



Leadership By Osmosis

How Organizations Are Setting Leaders Up to Fail

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Recently, at the wrap up session of a 9-month leadership program we facilitated, a participant remarked that he grew up working for his father's company and had always believed leaders were supposed to learn by osmosis. Until the program, he did not realize that there were actual skills to be developed and used, that could make his job easier, despite being in a key senior leadership role himself.

This was because no training was ever given to him and people were just expected to figure things out as they went along once promoted to a leadership role. This organizational mindset and approach to *leadership by osmosis* is simply setting leaders up to fail and causing organizations to bear the significant costs of ineffective, unskilled leadership.

We know that there are many organizations, traditional and entrepreneurial, that invest in leadership development for their people. They understand that by doing so, the leadership of their organization will continue to strengthen and secure their place in the market, as well as ensure the continuity of the business longer-term. For these organizations, building leadership benchstrength is considered a key strategic priority as is recognizing and developing high performers.

While there are those companies that recognize leaders need to be developed and systems need to be in place to support high performance leadership, there are just as many who don't. In fact, for every organization that develops their



It's just magical thinking to believe leaders will figure out on their own how to be effective without providing training, experiences and development support.

leaders from a strategic perspective, or when the need is so great that they have no choice, there are just as many, if not more, who still don't invest in the development of leadership capabilities and performance.

Interestingly, these same people who disavow the need for leadership development get upset when their next generation of leaders fail to perform to their expectations. They complain about the gap despite their unwillingness to invest in any type of leadership or management development programs for themselves, as well as both current and future leaders.

One highly seasoned CEO client who is struggling with underperforming executives and an underperforming organization believes that these key leaders just “need more time” in their roles to “get it”. He is not alone in his beliefs that leadership happens by osmosis.

A Ridiculous Concept

CEOs and other senior leaders have a bad habit of assuming it is the employee's responsibility to figure things out once they are promoted into a leadership role. While it seems a ridiculous concept, many senior leaders still act like a

leader's knowledge can simply be transferred to others without the benefit of verbal and written communication, or any type of planned training process to develop a new leaders' skills. It also ignores the reality that many leaders have developed their own bad habits, in which case mimicking your boss will only serve to perpetuate ineffective leadership practices.

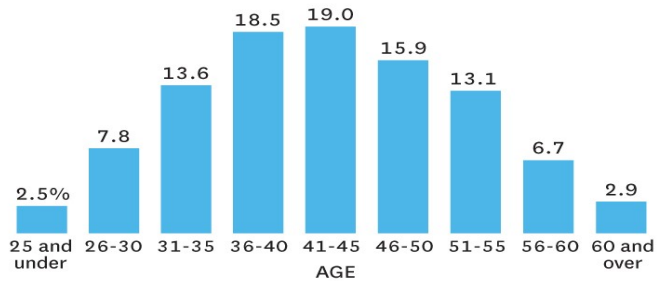
Holding this belief and taking this approach simply makes it easy for the CEO or senior leader. They never really have to step out of their comfort zone when they expect people to just figure it out on their own. This self-protective approach is generally the result of these leaders not having been trained themselves as leaders, nor developing the skills needed to create and train the next generation of leaders in their organizations. Unfortunately, this approach doesn't work for leaders who end up having to struggle to understand what is expected of them or how to navigate the complexities of leading.

No Leadership Credentials Required

Leadership, like parenting, is one of the few professions that requires little to no training or experience prior to being placed in or promoted into a leadership role. The fact is that most leaders have minimal, if any, training on how to be an effective leader before being promoted. Often, in our experience, it seems that the higher you go in an organization, the less leadership training people get when the opposite should in fact be true as leaders need to develop new capabilities with each progression. The result of this approach is that without training, leaders struggle to understand what is expected of them and so they keep doing what they did as a manager.

WHEN DO MANAGERS FIRST GET LEADERSHIP TRAINING?

On average, at age 42—about 10 years after they began supervising people.



SOURCE ZENGER/FOLKMAN TRAINING DATABASE

HBR.ORG

Think about what this lack of training and credentials would mean in another profession. For example, if you were going to be a carpenter, you would train, apprentice with a master carpenter and work years before becoming one yourself. If you were going to be a pilot, you would spend hours completing in-class-simulation, practicing with an instructor to reach greater levels of competence and banking 1500 hours before being considered qualified to fly a plane carrying passengers.

So why, if it makes sense in other professions that someone has to have both training and experience to do the job prior to being hired, is it optional or not required at all when it comes to leadership roles?

Setting Leaders Up to Fail

Research tells a pretty dismal story of how organizations are setting leaders up to fail with their leadership by osmosis approach to development. In a survey conducted by Wakefield Research, of 500 middle managers in organizations with 500 or more employees, **only 50% of those surveyed felt their leadership teams were doing a good or great job and 23% described the performance as poor or very poor.**

Even when organizations decide to invest in the development of their leaders, they typically wait

until these leaders have been in the role for many years before giving them the training they need. In an analysis of 17,000 worldwide leaders participating in training programs at Zenger/Folkman, the average participant age was 42, and more than half were between 36 and 49 while less than 10% were under 30.

Interestingly, the results also indicated that employees typically become a supervisor around age 30 and remain in supervisory or manager level roles for, on average, 9 years. When you do the math, this means they aren't getting the training they needed throughout their 30's and are managing people untrained for over a decade. Isn't this alarming! Yet employees are expected to follow these leaders despite them not really knowing how to lead.

What Employees Say...

If these statistics are not surprising enough, look at how this translates into employees' experiences what they have to say about the effectiveness of their leaders. According to a nationwide survey released by Aon Hewitt, only 12 percent of respondents said their leaders are extremely effective at meeting business goals. That's an astounding 88% that are missing the boat. What's worse is that only 7% believe their leaders are extremely effective at retaining talent. And here we are blaming millennials for not staying when it's actually a deficit of leadership skill that's causing the departures.

Leaders Are Developed, Not Born

Why are employees reporting such low scores for their leaders? We think its due to a lack of early and ongoing leadership training, and a failure to

understand that leadership development does not happen by osmosis. This is supported by a study from CareerBuilder that found most U.S. companies are not training their people before moving them into leadership roles. In fact, 58% of managers surveyed said they hadn't received any training until they had been managing people for years.

A 2016 survey of 500 managers from micro-learning platform Grovo indicated that 98% of managers feel they would benefit from training to deal effectively with "important issues such as professional development, conflict resolution, employee turnover, time management and project management." Further, 44% felt unprepared for their role as a result of not being trained and 87% wished they'd had more training before becoming a manager. These stats are in direct contrast to the discussions we have with clients who are quick to make statements that their leaders don't want the training, don't need it, or can't make the time for it.

Our leadership program participant who we highlighted at the start of this article said it best: "I was surprised at the skills I learned about that I was not even aware of, how much easier it makes leading and how much more confidence I have as a leader as a result of becoming more conscious about and skilled at leading."

The facts are clear: leaders and organizations wait far, far too long to start the process of building leadership skills. Given we know that leaders are developed and not born, why do we refuse to proactively and continuously develop our leaders? Why are we willing to set them up to fail and then bear the cost of low leadership performance on our organizations?

Closing the Leadership Gap

During the past 20 years, we have conducted numerous leadership development programs with senior leaders across a wide spectrum of industries. Less than 5% of participants had any formal training and an even smaller percentage of leaders made an effort on their own to develop their skills. This lack of development always results in a tangible leadership gap, especially as the organization grows and matures.

Given the lack of training for leadership roles, you'd think that its easy to one day just show up and lead. However, we know that is not the case. Ineffective leadership habits are created by practicing without training. Being taught and having the opportunity to practice with a manager, peers, a strong coach or mentor creates effective leadership habits that will last throughout the career and be passed down to next generation leaders.

Instead of letting new managers take a trial-and-error approach that potentially leads to bad habits, organizations need to see leadership development as a key organizational strategy and prioritize the investment in approaches that drive sustainable leadership practices. This includes providing the



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opportunity to learn skills, practice, gain experience and be coached and mentored to develop effective leadership habits prior to progressing into a leadership role or before being promoted to the next level of the leadership hierarchy.

Senior Leaders Must Develop Too

Senior leaders must get out of the way of next gen leaders getting training and experience and also need to be prepared to develop themselves. Leadership development initiatives are doomed to fail without senior leadership buy in and participation. We have seen this time and again. When a senior leader doesn't know how to mentor, feels threatened or offended by the new things his direct report is suggesting ("Why don't we have an agenda and a chairperson for our meetings, so they don't go off the rails.") and shuts it down with a devaluing comment, it can undo even the best leadership training.

Want to learn more?

Watch for the next article in the series or register for our complimentary webinar — [Breaking Bad Leadership Habits](#) — where we will build on the information from this article as well as share specific examples of bad leadership habits from our work with clients and the approaches used to shift leaders to lead with authority.

Click below to register for the webinar or to learn more about permissive leadership.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Do your leaders feel powerless?

Our **LEADING WITH AUTHORITY** program is specifically designed to transition leaders from permissive behaviours that get in the way of organizational success to leading assertively and with authority by building their confidence and their skills. Contact us for more details on bringing this program in-house.

ABOUT CALIBER

Caliber Leadership Systems is a Toronto-based consulting firm working with global clients striving to achieve their full potential. We specialize in helping clients build the infrastructure—systems, processes, structures, behaviour and leadership practices—necessary to prepare for and master the next level of organizational growth and development.

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