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Buyer Beware: Who Should Go to Leadership Training?

Imagine if you will, needing to learn how to fly a plane. You sign up at a reputable flying school, complete the ground-training portion, and take a number of “hops” with an instructor until he or she deems you ready to solo. You solo for the first time and fly three more hops on your own. One week later you are given the responsibility of flying a 747 into Heathrow airport on a Friday afternoon at 5:00PM. Sound like a good idea? I didn’t think so.

Try this. You are asked to take over as the head coach of a professional football team. You decide at the first team meeting that each member of the team will be provided the best instruction possible on his position from a distinguished group of “Hall of Famers,” who played that position throughout the years. Since this is your strategy and the players will be receiving the best instruction possible, you decide to dispense with team practices, the only time the team will play together is at the big game on Sunday. Sound feasible to you? I didn’t think so either. Yet this is exactly how we train leaders--unrealistically and individualistically.

Generally speaking there are three target audiences for leadership development training depending on which group of potential participants are in focus. They include executive leadership, middle managers and supervisor leadership development training, all based on position in a hierarchical organization. The most interesting part of this approach is that for the most part, the triad never meets, that is, all the trainings are usually conducted separately, i.e., individualistically.

Too often, executive leaders are noticeably absent from middle manager and supervisor training failing to realize the symbolic impact of their attendance and integration with their skilled associates. Involvement says a lot about a leader. And as far as middle manager and supervisors attending executive training; you’re kidding right? Think back to the football example above, it is as if the quarterback is the only one that knows the play. Problem is, that when the ball is snapped, everyone moves!

Traditionally, leadership development training has been an exercise of the abstract with little or no connection to the challenges an organization faces, concentrating on things such as traits, skills and behaviors enhancement and/or analysis of their shortcomings a la 360-degree surveys i.e., unrealistically. The fact is that leadership can be anything anyone says it is, until you have to go do something difficult and complex with it. But if leadership development doesn’t address the difficult and complex issues at hand then leadership can be anything you want. I mean it really doesn’t matter, does it?

In a perfect world, decision-making is perfect but in an imperfect world, decision-making is hard. I wonder at times, what level of nirvanic transcendental knowledge and perfectionist

behavior must be achieved before a person can be a leader or do leadership. More than that, would we recognize this level of perfection if we saw it?

To put it simply, this approach remains the reinforcement of industrial leadership models where human development equals leadership development and the leader is the sole active-member of any leadership effort. As James MacGregor Burns put it in his epic work, *Leadership* (1978), “the leadership approach tends often unconsciously to be elitist, it projects heroic figures against the background of drab, powerless masses.” As I have said previously, the Internet is not a very drab and powerless place.

In the 21st century, leadership is undergoing its own transformation from a descriptive noun to a verb of actionable change. Where manipulative strategies that thrive on inconsistency and simply confuse people are being replaced by sorely needed values such as safety, trust, consistency, honesty and integrity. Why? Because values provide the bed rock foundation where leadership emerges as what people do together in a world where the application of diverse talent and collaborative action afford the greatest hope (perhaps the only hope) of dealing with myriad complex, rapidly changing issues and challenges that press down on people and organizations each and every day.

Where diversity of ideas, backgrounds, culture, education and experience become common bonds as people are truly celebrated for what each brings to the table. In 21st century leadership dynamics the question is not how should you behave but what can you contribute to the common mission and vision?

In the 21st century, leadership development training must inextricably be connected to the complex issues and problems that permeate our daily lives and demand solutions. Coaching, OJT, action learning, and realistic non-computer based simulations are experientially based methods that embody a “learn by doing” philosophy clearly demonstrating what happens when the rubber truly meets the road.

“True learning is experience: everything else is information,” said Einstein. Armed with this philosophy, learning becomes the leverage point for change and experience a transformational event. What do you think? I am anxious to know!

Note: This article is part three of a five part series entitled: Buyer Beware: The Five Questions You Should Ask Before Buying Leadership Development Services.

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