

# Questions and Answers About Leadership Development

By

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Bob Mason is a speaker, consultant, author, and founder of RLM Planning and Leadership. He started the company after 30 years of leadership experience which taught him what does and doesn't work and how to modify leadership techniques to each situation. He has led organizations of a few people and many hundreds of people and has worked with many types of groups including government and non-profit.

Through his years of experience, Bob has developed a unique strategic planning model which is the subject of his book, *Planning to Excel: Strategic Planning that Works*. He's used the model extensively to focus leaders and organizations to obtain maximum efficiency. He has successfully trained hundreds of leaders, emphasizing the importance of a comprehensive leadership development program and post-training follow-up to help emerging leaders effectively apply the skills and concepts they were taught. He passionately believes that without a plan, leaders don't know where to lead and without effective leaders the best plan will fail. Bob's latest book is *Balancing the Generations: A Leader's Guide to the Complex, Multi-Generational, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Workplace*. Contact Bob at [rlm@planleadexcel.com](mailto:rlm@planleadexcel.com).

## **Why leadership development**

My sister was telling me about the bad management practices at her workplace and I was amazed at the inept leadership she was experiencing. She was an IT contractor and had experienced this in multiple companies; it seemed to be a common trait in her industry.

At that time I had progressed in my military career to a level that brought me in contact with companies outside the military. I started to see what my sister had been talking about as, with a few exceptions, many of those companies seemed to have the same problem. My wife was also having similar experiences in her extensive work with non-profit organizations and retail companies.

As I neared the end of my 30 year military career, I gave serious thought to all these less than stellar examples of leadership, wondering why I found them so appalling. What was different about them, and my own experience, that caused me to be so surprised by what I was seeing and experiencing?

As I reflected on this difference, I came to realize that the key was a comprehensive leadership development program. In the military I had experienced a well developed program; a program that was not available in many companies and organizations. That was the difference!

That revelation has led me to devote myself to transforming leadership and developing great leaders.

## **Why is leadership development so important?**

It's obvious that many companies don't understand the importance of good leadership. One reason is that the "experts" often preach that leadership is what happens at the executive or "C-suite" levels. That's unfortunate. While it's certainly true that executives are leaders, that doesn't mean their more junior subordinates are not leaders as well. Consider this. Your company's shift supervisors and team leaders, those lower- and mid-level managers, have more day-to-day, face-to-face contact with the workers who get the job done than anyone in the C-suite. They are the ones who keep your employees engaged and producing value for the company.

Except they often don't.

It isn't that they're trying to sabotage the company; they just haven't learned the fundamentals of leading people. They only know what they experienced from untrained leaders in their past and, worse; they'll probably pass those bad practices on to future leaders.

Leadership, even at the lowest level, has a significant impact on your company. While executive level leadership sets the pace and determines the company's goals, it is leadership at the lower and mid levels that really makes things happen. It isn't an exaggeration to say that the future success, and sometimes the very existence, of your company is tied to the leadership skill of those lower level supervisors and managers. If managers and supervisors are not skilled in the art of leading people, the result is increased expenses caused by lower productivity and efficiency, higher employee turnover, and more employee and labor issues. I often hear comments like, "We just don't have the time or money," but leadership development is an investment, not an expense. Not training leaders is an expense and actually threatens your ability to survive and grow.

### **What should a leadership development program include?**

The purpose of a leadership development program is to train leaders in the art and science of leading people. But it must go deeper than that. The program must become an integrated component of the company's structure – a part of its culture. This point cannot be overemphasized.

The components of your leadership development program must be accepted as part of the company's culture. When moving to a supervisor or manager position, everyone should expect, and look forward to, your leadership development program.

Of course, the program involves education in the form of workshops and seminars to give leaders the information they need to succeed. But, it must go further than that, much further, because leadership is one of those subjects that has to be experienced to be fully developed -- in other words, on-the-job training. That's why it's so important for the development program to be an integrated part of the organization. There is no seminar, workshop, or classroom experience that can teach someone everything they need to know to be a good leader. Applying the theory and principles is the difficult part.

As I mentioned before, leaders learn from other leaders. Therefore a leadership development program must involve leaders at all levels of the company.

### **What are the components of an effective leadership development program?**

An effective leadership development program is a combination of three components:

1. Selecting future leaders,
2. Educating and training current leaders at all levels,
3. Coaching and mentoring.

While for convenience I've numbered them, all three components have equal weight and must occur simultaneously and continually. Leadership development is an integrated program and will not succeed if the company's leadership concentrates on only one component at the expense of the others.

Let's take a look at each component in some detail.

The first is selecting new leaders. Organizations must constantly be on the lookout for the next potential leader. It's usually best to have a list of traits that the company feels are the best indicators of success as future leaders. Use this list as a guide, but remember that you're dealing with individuals. A standardized approach, if not tempered with the observers own experience and knowledge will result in overlooking some excellent prospects and probably selecting some who will not be effective leaders.

Current leaders select new leaders and this is the first indication of how integrated the leadership development process must be. Helping leaders recognize leadership traits in others and learning to select good candidates is a critical part of the program. In fact, it's an excellent project for mid-level and senior leader training.

Just recognizing potential leadership talent isn't enough though. Leaders must also be able to evaluate those potential new leaders to determine if they really are suitable for future leadership roles. Again, while it's a good idea to have a set criteria for that evaluation, individual leaders must develop their own feel for who will be a good leader.

The next component of an effective leadership development program is training leaders. This is the most involved component of the program and includes a combination of education and training. While it's important to understand the theory and concepts that underlie good leadership (education), managers become effective leaders only when they are able to actually apply those concepts and deal with real issues. Frankly, that also means sometimes falling short and learning from mistakes. Leadership is not an exact science and no one will ever have all the answers. That's why the training part must involve more senior leaders who act as mentors, and who can provide guidance. More on mentors a little later.

This component of the program can be further divided into three sections: first-level leaders, mid-level leaders, and senior leaders.

First-level leaders are those who are new to a leadership position and usually have no leadership training. They're responsible for a small team, or maybe a shift, and supervise a few other people. Consider beginning their training after you've selected them, but before they begin their new responsibilities.

This level is primarily education. It's important for new leaders to begin with a solid understanding of the fundamentals of leading people. The first thing new leaders should learn about is themselves. Leaders who don't understand themselves will never be truly effective in leading others.

New leaders also need to be exposed to the theories associated with leadership, but instruction in theory should be done with caution. Obviously, theory lectures can get boring quickly and workshop participants will quickly lose interest. More importantly, there are a great number of theories, with experts regularly creating new ones. Some are important, some are just restatements of others, and some are actually wrong. It's best to pick a few good theories and models that are time-tested and then have the participants relate them to their own experiences. Theory is useless if it can't be applied to actual, everyday circumstances.

The actual content of the training workshops for first-level leaders should be tailored to the company's needs. For instance, if the new manager will be working in a union shop, then union relations should be included. An off-the-shelf, cookie cutter approach will not provide the best return on your investment. A basic list of topics is included in appendix 1.

It's a good idea to include a self awareness survey during this training. A word of caution. At this point, it's best to keep it fairly simple. The objective is for the new leader to learn about themselves, so use an instrument that concentrates on them.

The most popular instrument is the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Myers Briggs is an excellent tool for determining personality types but is too advanced for new leaders. When properly administered by a trained facilitator, it also requires considerable time, both for the instrument, and the subsequent analysis. The MBTI is best as a separate activity for more experienced leaders.

An initial educational workshop is not the end of the program for first-level leaders. In fact, it's really just the beginning. Actually implementing what they've learned is the hard part. They will face situations and deal with issues that are new to them on an almost daily basis. That's why they must have a mentor who can guide them and help them apply what they've learned.

The next part of the education and training program is for mid-level leaders. These leaders often find themselves in a difficult position; between the senior leaders who direct action, and first-level leaders who must carry out that action. It can be a difficult situation. Mid-level leaders need to take another look at leadership theory. They first studied theory based on what they might experience in their new leadership position. Now, they will see it from a perspective that only experience brings.

Communication is another important topic for mid-level leaders. This was also covered in the first-level workshop, but mid-level leaders need to be aware of how to effectively communicate with subordinate leaders as well as the boss.

Of course an important part of the training for this level is leadership development. Mid-level leaders are often the ones to find new leaders and are usually their primary trainers and mentors.

Lower-level leaders are given education in the fundamentals of leading people. Their practical training comes with implementing those fundamentals daily with evaluation and support from mentors. Mid-level leaders also apply their training in their daily work, but should be given specific projects as well. The projects help them implement more advanced concepts and provide senior leaders with a way to evaluate progress and potential for further advancement.

Don't create make-work projects for the sake of providing training. Use projects that are meaningful and necessary.

A complete list of suggested training topics and a few potential projects for mid-level leaders is in Appendix 2.

The third part of the education and training program is for senior leaders. If the leadership development program is properly implemented, then the training for senior leaders will be different from the previous two training levels. That's because by the time leaders reach the senior levels in a company they will have had experience implementing the leadership fundamentals.

At the senior levels, leadership is different. Senior leaders don't have nearly as much interaction with individual workers as the other levels, but their policies and actions set the agenda and culture of the company. Senior leaders need to know more about planning, and organizational leadership. At this level leaders need education in areas that aren't often thought of in leadership development: the areas of the company for which they don't have experience. For instance, executives from a background in sales need to develop an understanding of the manufacturing process. An expert in finance needs to learn about operations. Training must be tailored specifically to each individual. Also, it's important for leaders to have a good understanding of the entire industry, something for which they may not have had much exposure.

Though senior leaders need this specifically tailored training, they also need to understand the fundamentals of good leadership. If they've never had any of the education and training provided for the lower- and mid-level leaders, that should also be included in their training program. This is sometimes unpopular with more senior leaders who feel they already know what they need to know, or think they don't have time for such things. However, when senior leaders don't understand the same principles their subordinate leaders have learned, and when they don't know what those leaders are being taught, they can unintentionally be a roadblock to success. Also, when the senior leaders haven't received the same information, the mentoring process that is so critical to program success tends to be less effective.

There are other subjects you may consider including in your leadership development program. These cover the more technical aspects of a leader's job such as supervisor's safety, or inventory management. While they are important for the overall management of an organization, they will not, by



themselves develop leadership. A coordinated approach is necessary to ensure that all necessary training occurs.

Mentoring is the third component of the leadership development program. It's listed separately because it's so critical to success; but, just as with leadership selection, it is integrated into all phases of the program. In fact, it must be an integral part of the company's culture.

No education in the theory and application of the art and science of leadership, no matter how detailed or involved, can ever cover every situation that will arise. A good leadership trainer will also be available for coaching. He or she can listen to problems and offer suggestions that the leader in the middle of the situation may not have considered. The coach can also provide an evaluation of the leader's actions in a particular situation.

If the leadership development program has become a part of the company's culture, the outside coach will be supplemented, if not replaced, by internal mentors. Each leader should have two mentors formally assigned. The first is usually the immediate supervisor who has the most contact and observes the leader's activity and development on a frequent basis. When the leadership development program is fully a part of the culture, not only will this be a natural part of the supervisors responsibility, he or she will have developed enough in their own right to provide valuable insight.

There also needs to be a second mentor. This should be someone outside the leader's normal reporting chain so they can have more open and relaxed discussion. It's also best if this mentor is more experienced. It should be understood by everyone that discussions with this mentor are always in confidence, for both parties. Such confidentiality is important to ensure that communication can be open and wide-ranging but it's difficult for many people to accept. As leaders are educated in good leadership, and as the company's culture matures, that discretion will be understood and appreciated.

### **Is In-House or Contract a Better Approach?**

It makes sense to contract services that are not your company's core capabilities – but – leadership development needs to become so ingrained in your corporate culture that it is one of your core capabilities. Outside expertise can help you identify requirements and take the necessary steps to make the program effective from the start; but, if the program always remains in the

hands of a consultant or training company, you'll never realize the full return on your investment. From the very beginning, any outside help should start with a set point at which the program will be run by the company's leadership and not a consulting or training firm.

While you, as the company's senior leader, will want to direct the program, you may not want to take on the actual training workshops. To gain maximum return, workshops must be led by people who are skilled and experienced. It takes time to develop that kind of skill and experience and selecting, training, and employing someone to do that full time is probably not a good use of your resources. There are several companies who will provide individual courses in various leadership and management subjects. While these courses normally provide valuable information, be cautious about using them as the sole source of training. The education and training portion of your development program must be coordinated to provide a cohesive continuum of development.

When you first broadcast a request for help creating a program, you'll probably be inundated with offers. There are many companies, large and small, in the leadership development business and it's a daunting task to choose the best fit for your needs. Appendix 3 lists some qualities you should look for when choosing a company to help you set up your program.

Developing leaders at all levels of your company is one of the smartest investments you'll ever make. Strong leadership is the difference between a company that just survives, and one that moves beyond sustainability to fabulous growth.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Topics for First-Level Leadership Training**

1. Getting to know yourself
2. Leadership Theory
3. Leadership Styles
4. Relationships with bosses and followers
5. Conflict Management
6. Change Implementation
7. Time Management
8. Effective Communication
9. Delegation
10. Problem Solving
11. Decision Making
12. Diversity

## **Appendix 2**

### **Topics for Mid-Level Leadership Training**

1. Selecting and developing new leaders
2. Communicating with bosses, peers, and subordinate leaders
3. Needs and motivation
4. Delegating responsibility
5. Leading and managing teams
6. Strategic Planning
7. Leadership theory review
8. Change Management

#### Potential projects

Form a team for a special project.

Find and evaluate new leader candidate

Identify and take responsibility for an area that needs improvement

## **Appendix 3**

### **Five Qualities to Look for in a Leadership Development Contractor**

1. \_\_\_ Does the company offer genuine leadership experience? Experience in academia or as a consultant is a good supplement, but experience is more important. You want someone who has actually been in the trenches and learned leadership from firsthand experience.
2. \_\_\_ Do they want to help you succeed, or do they seem more interested in constantly selling you more of their products and services?
3. \_\_\_ Do they ask what you want or try to push a pre-written curriculum? It's easier for a provider to develop a standard curriculum and try to force your company into that mold. Every company is different and the program must be shaped to fit the company. One size will not fit all!
4. \_\_\_ Do they take the time to understand your business and its unique requirements? To really help you succeed, the training provider not only needs to know what you want, they must also understand your unique challenges. If the training provider doesn't understand your company, how can he or she help you develop a program that's best for you?
5. \_\_\_ Will the training provider be available when things get difficult? Leadership development is more than a few training seminars. A good provider will be there for consultation when problems arise.