisations effectively develop global leaders (Gitsham et al., 2009).
- A 2015 study by the Brandon Hall Group found that 81% of organisations stated they were not very effective at developing their leaders. In the same report, only 18% reported their leaders were ‘very effective’ at meeting key business goals (Loew, 2015).

Adding to this backdrop of rather damning research, we have also seen many fads come and go. There is a constant push for new approaches in leadership development and too often we can be seduced with the latest ‘bright shiny new toy’. For instance, in one recent research report, 80% of all respondents were calling for greater innovation in learning techniques used in programmes (Harvard Business Publishing, 2018). However, many offerings in leadership development are short-lived and based on insubstantial theoretical foundations about how people actually learn. There is always some fashion selling itself as an off-the-shelf package (oven-ready) for all situations.

Too many development programmes are still preoccupied with defining what leaders should learn but ‘content’ is conditioned by dynamic

circumstances and in the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous organisational world, it is rapidly out of date. Research shows that leaders learn little from standardised programmes. The latter are often too full of non-actionable advice. Didactic methods simply don't and can't work. Leaders are always in the middle of things and there isn't a simple formula, set of steps or a recipe to follow.

In developing this book our desire has been to offer a coherent and well-thought through text that has practical value to those working on leadership development in organisations. You may be a CEO or senior leader who wants meaningful assistance for your thinking about the success of your organisation. You may be an HR or leadership development professional who is committed to providing real benefit to leaders.

The editors of this book have spent most or all of their careers in leadership and management development across all sectors; between us we have well over a hundred years' experience in the field. Those who have contributed chapters to the book were chosen for the depth and breadth of their experience from different parts of the globe and the efficacy of their approaches. We came to the view that it would be worth sharing what we have all learned as we are concerned that some of the important long-term, evidenced learning approaches may be being ignored. We are unhappy to see the billions of dollars spent on leadership education and training without seeing a demonstrable improvement in leadership performance across both private and public sector organisations. Well-designed and well-executed leadership development can and does make a difference, and through this book we intend to show you how. We will share with you the approaches and frameworks that work; that truly place the leader in the centre of their own learning and that deliver results to the organisations they lead.

THE NATURE OF LEADERSHIP

The starting point for us in considering leadership development is that we have to begin with establishing the nature of leadership. The great error in much of leadership education is to assume that leadership is just another discipline like finance or marketing. The assumption then follows that leadership can be easily taught in the training room, the lecture theatre or via a case study, but this is not true.

Leadership occurs only in the context of a group, community or organisation. It cannot stand alone. Leaders are not born as such but fill the role by virtue of their place in an organisation. This means that to talk about leadership one must have an understanding of what an organisation is in both formal and informal existences. Organisational relationships, as well as situations, are highly complex and cannot be predicted or assumed without evidence. The important concept is that organisational settings change as much as people and that these changes are rarely recognised. The key to understanding organisations is the ability to reflect on what has happened and then to be able to explain it with some rational and reasonable clarity.

The whole basis of gaining a good understanding of organisations and related aspects such as leadership, culture, administration and so on is through our understanding of how people work together in organisational settings. This is the theory of organisations and leadership development should reflect this. Having a good understanding of people and the variability of personality is critical. Everyone is different and taking as the starting point that people are just cyphers or numbers – or even just genomic manifestations – will be entirely useless. The process of gaining understanding is the process of learning.

As leader developers, the editors of this collection see ourselves essentially as assisting other people's learning. In the context of human behaviour, learning is not being instructed how to do something or remembering what we have been told or applying a matrix to a situation. These may fit other situations but not the dynamics of individual and collective human behaviour in organisations. One learns about leadership through one's own experience and by reflecting on it (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Usually we need help in this, and colleagues can be as useful as external helpers or supposed experts. Reflection can be through a process of mentoring or peer discussion. In fact, conversation or dialogue is often the best mode for learning as it provides the closest means of communicating.

Intrinsic to the functioning of every organisation are the ethical and moral values that individuals, and groups of individuals, exhibit. No organisation whatever its size is free of activity that imbues every deed and every transaction. Organisations are made up of people and are fundamentally an expression of human and personal values. This is also true of organisations based on digital technology because they are still created by human beings and hence inevitably carry human virtues and dispositions. However, the more

technological an organisation is in its format, the more the values of the humans who own it and run it tend to vary when compared with a well-populated company. Examples to consider include mega-businesses like Amazon as well as the corner shop.

All organisations are multilayered on all dimensions. Some of their aspects are hidden and many of them are dysfunctional. Indeed, every company is likely to have dysfunctionality built into the way it works. Not everything that goes on is seen or known by everyone and organisations have cliques and corners that run against their stated grain. Most business education has historically assumed that organisations exist for the general good and are morally inert. The typical ‘primer’ on management assumes that organisations drawn up according to the described model will work in a straightforward way; the common reality that well-intended systems just do not work fully according to intentions is overlooked. The reality is that there are many aberrations and distortions of what happens in organisations in all sectors. Recent cases have been well publicised where top leaders have behaved illegally as well as in unethical ways. Examples abound in banking, motor vehicle manufacturing and the military as well as government and churches. This area – the dark side – is different from the more general ethical matters because it involves abusing the way organisations are intended to work and puts employees as well as customers at risk.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

So, what are the approaches that this book is designed to challenge and debunk? A few examples follow.

The Scientific Approach in Business Schools

At the present time the so-called scientific approaches are dominant partly due to the way many courses are organised around ‘facts’ and ‘procedures’ and the salience of Information Technology. The dominant mode of delivery is instruction, not dialogue and reflection. The Harvard case study approach reinforces this tendency of there being ready answers, but an opposing view

is gaining strength that says prescriptive approaches do not recognise the reality of working within a human organisational context.

Put simply, the business school model suggests that leadership is a complex subject but, if the learner follows the prescriptions, then it is a relatively straightforward process to implement. This educational model is also essentially individualistic. For example, individuals have to pass tests such as exams that supposedly tell the assessor if this individual can go out into the world and lead wherever they have to carry out the act of leading.

Universalist Approaches

A typical feature of both educational and training approaches tends to be one of promoting universalist models. By that we mean approaches to leadership which have universal validity no matter what the organisation or context. [Charan, Drotter, and Noel \(2001\)](#) provided one challenge to this by pointing out that leadership varies at different levels. They and others have shown that leading a small team is different from a strategic leadership role in a large organisation. It is also apparent that leadership in a large-scale multinational is often quite different from the kind of leadership that occurs in small, highly localised businesses. [Harrison \(1995\)](#) pointed out that organisational cultures vary enormously. A start-up business is likely to have what he called a 'power' culture where the owner operates as the sole leader. In a 'role' or 'bureaucracy' culture on the other hand, even at the top level the leader is much more constrained by the structures and arrangements of the organisation.

There seems to be little basis on which to assume that developing leaders for these different cultures will be the same.

Ethnocentric Approaches

Most of the leadership theory that comes from the United States tends to assume that if other cultures are not the same as the United States, then they ought to be. The American model of a business organisation is promulgated by most American trainers and educators as the ideal model. For example,

one of us was involved with developments in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was very apparent that American trainers were out of their depth in trying to deal with the after-effects of communist regimes. And it is very clear that the activities of these trainers had virtually no effect in improving the leadership within organisations in Central and Eastern Europe post-1989.

Another dimension is of course that leadership occurs within communities that are not traditional organisations. Hunter gatherer bands have existed for more than a hundred thousand years and are clearly led, but in quite a different way from the business organisation. If, however, we put that seemingly extreme example on one side, the work of Hofstede and others over time has shown that national cultures vary enormously. Transposing leadership models from one context to another without any cognisance of the cultural basis of organisational life is fraught with danger and by and large foolish.

As we will show in the chapters in this book, it is feasible to have people from different cultures learning from and with each other and maybe taking some lessons back into their own culture. However, the cultural basis of leadership activity has to be acknowledged and worked within. It is not that we are saying that there is nothing people can learn from what has been the traditional American business model. And clearly the impact of technology is producing a more universal language which we can't ignore. But the way that technology is used in different cultures is still variable.

The Great Man, and Now Great Woman, Approach

This approach is the basis of many books by people who are supposedly great leaders. They claim to be able to pass on their wisdom to others, who can then absorb this into their own personal style and their own organisation's way of working. It used to be very much a masculine activity, but as women have rightly been gaining leadership positions, their texts are also increasingly available. This approach is also sometimes used as an add-on to business school activity where great leaders will be invited to pass on their wisdom to students. Often this approach plays to the ability of particular leaders to sell themselves and sometimes it appears that they are simply on a blatant ego trip.