

Bob Gunn, Editor

And Now a Word from Our Sponsors

BY ROBERT W. GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

“The way we identify executives and leaders is critical to our survival,” the VP of Learning at a manufacturer of business equipment observed recently. “Leadership development is the cornerstone in the way we move forward.”

Sounds like an endorsement for motherhood and apple pie. But it’s important to move beyond lip service and make leadership development a priority throughout the organization. That begins at the top. More and more companies are emphasizing senior sponsorship of leadership development programs.

Two of our colleagues—Alexander Caillet and Ken Manning—recently outlined how sponsorship provides the strength to successfully roll out a global leadership program. They define sponsorship as one or more individuals who possess:

- A true belief in the importance and relevance of the program,
- An unwavering commitment to seeing it through, and
- The willingness to constantly promote the program as a top-notch, mandatory priority for the organization.

Sponsorship needs to come from

the highest level of the organization. Where possible, get your senior executives involved—not just advising, but also mixing it up in the class. At one of the *Fortune* 50 companies we recently interviewed, for example, the CEO spends a full week each year actively teaching in the company’s leadership school for 35 hand-selected key performers. Meanwhile, at a leading food manufacturer, 40% of executives have gotten involved in a “core business essentials” program for all professionals. It’s easy to enroll these instructors since the CEO did it first.

It’s also easy to point to coincidental benefits to senior executives who participate as “visiting faculty” in leadership development programs. “These are actually mini-focus groups,” the executive in

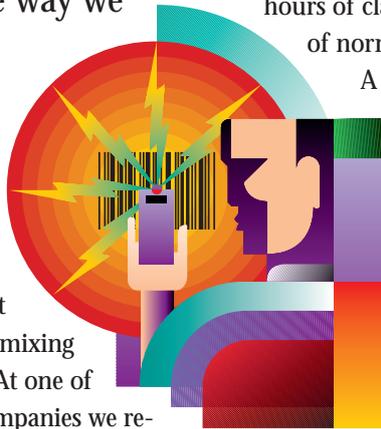
charge of learning at the food manufacturer notes. “Senior leaders are too often isolated; they’re told what people think they *want* to be told. They can learn more in one to two hours of class than in three months of normal feedback.”

A technology services and products company sees an additional benefit when senior leaders participate: They get to know the organization’s future leaders. “When we engage in succession planning, we aren’t just looking

at names on pieces of paper,” the vice president who oversees the leadership development program says. “The senior leaders are thinking and talking about people they *know*.”

Clearly, sponsorship helps align corporate strategy in many ways. And it needs to be strategically pursued. Caillet and Manning provide an action plan:

- Generate a list of possible sponsors based on their potential to believe in and champion the program *plus* their reputation and track records as true leaders within the organization.



- Prioritize your list. Decide which person to approach first, and define the sequence of individuals to speak with.

- Design the initial meetings with the first sponsorship candidates. Use their reactions/feedback to fine-tune your approach to the rest of the list.

- Define approaches to keep the sponsors involved—including active participation in the program.

- Ensure the means to provide the return on investment desired by each sponsor.

A Sponsorship Committee, composed of various advocates throughout your network, will provide even more strength than an individual. Meeting on a regular basis, the Sponsorship Committee can share feedback on progress, review sponsorship actions, assess the viability of the program, and confirm commitment to moving forward. With such a committee, you will maintain a greater sense of the overall strength and effectiveness of the program's sponsorship. Ultimately this will ensure greater alignment, engagement, and mutual accountability.

Once sponsors have been enrolled, advise Caillet and Manning, their first duty is to ensure that the environment is ready for the desired future state. "Leadership development means challenging a group of individuals to think and act differently and to produce results beyond what they were producing before," they observe. "The sponsors must ensure that the other executives and leaders within the organization understand this and that they are supportive of the effort. If these executives ultimately do not accept the newly minted leaders—are unwilling to 'allow them' to play their new roles—the new leaders may become cynical and resigned."

Follow-up steps of sponsorship include making sure the right things are emphasized. At a large Midwest-based manufacturing company, for example, one or two senior executives are drafted to be "content sponsors" for each development topic. They don't necessarily do training, but each is expected to make sure the right content is taught in the course under his wing. The staff and consultants charged with designing the programs ask these sponsors to "make sure we get the messages right."

Here's how sponsorship works for a global leadership program at a major European bank: The lead sponsors for leadership development are the CEO and the executive vice president for Human Resources. The Executive Committee of the bank was involved in approving the design of the program. In addition, one member of the Executive Committee is assigned as the sponsor for each "class" (group of 35) going through the program; he/she plays a critical role in actual delivery and championing key messages. Debriefs among the CEO, the individual "class" sponsors, and the Executive VP/HR occur periodically.

The key factor to gaining the vital support that we're describing is delivering a return on investment that is meaningful to the sponsors. In other words, an effective leadership program must be designed to clearly demonstrate value to the business. Caillet and Manning outline several key items:

- Focus on the resolution of business issues versus the acquisition of leadership competencies. One way to do that is to have participants work through real work challenges instead of staging simulations or studying analogies in a classroom setting. "The key point is simple: If your program forms leaders who help the organization solve real and significant busi-

ness issues, you are surely successful. If your program helps a participant and his/her 360° reports check off a list of competencies acquired, you may be successful."

- The business issues addressed must be measurable. Therefore, it is important for you to be clear about the business needs that the program addresses and thoughtful about the metrics you will use to measure their fulfillment.

- Measurement of results is accomplished by several parties, and the metrics are best defined with direct involvement by the sponsors. "During the definition process, it is important for you to vet the metrics you establish with the existing leadership of the organization. They will ensure that you are representing their needs accurately. It is then important for you to design and roll out a feedback/results monitoring system to assess the success of the program. Again, the sponsorship should be involved in their process throughout the life cycle of the program."

Leadership development takes time. Programs that last one or two days are rarely effective in generating sustained learning. Developing the leaders needed to move an organization to the next level takes six months to a year—with periodic tune-ups thereafter.

Who can make that happen without the commitment of senior leaders with a clear eye on the future and a steady resolve to make a difference? ■

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