Leadership development in a global chemical manufacturer

AQ:au Marianne Tracy

L eadership development is used as a common talent management strategy to achieve sustainable organizational success. Recognizing this potential source of competitive advantage, organizations invest a significant amount of time and money in leadership development. Their executives believe that good leadership makes a difference in a company's overall performance, and they demand accountability from leadership development programs (Van Velsor, 1998).

This case study summarizes the context, strategies used, and evaluation undertaken of a program for front-line leaders in some of the key BRIC locations of the world's second largest global chemical manufacturer.

Years of expansion and increases in staffing levels in parts of the organization's BRIC-based manufacturing division highlighted a critical need to develop both the technical capabilities and the knowledge, skills, and leadership behaviors of first-level people leaders. The business needed this group to improve in their existing roles and to develop for future roles in order to create a robust leadership pipeline. An internal global team of leadership development experts, stationed in the five regions, sought to understand the specific business needs and create solutions to address them. They worked together for six months to assess, design, and develop a leadership curriculum to be delivered in Russia, India, China, Korea, and Thailand, aiming to achieve the following business goals:

- faster on-boarding of new people leaders;
- a pool of energized, highly motivated, well-networked leaders;
- reduced transition time into new role;
- increased effectiveness in critical competencies;
- firm grounding in the company's core values;
- increased performance and effectiveness as a leader; and
- increased levels of employee engagement, satisfaction and retention.

Marianne Tracy is Change Management Manager at the Bath Consultancy Group, Bath, UK.

Transfer of learning as the bedrock of the design

A key part of the research supporting the design of the program was to study strategies that facilitate the transfer of learning back to the job. Three sets of factors were identified, and each element within these factors was based on previously published and accepted academic research:

1. *Individual*: The concept from psychology research that an individual's characteristics influence transfer outcomes (Sackett *et al.*, 1998), grouped into elements of cognitive ability, self-efficacy, motivation, personality, perceived utility, or value and locus of control.

2. *Interventional*: These factors focus on the design and delivery of the learning interventions and include needs analysis, learning goals, content relevance (Bates, 2003), instructional strategies, self-management strategies of both goals and action plans and technological support.

3. *Environmental*: Factors related to the context of the work, including strategic links, transfer climate, superior/peer support (Clark, 2002) and opportunity to perform. It was here that the team focused their survey research to measure Starting out as they understood the significance from the research.

The People Leader Development Series

With a solid foundation in transfer of learning research, the development program was called the "People Leader Development Series" (PLDS). The PLDS implementation was managed regionally with a cross-functional team of business executives, human resources, and learning and development professionals. Content was based around existing sets of competencies within the organization and structured with three distinct first-line people leader groups in mind:

- Stepping up into a people leader's role for the first time – to help individual contributors decide if they had the interest and aptitude to become a people leader.

- Starting out in a people leader's role – to help those new to the job, or in the job for less than 12 months, to understand their role and use effective tools to develop their leadership skills.

- Sharpening up designed for people leaders who had been in the role for two years or more to hone individual's interaction skills. Later, these groups came together in action learning sets to address business improvement projects.

This case study focuses on the program and evaluation for those in the second group.

"Starting-out" interventions

Before the starting-out workshops in global locations, during a period of approximately two weeks, there was a series of on boarding events that shaped the expectations for attendees and provided important frameworks. These included discussions around roles and responsibilities and competency-based online courses on topics such as working through and managing people, organizing resources, cultivating your team, networking with colleagues, and evolving as a manager of people and processes.

During the three-day starting-out workshops, taught by internal regional executives to provide company context, attendees participated in a series of classroom-based sessions. These focused on the critical competencies required to become successful leaders in the company:

- understanding the business core values;

- corporate and site policies;

- coaching for performance; and

- building and motivating teams.

After the workshops concluded, participants conducted follow-up sessions with their managers, and new performance plans were initiated. Managers were encouraged to follow

up with the delegates within two weeks of their return to work to reinforce learning, provide coaching, and revise development plans. Coaching and mentoring continued, peer learning networks were formed, and optional Web-based training was provided to review and reinforce what was taught in the classroom sessions, as this was supported by the regional HR resources. Delegates were encouraged to integrate their learning by initiating their development plans, enrolling their direct reports to give them feedback, and sharing what they were working on with their teams.

Evaluation

Immediate feedback on conclusion of the workshops was positive, and only one minor change was needed – to increase the amount of informal networking or socialization time.

Six months after program implementation, data were collected via an online survey based on the critical competencies that were the main focus of the development program. The survey was administered to participants and their managers, and a Likert rating scale (1 = change for the worse to 5 = significant positive change) was used to assess the change in behavior or performance. Managers of participants were interviewed over the phone to collect further qualitative data.

Managers reported a noticeable positive change in all competency areas for over half the participants. There was a significant positive change for one-quarter of the participants and a slight positive change for the remaining quarter. The managers also reported that three-quarters of participants said that they were looking for opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge, and managers confirmed they would support this.

Managers said that their participants reported the in-classroom time as the most beneficial element and where they had learned the most. All managers reported that the PDLS had created improved performance in their participants, a quarter rating the improvement as extremely effective and three-quarters rating it as very effective.

All of the attendees reported that they had discussed their development plans with their current manager and that they felt supported in their growth and development. Following the program, all participants had asked for challenging work assignments and a mentor to continue their learning.

The most important outcome for all of the managers and attendees was the development of the peer network.

It was recommended that the program continue with one new emphasis – to further increase the post-program support from participants' managers.

Recommendations

Finally, on the basis of the development, implementation, and evaluation of this program, the following top six tips are offered:

1. Allow for regional variations in the program implementation. Regional HR played an important role with feedback and development planning with people leaders, along with managers and assigned mentors.

2. Involve regional executives in program facilitation and teaching: Designing in the inclusion of more senior business leaders enabled manager's stories and experiences created rich context for participants.

3. Include peer-to-peer learning and networking opportunities in any program. There was still much to decipher and reinforce post-program, and the networks provided much needed support.

4. Ensure line managers are involved and committed from the outset. The ongoing involvement of managers helped the participants to grow into the company's new expectations of them and their roles. This reinforcement was a critical aspect to embed their newly found skill sets.

5. For a global business, fund leadership development centrally. Funds for the initial programs for two years came from the global leadership budget. The support from the corporate center was vital as leadership capability was a burning platform for the global success of the business.

6. Use external expertise where appropriate. The company worked with external partners to design the PLDS. A strong emphasis was placed on those who provided competency-based education and skills assessments and where there was also a global reach.

References

Bates, R.A. (2003), *Managers as Transfer Agents: Improving Learning Transfer in Organizations*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco.

Clark, N. (2002), "Job/work environment factors influencing training effectiveness within a human service agency: some indicative support for Baldwin and Fords' transfer climate construct", *International Journal of Training and Development*, Vol. 6 No. 3, pp. 146-162.

Sackett, P.R., Gruys, M.L. and Ellingson, J.E. (1998), "Ability-personality interactions when predicting job performance", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 83 No. 4, pp. 545-556.

Van Velsor, E. (1998), "Assessing the impact of development experiences", in McCauley, C.D., Moxley, R.S. and Van Velsor, E. (Eds), *The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, pp. 262-288.

Corresponding author

Marianne Tracy can be contacted at: mariannetracy100@gmail.com

AUTHOR QUERIES

AUTHOR PLEASE ANSWER ALL QUERIES

AQau— Please confirm the given-names and surnames are identified properly by the colours.
■=Given-Name, ■= Surname
The colours are for proofing purposes only. The colours will not appear online or in print.

AQ1— Please check whether you mean "All were designed with assessments, classroom training, and Web-enabled training for reinforcement, and with a global peer development network" for the sentence "All were designed with assessments. . ." and revise/reject as applicable.