Challenges for Leadership Development Planning?

The challenge for any new Leadership Development Programme (LDP) will be to both mobilise existing talent and also develop new leaders. This requires that any LDP must help prepare individuals to play roles beyond their normal experience or frame of reference. Therefore, one measure of the success of any LDP is to what degree it helps transform personal behaviour and change attitudes within the sector.

Individuals in leadership positions have to become more self-aware and change their own behaviour and attitudes if genuine change is to take place. In other words leaders have to change themselves, not just try to change the organisations. As Nelson Mandela famously commented:-

"You can never change society if you have not changed yourself".

Another way of seeing it is summed up by Ghandi who said:-

"You must be the change you wish to see in the World".

The crucial question is how to ensure such personal change occurs? This is another challenge to be faced in designing and running leadership development programmes. Personal change and transformation is dependent on greater self-awareness and willingness to engage in new ways of working or thinking. This is the stuff of emotional intelligence and transformational thinking. Raising awareness and promoting personal change is therefore a crucial component of any successful LDPs (Bolden & Gosling, 2006).

There must be a shift away from formal, structured, one-off training courses to more process-based, experiential programmes with an emphasis on personal development and self-directed learning. This will mean a greater appreciation that more holistic, self-learning programmes spread over time are better able to develop personal confidence and new leadership competencies. There is now much greater recognition of the importance of personal change, individual empowerment, experiential learning, and face to face support.

Bennis and Linkage Inc (1999) surveyed 350 companies to ask about best practice in leadership development. Leaders report most learning from practical components such as 360-degree feedback, action learning and exposure to senior colleagues. Since these programmes are delivered to adults, then the conclusion must be that good practice in adult learning should drive methodology.

This means being:-

- action-oriented;

- hands-on with learning; and

- giving time to reflect and absorb new information.

Experience suggests that leadership insight can be best developed through some process that builds on participants' own experience, and provides feedback through mentoring and coaching sessions, appraisals, learning sets, or team building exercises (James, 2005). Kouzes and Posner (1987, p283) suggested three major

categories of opportunities for learning to lead: trial and error (experience); other people (role models); and education and formal training.

Leadership development therefore is not about a single event, it is about a process that incorporates a range of activities including:

- reading and self-directed learning

- formal, targeted, courses and workshops

- interactive workshops

- coaching and mentoring

- self-assessment questionnaires

- diagnostic tests

- 360 degree feedback

- psychometric testing (such as Myers Briggs or 16PF)

- journaling and narrative description

- photographs and video dairying

- communities of practice and networking

- cases and simulation exercises

- transformative events, tests and experiences

- specialist workshops and seminars

- learning sets and peer group support

- secondments, attachments, and observation exercises

- leader shadowing.

This mix of inputs and approaches will not only provide participants with specific skills and experiential learning, but also insights and feedback that help promote greater self-awareness and self-confidence in their role as a leader. Of the activities identified it is apparent that coaching and mentoring plays an increasingly important role in leadership development - to the extent that it is commonly expected that most individuals in leadership positions should have the support of some kind of coach or mentor.

In an Accenture study of leaders under the age of 35 years and over the age of 70, which included social activists and elected politicians, it was unanimously agreed that they had learned more about leading from real work and life experiences than from leadership development courses and MBA programmes. These leaders had been taught technical skills but not how to 'extract wisdom from experience'

(Thomas & Cleese, 2005). One of the key findings of the study is that LDPs should not be so much focused on how to learn about leadership, rather, on how to learn from experience and gain insight into how individuals learn.

> "Helping people understand their own best learning style is one of the keys to preparing leaders; the other is helping them to understand what kind of lenses they use as observers."

This implies using personality tests and learning styles inventories as instruments or tools as part of the "preparing to learn phase" of any development programme. This suggests going further with phases for leadership development which might include developing and preserving phases. The developing phase is fairly traditional but the preserving aspect might grow to include knowledge management tactics including building advice networks and communities of practice within which experience can be honed, personalised and shared for mutual benefit.

John Hailey, writing in 2006, suggests that:-

> "one should not underestimate the role of "followers" (colleagues, subordinates, or team members) in developing effective leaders. Such "followers" play a crucial role in reinforcing the power of individual leaders, influencing their behaviour, and helping construct internal systems and structures that act to enhance the status of those they see playing a leadership role (Howell & Shamir, 2005). The success of most leaders is determined in part by the resources, energy, expertise and knowledge that such "followers" can muster.

> Appreciation of the influential role of such "followers" is critical in informing our understanding of the socialisation process that shapes the leadership style adopted, and suggests that leadership is a collective task based on shared decision-making and delegated authority. Leadership is therefore a social process in which everyone is engaged. As such leadership development should also be seen as an investment in building human capital and developing the collective capacity of staff and volunteers to interact and work together in meaningful ways." [1]

Current thinking suggests that leadership development should be seen as being an emergent, experiential and bespoke process. LDPs should be seen as providing a safe space to explore new issues, receive feedback and reflect on personal performance and behaviour. Because of the emphasis on experiential learning, many successful programmes incorporate a planned programme of secondments, attachments and job rotation. As such they should not be seen in the same light as traditional training courses, but more a mix of methodologies that help generate self-awareness, build confidence, analyse options and explore ways of implementing alternative solutions.

Ready (2003), writing for MIT Sloan Management Review, offered three reasons why leadership development programmes fail: lack of top management ownership; choosing off-the-shelf product over evolving processes; and focusing measurement

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[1] http://www.centreforcharityeffectiveness.org/Newsletter_Sept06/Sept06hailey.htm: Last accessed 9 Sep 06

on inputs and immediate outputs rather than outcomes and impact. He warns against these pitfalls which he say will result in organisations 'getting burnt' and failing to invest in leadership.

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