



PROVIDING A NEW LENS FOR DEVELOPING LEADERS

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## BREAKING WITH TRADITION: **LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT ON FAST FORWARD**

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Several years ago our CEO charged us with building greater leadership bench strength in the organization. While the field is seemingly rich in methodology to develop leaders, the rules of the game are changing. With traditional methods, we were not able to keep pace within our dynamic competitive environment.

Like most contemporary organizations, we were faced with shorter average tenure among our leaders and employees. Less time to prepare people for leadership has become a real business issue in today's work environment. There simply is no time for traditional methods of development such as job rotation, executive education programs, or even 360's to be used effectively. People enter and leave the organization on average every 2-5 years. When this short tenure is the norm, 360's are problematic despite current popularity. As a result, by the time a manager is on-board long enough for raters to feel comfortable providing input, the manager moves on to the next job or even out of the Company.

### **OUR METHODS . . .**

For some time we thought we were going through the right motions with our leadership development processes. However, if leadership effectiveness is a measure of whether our development efforts are working, we have a problem. At Bard, we have used all of the following methods:

**Competency Models** – after a great deal of energy and money was expended to develop leader competencies, we now concur with Hollenbeck and McCall's position that

“competency model building is a waste of time and money because competencies are the same across organizations; the methodology inevitably produces competencies based on the past rather than on the future; the model developed is static and cannot possibly adapt as quickly as leaders must to an uncertain future; there is more than one kind of effective leader, therefore a model based on one set of competencies is deceptive; and, despite efforts to the contrary, the model inevitably is owned by HR, not the line organization.”

**Executive Coaching** - The effectiveness of coaching tends to be evaluated by the anecdotes rather than by research. And separating ‘coaching’ from the rest of leadership development processes makes evaluation difficult. A follow-up study by Edelman and Armstrong (1993) of coaching-based executive development found that participants rated the process very valuable (3.95 out of 5) and they reported that they made consistent change (4.07 out of 5) overall. The conclusion is that the positive image of coaching is supported by the experiences of the people who have been coached. The individualized approach may be a significant key to results in this method.



**360's** -- For us, these tools tend to be troublesome, given the tenure issue we faced. Hollenback and McCall suggest that "convincing research is not available." We know that the credibility of raters, the rating instruments themselves, and feedback methods are all variables that impact upon the usefulness and effectiveness of this methodology.

*"After years of using prominent methodologies for developing leaders, we ventured in a different direction and found the front end solution we sought... The CDR 3-D Assessment Suite instruments (Character, Drivers and Risk Factors) measure leadership characteristics in a three-dimensional way that cookie-cutter competency models and other assessments cannot.*

**Action Learning** – Some people highly value action learning experiences (Conger, 1992). Whether the impact carries over into job performance depends on the training staff's ability to help translate learning into application in relevant business situations.

**Technology Tools** -- It is too soon to tell if technology will be effective as a development tool. New trends in training technology certainly fit the needs of learners and the work place to learn individually, and to spend less time away from families and work. The question is can lessons be learned through computer simulations? Time will tell how well this method can deliver.

**Formal Executive Education Programs** -- These programs use all of the methods included in this review: 360's, action learning, etc. Universities typically provide this resource, however,

"...the blush is off the rose, and universities no longer hold the uncontested top spot in development. This is due largely to time away from the job, consultants bringing programs in house, companies creating their own internal leadership 'universities' and other sources of programs such as the Center for Creative Leadership. While a traditional way to develop leaders, the ability to evaluate overall effectiveness is problematic. The 'smiles test' shows high participant ratings, but documented improvements in job performance, much less in organization performance, are few and far between" (Hollenbeck & McCall, 1997).

**On-the-Job Experience** -- Hollenbeck and McCall believe that on-the-job experience still holds the most promise as an approach to develop leadership talent.

From my point of view time and average length of tenure are making this less viable as a development strategy. At Bard, in addition to the above methodologies, our selection and performance management practices have been part of our "leadership development" process. We begin the leadership dialogue when we select the (right) people for the job.

## **WHAT WE LEARNED AT BARD USING TRADITIONAL METHODOLOGIES**

Reflecting on these varied methods we were using to develop leaders and grow bench strength, we were surprised to observe that the overall themes and triggering events underlying each approach were the following:

- × Selection was more dependent on people's assessments and opinions than on objective data
- × Development focused on things upon which the leader needed to improve -- weaknesses
- × Coaching tended to be provided when there was a problem
- × Cookie cutter definitions of leadership evolved based on a competency model
- × Learning conducted through scheduled programs (not "just-in-time" when a learner needs the education)
- × Reliance on job rotations (involving relocation) at a time when demographics show that people are less mobile and less willing to compromise work / family balance, and
- × Manager's role in and accountability for leadership development not clearly linked to our development strategy.

## **REFRAMING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

Clearly, our methods had not kept pace with the monumental changes taking place in the world and within our business environment. We needed to revisit our traditional methods, continuing to use them as time in job permits, but the "norm" approach would *need to be much more fluid and front-loaded*. Thus, we developed a new philosophy and strategy of leadership development.

Our new approach has shifted to:

- ƒ Reducing reliance on event-based, scheduled learning, and are shifting to individualized development and learning options
- ƒ Migrating to self-service learning delivery via e-Learning (web) and Manager's Tool Kits

- f Individualizing competencies to incumbent / position needs (web-based technology provides the opportunity to do this easily)
- f Expanding the use of technology, specifically the web, blending traditional and virtual learning methodologies
- f Focusing on developing people based on strengths, not weaknesses
- f Learning provided “on the fly” (*a Jim Bolt term*) and,
- f Utilizing psychological and motivational assessments for selection and development.

### **THE FRONT-END SOLUTION**

After years of using prominent methodologies for developing leaders, we ventured in a different direction and found the front end solution we sought — the use of a trio or “suite” of instruments from CDR Assessment Group, Inc. The CDR 3-D Suite (Character, Drivers and Risk Factors Assessments) measure leadership characteristics in a three-dimensional way that cookie-cutter competency models and other assessments cannot. The data provided in reports from CDR is accurate, comprehensive and we now have validated profiles for a wide range of leader-roles. The time we spend assessing candidates is shortened substantially though the information we have is far superior. Surprisingly, less than 10% of the companies in the U.S. have chosen to augment leader selection and development with instruments (Employment Testing, October 2000, HR Executive Survey).

### **FOCUSING ON THE RIGHT STUFF -- RIGHT AWAY**

One of the key benefits of using CDR Assessments as a front-end solution is that these tools launch our development process from a candidate’s first day in a given role rather than down the road as a reaction to a problem. Our line managers are enthusiastic about this new tool. Being better informed about a candidate’s profile up front, eliminates guess work, and enables a manager to coach with a more productive dialogue to develop strengths and shore up gaps.

Our second most prominent driver of our new approach is embracing and applying the development philosophy of “*focusing on strengths*”. Studies support that this leads to much more effective leaders. Drucker for one advocates... “building on strengths” – he believes that’s how we will out perform our competition and

accomplish more. (Drucker, P. *The Effective Executive*, Harper, 1993).

Buckingham and Clifton write in *Now, Discover Your Strengths* that “the greatest room for each person’s growth is in the areas of his greatest strength, therefore you should focus your training time and money on educating him about his strength and figuring out ways to build on these strengths rather than on remedially trying to plug his ‘skill gaps.’ You will find that this one shift in emphasis will pay huge dividends.” This may be the most powerful antidote to the short tenure epidemic that is stalling leadership growth --- learning to focus on individualizing jobs to play to people’s strengths, for greater job satisfaction and return on hiring investment.

### **GETTING THE CUSTOMER ON BOARD**

Helping our managers make these shifts has been somewhat easier than most change efforts. Why? In our organization, they are operating from a platform of “pain” and a need for change. They clearly see that business results and leadership bench strength are precious and elusive commodities. We’ve introduced CDR Assessments throughout the organization and have created a new vocabulary and dialogue for coaching developing leaders. We also use CDR Assessments in a team-building context and to provide selection data points for our front-line Sales Territory Managers. Studies are underway for defining leadership in our Quality Department.

As far as reframing our development philosophy to “leveraging strengths” we have incorporated these tools into our Performance Management Process and Succession Planning process. However, this philosophy of focusing on strengths is a change that may evolve slowly, as we are conditioned to point out what’s wrong. It’s hard to break with tradition. The lessons we learned first-hand in life weigh heavily against compelling new arguments to do things differently. Time will tell if our new strategy has worked.

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