



A New Approach to Leadership Development



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As we drafted this white paper, the 2018-19 NCAA Men's and Women's Basketball Tournaments were thundering down to their nail-biting conclusions. At least on the men's side, only one of the Final Four was a No. 1 seeded team. The 'traditional' powerhouses were all beaten earlier.

What are a few of the key lessons for Leadership embedded in this annual race to the top of collegiate basketball? It's no coincidence that great roundball coaches such as UCLA's John Wooden, Duke's Mike Krzyzewski, Tennessee Lady Volunteer's Pat Summitt, and others have penned books on business leadership.

The basketball court is, indeed, an environment in which both teams and individuals-within-a-team are asked to excel at the highest levels. Strategic and tactical leadership skills are as critical as the very best ball-handling, shot-making, communication, and innovation skills. In the course of even a single game everything must cohere as exactly as is humanly possible. When you consider this array of talent and hard work must be brought to a season-long series of games, to excel above and beyond all others is nothing short of magic. This is a sport that may provide lessons for business leaders who now find themselves in a fast-paced, ever-changing, environment of increased complexity and ambiguity – one that has been called a VUCA environment.

"We live in a VUCA environment: Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity"



Taken from language used by the military to describe "the fog of war," VUCA¹ is an applicable description for the basketball court as well as for the business environment of the 21st century.


VOLATILITY: Change is continually happening and at a larger scale. Upsize, downsize, competitors change overnight.

UNCERTAINTY: Due to such rapid and constant change, it has become more difficult to predict the future. New regulations and entrants to the environment—some never expected.

COMPLEXITY: With such diverse and global impacts on an organization, drivers of change become more difficult to identify and analyze. What skills and leadership will be needed in this new environment and for how long before another shift is needed?

AMBIGUITY: Continual change, inability to forecast, and lack of clarity lead to the "fog," or ambiguity, of the business environment. "Shots" seem to come from out of nowhere, and the source changes before you can even develop a plan.

These drivers are impacting the ways in which we need to approach the development of future leaders.



"The pessimist complains about the wind, the optimist expects it to change, the realist adjusts the sails."

— William Arthur Ward

"Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future."

— John F. Kennedy

Changing how we approach the development of future leaders

In the midst of this world of change, we as Leadership Development professionals should ride this wave and adjust our sails.

Leadership Development functions should be reconsidered.

Who "owns" Leadership Development (L&D) within the organization? Rather than serving as the distributor of information, L&D professionals are now required to be "facilitators" of the learning and development process. This means we need to help our learners develop continual learning skills – identify what learning is needed, and how and where to find it. This may mean on-demand learning sources, peer-to-peer

mentoring, cross-functional project assignments, and/or use of emerging social/virtual technology.

Not only do we need to support learner efforts, we also need to help learners learn how to learn, to identify valid sources of information, and to constantly gain new skills and knowledge and become self-learners. Internet search engines, YouTube, and Facebook often incorrectly serve as primary sources of information. L&D is not a deliver-once-and-done function; rather we should constantly provide access to quality learning sources and experiences.

Leadership Development instructors may be delivering programs for the wrong roles.

Many of the roles required of future leaders may not even exist today. This means future leaders need the agility and problem-solving skills to identify new requirements as they emerge and to ask for support. L&D staff must stay in tune with the needs of the organization and adjust materials. “The future of work, shifts in technology, and new ways of working are leading the way for critical learning and talent transformation,” says Tamar Elkeles in *Today’s Learning Agenda Exposed*, Chief Learning Officer.

Who are leaders – potential and current? The old system of “identify high-potentials and grow over time” will not apply in this rapid-fire environment. Organizations should constantly scout for those who surface as a leader—of a skill, attitude, team, or other initiative. “Leaders” are not just those who have positional authority, rather, they may be those who have the vision and drive within an organization to lead.

Successful programs may need more than one leader on a team – sharing the responsibility among those with skill sets critical to success. As on the basketball court, those teams with shared leadership are often more able to survive the changing competition and the stress of the drive. Superstar leaders can take down the team with the flick of an eye or the twist of a knee. If that strong leader is out – what is your organization’s plan for ongoing team leadership? Well-balanced teams are able to pass the baton of leadership as needed.



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Rethink the audience for leadership development – look beyond traditional roles, look for demonstrated leadership.

Scan for emerging “leadership”, change the lens through which you consider “leadership.”

Envision a new future; look at competitive sports, video gaming. New generation leaders have often honed their skills for survival in the sports and in the video gaming world. What can we as L&D professionals adapt for today’s leadership development?

Leadership Development programs should be developed to accommodate a continual roll-over of participants.

As the economy improves, employees are seeking new opportunities. Retention of staff and the knowledge and skills they represent are no longer guaranteed. What and how we provide L&D support will need to offer easy entry points for new staff and ensure knowledge of exiting staff is captured and shared.

Team members may come and go – change roles, change locations, change employers.

Leadership Development programs need to encompass the emotional/cognitive skills of learners, as well as the organizational/management skills.

Learners will be asked to stretch as never before as they are set off in the turbulent seas of the VUCA environment. Understanding how these environmental aspects will affect you and others, and how to adapt to maintain productivity and connection are critical. These skills provide the mental preparedness necessary to deal with whatever comes your way. This “cognitive readiness” includes metacognition, sense-making, intuition, attentional control, adaptability, emotional control, and advanced communication skills.²

“Watch your thoughts for they become words, watch your words for they become actions, watch your actions for they become habits, watch your habits for they become your character, watch your character for it becomes your destiny.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson



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How developed are your learners in these critical areas of readiness? Have they developed in an atmosphere of “helicopter parenting” where management and leaders have done the decision making, undervaluing the need for critical thinking and emotional awareness?

Allow learners to fail, to learn by experiencing the impacts of their decisions; then coach them through the redirection.

This quote has been attributed to many people over the years, but its essence remains true. At the core to our ultimate success lies the way in which we think and feel about our current situation.



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Leadership development is a function for any contributor in an organization – internal and external. If the individual is a team member, provide ways to coach and mentor all members.

When an organization depends on subcontractors, rethink ways to ensure skills and attitude fit team requirements.

Options may include a “Boot Camp” upon onboarding, buddy up with an existing member, requiring the hiring agency to meet initial onboarding requirements.

Leadership Development may need to provide support to key contractors as well as employees.

As organizations utilize subcontractors to transition changes in the business, L&D should consider the impact to their role as providers of operational consistency and culture. 43% of U.S. workers are currently independent contractors, with that number expected to climb in the next five years to over 50%.³ The need for sharing the organization’s culture and values will grow as companies increasingly bring in support from outside the organization.



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Adapt to meet the needs of the virtual, unseen learner. Utilize many of the tools in our daily information environment – podcasts, apps, e-modules, simulation games.

Check for learner application distantly by partnering with learner's management for observation and feedback. Develop managers as coaches.

Find ways to provide immediate feedback in absentia – self-correcting modules, distributed coaches.

Leadership Development may not have face-to-face access to all learners.

According to a recent New York Times article, 43% of U.S. employees spend time working from home.³ Program and development support programs will need to encompass a virtual component and can no longer depend on having employees come together in one location.

Leadership Development is no longer a program or a one-time series.

As leadership demands come and go, employees will be required to continually step up to take a new leadership role. In this volatile and ambiguous environment, employees may not be able to plan for leadership development, therefore, L&D professionals will be charged with developing leaders “on-demand.”

This approach will push L&D to overcome age-old concepts such as that of the sequential, phased-in leadership growth program of new, middle, then senior management. Instead learners may need to drop in at any level and quickly.

A vision for the new L&D should be to build “muscle memory.” It is this muscle memory that enables the body to take over and guide an individual to successful execution in the midst of chaos and change. Just as in sports, the best way to ensure new skills become ingrained is to practice, practice, and practice more. Far too often in an organization, L&D is a once a year or less series of class sessions.

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Embed practice and reinforcement into the organization's culture. L&D must partner with management to build the necessary systems and skills to allow continuous feedback and opportunities for challenge.

"No Way" becomes "Why Not" – Keep an open mind to trying new methods. Maybe even as in an old Seinfeld episode – Do the opposite of what you think.

Use the Lateral thinking concepts of Edward De Bono*. Rather than thinking through problems as sequential or even parallel, look for off-shoots or related ideas that can be developed.

Plan for multiple options, including the "No Way" and be prepared to shift – as any adept basketball forward or guard.

Consider a layered L&D program, not sequential. Rather than a series of classes, each session has contained within it layers of development appropriate for any learner.

Allow learners to jump in as needed and for refresher sessions.

Incorporate learners as teachers. The best way to really learn is to prepare well enough to teach someone else.

Successful organizations will be those that are continually providing day-to-day opportunities for job growth to a varied audience through a variety of methods. This will also drive the emerging need for continual performance management to ensure staff are receiving timely and effective guidance. This frequent "Feed-forward Coaching" is performance coaching with a focus on future needs as well as on learning from past experiences. L&D professionals will need to partner with the Performance Management process of the organization in order to monitor and provide ongoing developmental support for staff.

Just as in the competitive sports arena, within this VUCA business environment, employees need to become leaders who can adapt to changes and grow comfortable with ambiguity. Awareness of self and confidence in one's own abilities will provide the foundation for these skills. L&D professionals can aid in this development by ensuring Leadership programs address these needs.

1 "The Shifting Trends on Leadership," TD.org, Bonnie Hagemann, October 2016

2 "State of Independence in America," MBO Partners, 2017

3 "Remote Workers Work from Home," New York Times, 2017

* "Lateral Thinking, Creativity Step by Step," Edward De Bono

A New Approach to Leadership Development, Author Sandie Bateman, MBA, CPLP

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