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Going Nowhere Fast? Simulations and the Future of Leadership Development

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Leadership development is going nowhere fast even though seventy-five (75) percent of the executives surveyed identified improving or leveraging leadership talent as a top business priority. These are the findings of Development Dimensions International (DDI) 2008/2009 Global Leadership Forecast where 1493 HR professionals and 12,208 international leaders from 76 countries were interviewed. The two most cited reasons for why leaders fail were leadership and interpersonal skills 19% and strategic visionary skills 19%.

Additionally, according to the survey most organizations fail to offer their leaders enough variety in opportunities to learn and that the most effective methods were those embedded in their on-the-job activities (DDI, 2009). The realization seems to be setting in that leadership can be anything anyone says it is, until you have to go do something difficult and complex with it. Moreover, it appears that what prospective leaders truly want is an opportunity to connect their development with the real issues and challenges facing their organization.

Leadership: The Magic Elixir

During the past 100 years or so there have been a lot of people who have weighed in with a description, notion, paradigm, definition and no definition at all of what leadership is. Consider that in 1985, Warren Bennis and Bert Nanus cited over 300 definitions of leadership in their research (Crawford, 1998). In 1993 Dr. Joseph Rost surveyed over 587 books and articles to find no less than 221 definitions of leadership (Rost, 1991). But why is leadership receiving all this activity and attention? Simply stated, leadership is one of the most powerful words in our English lexicon.

Leadership scholar John Gardner says it best, "Leadership is such a gripping subject that once it is given center stage it draws attention away from everything else." (Gardner, 1990, p. 3). It is a word that connotes greatness and wisdom and what we as mere humans should accede to. Yet for all the attention leadership attracts it has remained much like a magic elixir sold from the back of a horse drawn wagon. The power of its effects have been extolled and invoked as the cure for all our ills, even while its promoters gather around to sniff and taste the contents of the bottle never agreeing as to what it contains. Traditionally, the words leader and leadership have been more than synonymous; they are one in the same. After all, it is the leader who gives us leadership. And therein lies the problem, a paradox of sorts. As James MacGregor Burns has said, "If we know too much about our leaders, we know far too little about leadership." (Burns, 1978, p. 1).



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From Hierarchy to Super Networkers: The Changing Nature of Leadership

Leadership has been the subject of an untold number of books, articles, dissertations, and speeches that continue today to be a fulfillment of Burns' candid words. But a realization is setting in that a great deal of what we have described as leadership in industrial times is incongruent with the needs and requirements of a world whose instantaneous and accessible widespread communication keeps it rapidly changing, facing complexity at every turn and subject to information overload the likes of which were unimaginable just a few short years ago.

In this environment leadership and learning at every level of the organization are more than essential. They are the very essence of survival and achievement. In 1990 Peter Senge said, "It is no longer sufficient to have one person learning for the organization, a Ford, a Sloan, or a Watson. It's just not possible any longer to 'figure it out' from the top, and have everyone else following orders from the 'grand strategist.' The organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at *all* levels in an organization." (Senge, 1990, p. 4)

Twenty years later, Senge's prophetic words are coming true with or without the support of the grand organization. Social networking and the Internet culture are facilitating the emergence of the super-networkers whose ability to create are needed as leadership networks punch through the old notions of the hierarchical leadership models. Super-networkers are those who understand that the key to success is not vested in the abilities of one hierarchical leader, but in the capability and capacity of a network of talent that can focus their talents into a seamless transforming effort. The power of the super-networkers is not vested in position but in their ability to create and sustain influence relationships built on trust and formed under the aegis of a "fishnet" organizational structure that anticipates and responds to complex emerging issues and rapid change. As Bill George writes,

"Their approach to leadership is entirely different . . . They don't care about position, power or status or organizational hierarchy, or even having followers. Instead, they are superb networkers who find collaborators to create opportunities and businesses. They are on line 24/7 always networking; always in touch . . . The emerging leaders are knowledge workers who typically know more than their bosses. They collaborate with people who have skills they don't, growing up with diversity as the norm, they understand the benefits of a diverse people working together to solve the world's most pressing problems." (George, 2007).

These super-networkers are steeped in the reality of the challenges they face and work to make substantive change through the establishment of a leadership network. They are the realization of 21st Century leadership models that focus on melding a multitude of diverse talent and individual ability into collaborative, interdependent, and unified action capable of addressing the most complex and intractable issues and challenges. As 21st Century leaders they work to



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create environments built on trust and continuous learning where participants in these “leadership-dynamics” are fully engaged, derive meaning, and take ownership and responsibility for the results.

Leadership: An Integral View

The Integral leadership perspective uses three lenses to peer onto the leadership landscape. The three lenses include: the leader—an embodied individual who performs a role in a system, leading—the activities that leaders use in their role, and leadership—the actual practice of those activities within a specific real context that includes culture, systems, processes and technologies with a stated goal of bringing about significant or transforming change. The preponderance of work done in most leadership development programs has concentrated on the leaders and leading. The theme continues---if we make better leaders and teach them what other leaders seem to be doing---we will get better leadership. This is tantamount to teaching a medical student about medicine and surgery without ever letting them operate on a patient in a real operating room. This approach is why leadership development has been, for the most part, an exercise of the abstract.

More importantly this approach feeds a flawed concept of leadership development referred to as “Me first!” “Me first” refers to leadership development whose mantra is steeped in the notion that a person has to be able to lead themselves first before they lead others. Of course what is not mentioned in this mainstream of approaches is, what level of nirvana or transcendental level of being and knowledge must a person be at in order to do leadership?

Have we tired of trying to create some perfect person or leader from a human development perspective that meets every single known trait or behavioral profile to be able to do leadership? More importantly, if we were able to achieve such a noble feat, would we as mere humans recognize him or her? From this author’s perspective, the issue with leadership is not about creating perfect people but providing access for more people to take an active role in an organization or community and to simply do leadership.

What is even more interesting is that all those who might read this article understand that experience is the best teacher and it has been our experiences that have brought about significant change in us. As Margaret Wheatley writes, “we only know ourselves in relation to others”. Using an integral leadership view it might make more sense to give people an opportunity to experience first a context where the practice of leadership is demanded allowing the experience to speak to the prospective leader.

Doing leadership in a real context can inform an individual’s imagination, current mental models, perspectives on shared vision, team learning and systems thinking i.e. the need for leadership and the facets of a learning organization to withstand the tide of change. Doing leadership in a context can teach us the most important lesson, that we ourselves can lead and



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do leadership all we have to do is commit to making a difference. As the remainder of this article explains, simulations provide this “experience first” rather than a “me first” engagement a place where learning by doing provides a way to know ourselves.

Leadership Development: Using Simulations to Cross the Great Divide

Between the hierarchical perspective and the more network centric 21st Century leadership models lies a great divide of sorts where people in organizations find themselves in need of making substantive change, thinking strategically, developing greater effectiveness, enhancing their emotional intelligence competencies, and other people skills all within the context of growing complexity in the world in which they live. With the possible exception of action learning, leadership development has been a drive to develop individual attributes in the hopes that if we make better individual leaders, we get better leadership.

This strategy is flawed, because at the root of its practice leadership development has been devoted to training leaders individualistically and unrealistically. Its as if a person is the coach of a football team and elects to dispense with team practices for a practice where each member of the team practices independently with Hall of Famers at each position, only playing as a team on Sunday at the big game. Or learning to fly an airplane by soloing in a single engine Cessna one week, only to be given the responsibility to fly a 747 into Heathrow Airport on Friday afternoon at 5 o'clock the next week. This leadership development methodology has been a futile endeavor, because the connection to reality, to what challenges that person and his or her organization everyday, has not been a routine part of the equation—a key finding in the DDI report.

If developing leadership capacity in organizations capable of dealing with the complexity of an ever changing world is on the minds of over seventy five percent of the senior executives and if those future leaders are expressing dismay over the current leadership development strategies in a time of economic and financial stress when effective leadership is needed more than ever, the question is where do we go from here? Is it possible for organizations to institute robust leadership development programs that compress the time it takes to develop leadership capacity, enhance individual emotional intelligence competencies and create greater effectiveness in the face of complex challenges, all with an eye towards doing it better, faster and perhaps even cheaper in the long run? The answer from this author's perspective is a resounding yes. Simulations that do not depend on computer generated graphics and interfaces but on the interpersonal dynamic of the people in the room offer a tried and true method that can and has accelerated the leadership learning process and compressed the time it takes to ramp up leadership capacity in organizations.



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People-Powered Simulations Develop the Power of People

Everything we consider important, vital or dangerous in our daily lives we simulate. Whether training pilots, running a nuclear power plant, training emergency response teams, or in this case developing leadership talent and capacity. Simulations provide a way in which human beings can experiment or play with processes or outcomes in hopes of creating effective approaches to the real or potential dilemmas they face. Simulations have been around for decades. Yet today if you say the word simulation what immediately comes to mind are pictures of computers, incredibly real graphics, joysticks and avatar characters that create a mystical presence in another realm. Yet computers have, for all intensive purposes, hijacked the notion of simulations. The mere mention of the word conjures up DVD or online e-based methods that use graphically rich user interfaces as an allure to bring efficient distribution of training to many, any time and any place.

As one who greatly appreciates and embraces the power of what technology offers, a word of caution—efficiency is not effectiveness. There are still things that computers cannot do. In our postindustrial world computers and technology have greatly overshadowed the benefits and uses of people-powered, interpersonal or table top simulations where the emphasis is not on the graphics representations but on the interpersonal dynamic of the people gathered in the room.

Simulations: Process and Content

What do we mean by the term simulation? Simulations are problem-based exercises possessing two criteria. “First, a specific issue, problem or policy is posed that precipitates a variety of actions. Second, roles are defined that interact with the proposed problem or issue in particular ways”. In other words, "simulation involves the experience of functioning in a bona fide environment and encountering the consequence of one’s actions as one makes decisions in that role . . . second, the participants address the issues and problems seriously and conscientiously” (Gredler, 1992, p. 14).

There are two basic types of simulations that emphasize a particular learning, content and process. It is important to note that the line between process and content is often blurred because each simulation contains elements of both. However, in most cases the type of simulation used skews the primary learning either towards learning the process or learning specific content. For the most part content simulations are hosted on computers and explore the “what” of actions taken. That is to say, if an individual makes a decision, implements that decision by pressing a button, *what* will happen?

On the other hand, process simulations examine the how and why of actions taken. In other words, the focus of the simulation considers the outcome as it pertains to the congruity of the interpersonal processes and motives used, the *how and why*, a particular decision was reached.



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Process simulations usually precede content simulations and are more interpersonal by nature. The reason is that human beings are a *why* driven species. We like to know why we are doing something before we actually engage the task and do it. Knowing the why helps us make sense of our actions, no matter how small or large they might be.

Immersive Learning: The Power of the Narrative

Process simulations use realistic content in the form of a scenario or story to drive the participants involvement in the simulation. In fact a realistic scenario or narrative story is the critical factor in involving participants in the action. Stories or narratives form the basis of culture, whether that is one's personal culture, a country's culture or an organization's culture because without stories there would be no culture. Stories carry meaning. Without meaning people would live purposeless lives. In simulations the story is referred to as the scenario and it provides to the simulation participants the opportunity to become fully involved in an interactive story-making exercise within the context of the simulation.

It is the realism and richness of the scenario plot that grips the participant with real meaning. It captivates their imagination and holds their attention to the tasks at hand, while it quietly reinforces the meaning of each individual's actions to the whole of the problem presented. It is the inherent sensibility of the plot that allows the participants to suspend their current known reality during the time they are in simulation play. While in this state of immersive learning, the participants are fully engaged, emotionally committed and subtly reengineering what they will do and how they will engage the world in the future. Why? Because all participants are imbibing the experience into their short and long term memories as realistic episodes of action. The result is that decision-making skills are affected and altered. New ways of action become the new ways of reacting in difficult situations.

Providing such experience is something that computers still cannot do, because computers are unable to provide the requisite environment for the development of human processes. In speaking about crisis-management type simulations, Gredler provides the reasoning for this.

“Crisis management simulations in which the participants interact exclusively with a computer are not recommended. The problem is, of course, maintaining reality of function for the participants. Computers are not the root cause of crisis situations (unless, of course, they crash). Thus, the possible disadvantages of a computer-delivered exercise for crisis-management simulations are (a) the lack of interaction among decision-makers; (b) the false sense that time is not a variable; and (c) the possibility that the exercise will be perceived as a game” (Gredler, 1992, p. 81).

People-powered or interpersonally based process simulations provide an intensive cognitive learning experience that reach deep into the human psyche to effect change in habits and mental models. To that end, they remove doubt that leadership is about position, personal



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traits, some state of charismatic being or behavioral manipulation and replace it with the idea that leadership is about doing, collaboration, partnership, and working together to exert a confluence of action by creating a force for real change.

The Basic Building Blocks of a Leadership Development Simulation: The Big Idea

The leadership development simulation discussed in the remainder of this article is known as LeadSimm and was developed by the author. While other similar types of simulations may exist, the author will restrict his discussion to this particular method. LeadSimm has been under development since 1994 and has been used successfully for the past 13 years in a number of environments and on different intractable challenges.

While powerful tools, leadership development simulations are best used as an adjunct to other types of leadership development methods such as action learning, theoretical presentations, and embedded on the job activities. For the most part they are acceleration and time compression tools that provide a robust practice field upon which potential leaders or team partners can test ideas and theories all within the safe confines on an experimental laboratory. Leadership development simulations can achieve so much in such a short period of time, because they speed up, validate and demonstrate leadership learning.

People-powered leadership development simulations run on two basic fuels, empathy and a reality that simulates the ambiguity of decision-making. Empathy in the simulation is achieved when participants are given a job to do that is not in their traditional field. This perspective taking, a key element of emotional intelligence competencies as described by Goleman, is not found in any other type of simulation method. It allows that person to walk in the other person's shoes giving them the opportunity to see the world from another perspective. It is this simple yet powerful experience that in the end fosters a greater understanding and need to develop collaboration and partnership within the framework of doing leadership.

Reality provides a tipping point for personal belief and involvement in simulation play. Realism and believability are essential to the drama created in the scenario and the participants directly relate these to the level of immersion. The more realistic, the more immersed the participants become in the scenario. They suspend their belief that the scenario is just a game and is not relevant and view the scenario as their current reality. This type of simulation is not about pressing buttons to see what happens. Instead, it is the exploration, involvement, facilitation and engagement of human interaction within the development and ultimate influence of the power of a leadership dynamic to bring about transforming change.

Oftentimes, reality is more about ambiguity and what is known or unknown. Ambiguity can be a powerful motivator or de-motivator depending on how the participants respond. When the answers to questions are known, life becomes much easier. There is no confusion. In a leadership development simulation, ambiguity is the glue that holds the participants to the



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struggle of finding an optimum solution as each episode is revealed during simulation play. It is within the struggle that the participants choose a course of action. They can do nothing and wait until things become clear. They can form an opinion or action plan without the consultation of others. Or they can collaborate and partner with other entities in an effort to develop an approach that yields a true leadership dynamic that brings the assorted talents of individuals to bear within the context of the scenario. Of course, the last choice is the optimum. Routinely choosing any of the other two mentioned or others not mentioned will result in a less than optimum outcome. And that, more times than not, IS reality.

The Three Phases of a Leadership Development Simulation

The brevity of this article does not permit a definitive explanation of each of the phases of developing and implementing a leadership development simulation. Instead, it is an overview of the different activities required to create, play and critique the simulation efforts.

Phase One: Researching, Designing, Developing and Writing the Scenario

The goal of scenario development is to work to create a realistic scenario where the organization's issues, challenges, concerns, trends and future considerations can be discovered. This is best done in collaboration with the hosting organization. As researchers and designers, we must dedicate our efforts to finding out what is truly going on in the organization. This is important for establishing the credibility and realism of the basic scenario. Designing the scenario requires that the information discovered during the researching process is woven into a believable storyline.

It is important to remember that the goal here is to separate the real problems from the symptoms. The scenario must be designed around the real problem with the symptoms used as triggers. While it is important for the scenario to be realistic, it must also be playable by the participants. A liberal use of something called "simulator's license", allows the designer to use specific information discovered to construct the simulation to achieve the desired results. For example, if the real issue is that there is little cross talk among different departments when a new product or service is being introduced, then the scenario should be designed to use different player entities representing those different departments, i.e., marketing, operations, distribution, executive and production. A resultant or symptom of the lack of cross talk would be used as an episode driver to see how the decision makers react and how they discover what needs to be done.

Developing and writing the scenario uses a crawl, walk, run philosophy that allows participants who have never been involved in a leadership development simulation to learn the ropes about simulation play. Introducing too much complexity too soon might result in the participants opting out of playing and the scenario.



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Setting Up, Playing and Facilitating The Simulation

This is where the action is. In recent years, scenario development has been used by a number of organizations to develop strategies for dealing with future events that might come to pass. For this author, this is much like watching a baseball game from the stands as opposed to trying to hit a 95-mile an hour fastball. So much more can be learned by a direct interaction with the context and conditions as they exist on the field of play.

In setting up a simulation for play, it is important that enough entities and people are present in the room to create a realistic decisional environment. Usually the best simulations are composed of about 30 to 45 people, with a minimum of 5 or 6 and a maximum of 9 specific decision maker groups. For example, in a recent police simulation, the entities chosen were, Police and Fire, Mayor and City Manager, News Media, Community Leaders and Community Based Organizations, Federal Authorities, School Authorities and Emergency Management.

Depending on the organization's industry and issues e.g. finance, education, software development, hardware development, any group of decisional entities can be simulated. Once this part of the set up is completed, the next part is to introduce the participants to the basic ground rules of simulation play. Some of the rules are:

- Be more concerned with learning than winning,
- Deal with the issues as you would and not how you think your superiors would,
- Speak to anyone, about anything at any time and
- The facilitator will fill in the technical details when appropriate.

Rules are designed to create a framework of creativity that allows the participants the maximum amount of freedom to choose alternate courses of action.

The simulation is played using a basic background sheet that sets the scene for the scenario. It is played in two modes online and offline. During online play participants are doing their jobs and playing their roles. Offline the simulation is stopped for teachable moments or to insure that everyone is on the same page.

Episodes are revealed at appropriate times to build and compound the drama of the unfolding story. To that end, facilitating the simulation is one of the most important skills for consultants to develop. It is important for the simulation be run with a substantial amount of freedom, but at the same time it is important that it not veer off into a realm of irrelevance or absurdity. If this occurs the facilitator must institute a "course correction" such as jump time to reset the scenario to a more realistic path. The facilitator must assure that the simulation progresses in a reasonable way without trying to influence the outcome. After all it is a discovery process fueled by attempting experiments in designing, defining and implementing creative approaches to complex challenges.



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Critiquing and Extrapolating the Lessons Learned

Once the simulation is stopped and the facilitator feels that most of the learning has occurred it is time to revisit the action of the simulation. Usually, this requires a each entity reporting to the whole group on such issues as goals, difficulties encountered, information garnered, status and quality of communication with other entities, how they might describe leadership in view of the events, and the most significant thing they learned as a result of simulation play. Once this information is gathered, the next part is extrapolation. During the part of the concluding events, the participants are asked to make a list of things they wish to change the very next day when they return to work and to outline the first few steps they intend to take to do that. This is where the leadership lessons learned from the simulation can be put to work.

Conclusion

People-powered simulation learning is a powerful tool for developing, accelerating and compressing the time it takes to develop leadership capacity in almost any organization. It connects leadership development with reality and provides a rich and robust practice field where people can try new ideas and learn the essentials of forming leadership dynamics to make substantive change. On this practice field, future leaders, and their collaborators and partners, can work to solve current dilemmas or peer into the future to prepare for new ones. On this practice field, participants can rewrite their stories for success as they engage in interactive story making experiences that replace old models with new ones. This is a result of their own personal encounter with the power of leadership as a collaborative relationship and force for change. On this practice field, there are no perfect people, only people who make the one decision a leader must make, to make a difference—and simulation learning will teach them how to achieve that highest of aspirations.

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