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Equipped to Lead: The Key to Developing Your Leadership Skills

By Don W. Prince

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Don W. Prince
General Director
Center for Creative Leadership, Russia

While some may believe that leadership is an inborn trait possessed by a select few, our research causes us to disagree. Research suggests that leadership is more than a position and can be learned and exhibited by anyone. Leadership roles may be formal positions with the authority to take action and make decisions, or they may be informal roles with little official authority, such as the team member who encourages a group to complete a project. Rather than classifying people as "leaders" or "non-leaders," it is more useful to understand that everyone can learn and grow. This process of personal development that improves our effectiveness is what leader development is all about. One definition of leadership development is "the expansion of a person's capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes."

So what does this mean for individuals in today's organizations? The path each of us takes in learning to lead is unique to each individual. Leadership research has identified key elements that contribute to the development of one's leadership skills. When present and working together, these facets can expand your capacity to lead. These three elements are Assessment, Challenge and Support.

Assessment is a process that helps you understand your current strengths and level of effectiveness, as well as areas that need improvement. It can be formal, such as performance appraisals and 360-degree feedback, or informal, such as receiving clear feedback or reflecting on your behavior.

Challenges on and off the job can be developmental experiences. A challenging situation is one that stretches you out of your comfort zone and forces you to learn new behaviors in order to be successful. This is sometimes difficult because leaders want to stay with what is comfortable and familiar, and learning new behaviors may lead to temporary feelings of

incompetency. But without this stretch, new skills will not be learned.

Job assignments are one of the most important forms of leader development. They give leaders the opportunity to learn by doing. Unfortunately, on-the-job learning can often be haphazard or limited. So what can you do to ensure your daily work is contributing to your long-term development?

A job assignment can refer to an entire job or a single aspect of a job. What makes a job assignment developmental? Essentially, it must be something that stretches you, pushes you out of your comfort zone and requires you to think and act differently. It may involve roles that are not well defined, and it usually contains some elements that are new to you. These assignments place you in a challenging situation full of problems to solve, dilemmas to resolve, obstacles to overcome and choices to make under conditions of risk and uncertainty.

Research has identified a number of broad sources of challenge related to learning. These include:

1. Job transitions. A change in work role, whether change in content, level of responsibility or location, requires you to handle responsibilities that are in some way unfamiliar and where the usual routines and behaviors are no longer adequate.
2. Creating change. Jobs that require you to create change call for actions and decisions in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity. You are responsible for new directions, must address inherited problems and must face problems with employees who are dealing with change.
3. High levels of responsibility. Assignments with high levels of responsibility have greater breadth, visibility and complexity; they also expose you to pressure and high-stakes decisions.

Leader development is a process that requires a variety of developmental experiences. Different experiences teach different things at different points in one's life. To expand your repertoire of leadership skills, seek new types of experiences.

Support is the other key element in the process. Organizations that support development and have a strong leadership culture will make sure that leadership development is a central part of their strategy. Support for development is also individual, as we seek out others to support our development, whether that is a boss, peers, mentors, external coaches or other trusted individuals. These developmental relationships help us weather the stresses of development, provide feedback and encouragement, and tackle challenges.

Leadership development is an ongoing process. It is never complete. Learning and change happen slowly and in a continuous process, over the course of a whole career. And each person is ultimately responsible for shaping his or her career-long process of leadership development.

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