

Sharpening Talent-Building Skills at the Top

In today's leaner organizations, C-suite leaders have to put learning at the top of their agendas - and a recent study shows senior leaders are less skilled at developing talent than others in the organization. To successfully build a "culture of learning," experts say, it has to start at the top and trickle down.

By David Shadovitz

If you want to develop talent in your organization, don't look to your top leaders for help.

In a recent study by PDI Ninth House, business leaders identified talent development as one of the most important competencies for leaders today, but it also revealed that the higher people climbed in the organization, the less skilled they were at developing talent.

The 8,000 business leaders surveyed said the competency for building talent was most important for senior-level leaders, followed by business-unit leaders, mid-level leaders and first-line leaders.

But when the respondents were asked to assess the skill levels of leaders for that particular competency, the reverse was true: first-line leaders ranked the highest, followed by mid-level leaders, business-unit leaders and senior leaders.

Experts say they aren't surprised by the findings, though most agree the survey serves as an important reminder of the need to reinforce the value of learning, especially at the senior level.

"The job of developing talent gets more complex [and therefore harder to do] the higher up you go in the organization," says Cori Hill, director of high potential leadership development solutions for PDI Ninth House in Minneapolis.

That complexity starts to become particularly apparent at the mid-level, she says, as the coaching competency shifts from being a coach-to-employee interaction into a coach-to-group interaction.

"That's when you start to see a disconnect between the level of importance [when it comes to developing people] and the lack of clarity [in how to do it]," she says.

To address this issue, Hill says, "companies need to engage leaders and create a culture where development is valued alongside of performance."

She cites as a role model former General Electric CEO Jack Welch, who during his tenure at GE repeatedly emphasized the need to be a "talent developer" and talked about how much time he personally devoted to doing it.

Few companies, however, have a "Jack Welch" at the helm.

Training leaders is frequently easier said than done, says Joel Garfinkle, a San Francisco-based executive coach and author of *Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level*.

While most leaders recognize the importance of talent development, "the truth is most leaders are simply too busy to do it," he says.

So what steps should HR leaders take to overcome that inertia?

"One thing they can do is create an in-house training session that's being taught by senior executives to managers, instead of having an outside trainer come in," Garfinkle says.

By doing this, he says, companies are sending a message that "leaders developing leaders is a priority for the organization. It's not just lip service."

Garfinkle believes it's also crucial for companies to institutionalize their leadership-development initiatives.

"You need to combine day-to-day learning with in-house training in a systematic way so leaders understand that they're going to be expected to take the information they're being taught and teach it to the people below them," he says.

Leaders need to know, he adds, that they're going to be held accountable for developing their talent.

Organizations can no longer afford excuses from their leaders for not developing talent, says Frank Fritsch, managing director of Tier1 Performance Solutions, a Cincinnati-based consultancy.

"I have a much different point of view of things than I did years ago," says the former senior vice president of HR at Select Medical Corp. "The older I get, the more open-minded I've become about the people around me," he says. "I've come to see that there's a vast amount of talent in our organizations that can be developed.

"Sure, it sometimes may be hard to find great people for jobs," he adds. "But that doesn't mean we can't grow the people around us."

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