

Steve Macaulay and Sarah Cook explore how to grow the capabilities of senior managers.

Much of the millions companies spend on management development is wasted. Yet another report has come out, this time from Oxford Saïd Business School, saying that companies must sharpen up their act in developing their leaders. In this article we aim to highlight some practical pointers for the learning and development professional in growing the capability of their senior managers, both new and experienced.

Those involved in the development of senior management today are faced with a tough task. They are constantly treading a tight rope: on the one hand they seek to achieve value for money and high quality learning. On the other hand, a whole range of pressures of choices conspire to make those objectives hard to meet: What development option to choose? Should it be for a group or individual? In-company or external? All senior managers or certain levels only? What partner to work with ? prestige big name or respected industry practitioner? The high profile nature of the task puts the decisions, and the very career, of learning and development and HR professionals in the spotlight.

Managers at the top of the tree are the custodians of the organisation's future; if they don't keep growing and developing then probably neither will the organisation. Top managers must not only be fully aware of customer needs today, but must plan well ahead to anticipate the next set of organisational challenges. Then there are their other burdens: the challenges of corporate governance, the regulatory environment, new technology and competitive pressures.

Next, there are difficulties posed in developing very senior people: many senior managers believe in practice that once they have reached a position of seniority, they have found their success formula and are reluctant to change it. Others, who do undertake personal development, keep it a guarded secret and do not share this with their team.

Gaining Buy-In for Continuous Development

The first challenge for the learning and development professional is to convince the senior team of the benefits for them of lifelong learning. Often the issue is for internal specialists to be perceived by senior managers as sufficiently credible in order for them to take their advice.

We have worked recently with one organisation where senior managers and their direct reports

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undertook a regular process of 360 degree feedback. Each leader was measured by their manager, direct reports and colleagues against the agreed organisational competencies for people at their level. The resulting feedback highlighted individual strengths and areas of development. The subsequent one to one coaching sessions allowed each leader to develop a personal improvement plan.

In our experience at a senior level executives often prefer to be developed on a one to one basis or amongst their peers. The development interventions we run tend to focus on one to one coaching, 'best practice' workshops, conferences and forums attended by peers as well as training sessions where participants are also at a senior level. Although this has benefits in terms of sharing of experiences and issues, the downside from an organisational perspective is that senior managers' learning and development tends to happen in isolation from the rest of the organisation. One of the criticisms of individual coaching is it tends to take place in private behind closed doors with direct reports rarely seeing measurable outcomes.

To counteract this effect, we have successfully run many leadership development programmes where senior managers participate as equals with other managers from varying levels throughout the organisation. If handled skilfully, this can truly encourage a climate of greater openness and trust.

A Five-Step Approach to Senior Development

Whatever the approach to developing senior managers, we believe that a structured, strategic approach offers an invaluable basis for a checklist for senior management development. Any development activity undertaken can be measured against these steps.

Step 1 Know what you want and where you want to get to.

Step 2 Clarify where you are now.

Step 3 Assess the gap and work out a strategy to close the gap.

Step 4 Gain additional leverage.

- strengthen senior knowledge and skills
- work to enhance image and reputation
- seek external partnerships.

Step 5 Evaluate and review progress and re-define step 1.

Step 1 Know what you want and where you want to get to

A clear direction - both personal and organisational - for where you want to go and what you want to achieve is vital. Few would disagree with this, but in practice this clarity in senior development it is rarely achieved.

What do you expect your senior managers to do in the future and why? What is the link between senior management behaviour and success in your market place? How do you know when you have achieved management success? These are some of the most challenging questions we know if considered thoroughly ? and that is why they can get deferred and courses booked from a brochure which has landed on a manager's desk.

Senior level requirements are wide-ranging emphasise an exacting profile. As managers climb the organisational ladder, they start to hit problems they had not encountered before. They become increasingly visible and vulnerable - people watch and read what they do and their impact is greater. Nuances and wording, actions (and no action) become the subject of discussion, internally and externally. There are few clear-cut rules to follow. Cranfield's Professor of International Management Development, Andrew Kakabadse, has conducted extensive international research into senior level demands. He has observed² that senior managers need to be able to:

- Shape the future by their capability to create a shared vision.
- Shape the business by focusing on key future business issues.
- Spread the message by providing direction, identifying and communicating key business values.
- Shape the team by understanding importance of high quality dialogues and the ability to manage sensitive issues. In practice many Boards are made up of sectional and warring factions who fail to confront difficult issues and therefore never get beyond superficial agreement on a strategy.
- Hear what is said by having the maturity to invite, offer and receive feedback and then by having the wisdom actively to pursue ways forward.

In Professor Kakabadse's eyes, it is very common for executive teams to fail to work cohesively and that senior managers of the future, therefore, need assistance in making a sea-change in team working, attitudes and behaviours. Try rating your senior managers against this checklist:

- Knowing what outcomes they want, short and long term
- Finding original, agreed answers rather than a lowest common denominator
- Sensitivity to what is going on, starting with self-awareness
- Actively seeking and receiving feedback
- Personal resilience
- Willingness to talk about and deal with sensitive issues
- Influencing others in flexible and responsive ways

Step 2 Clarify where you are now

Setting an accurate base line for development is often neglected. Traditionally scant attention has been given to really understanding the true nature of the current situation, and the development needs that come out of that, yet we believe it is vital to the success of senior development. Dashing to complete an ill-thought through development and training plan will surely lead to disappointing results.

Proper consideration should be given to individuals' needs in the context of the organisation and current capability, motivation and culture. Against defined criteria such as those described in Step 1, how much do you know about your managerial population? Development centres to measure defined competencies are becoming increasingly relevant to help achieve such insight. The introduction of competences has been a positive attempt to identify specific, observable effective behaviours that may be developed in managers. Other means are through in-depth development interviews and the use of 360° feedback and personality questionnaires. However, senior management benchmarking must focus on the future, not the past and it is easy to slip into recruiting and developing against past success criteria.

Step 3 Assess the gap and work out a strategy to close the gap

In judging the size of any gap and how to bridge it, you should look at learning and development as part of a wider process of change. There has never been such a broad range of learning methods open to senior managers, in addition to traditional classroom based programmes and to achieve personal change you need to go beyond 'chalk and talk'. Encouraging learning at work in practical situations is a must: action and problem-based learning, simulations, use of psychometrics and development projects have an important place. Exploring external providers can help you pinpoint what is right for your organisation.

Senior managers are now more comfortable to use the services of executive coaches, mostly externally resourced to help increase their immediate effectiveness. In addition, senior

managers need to go beyond the familiar territory of their home department and take on board wider business issues. In order to extend the senior managers' perspective, organisations are encouraging individuals to gain experience in a variety of environments, to get people out of a rut and thinking in fresh ways. One organisation we know, for example, sends its senior managers on intensive development courses at business schools in the US to broaden perspectives. Another organisation we work with in the private sector encourages its senior managers to act as mentors and non-executive directors for public sector charitable organisations.

Step 4 □ Gain additional leverage

- strengthen senior knowledge and skills
- work to enhance image and reputation
- seek external partnerships.

An honest personal re-appraisal can help to build a better reputation and image, which can increase a manager's ability to make a difference. Words like image sound like more like fluffy PR or spin, but we believe that how we are perceived forms a key component of the a senior manager's ability to act. We find that many senior managers have under-developed skills that need to be strengthened, in particular to:

- understand and work the political system
- develop influencing and conflict/resistance handling skills
- strengthen personal coaching skills
- know the change transition curve and its implications.

Partnering

Both senior managers and internal learning and development professionals can usefully draw on external people to strengthen their authority and effectiveness. A strategy many successful businesses are adopting is partnering with an external development provider, such as a consultant or a business school. What should you expect to gain from such a partnership? A partnership enables you to draw on wider expertise. A downside might be that potentially you could lose control of the process or the work you are doing internally is diminished. All of these possible downsides can be managed. And of course, there is the cost which will need justification. What should you look for in choosing a partner? Our experience suggests such factors as:

- expertise not available internally
- credibility within your business

- ability to work with you to set up evaluation criteria and demonstrable return on investment
- a real understanding of your issues

Step 5 Evaluate and review progress and re-define step 1.

To encourage on-going development, development professionals need to facilitate senior managers evaluating and reviewing their own progress. This will help them to see where their next moves are on their pathway to continuous development. Evaluation and review needs to be consolidated into an overall organisation progress plan. It is important to bring together those metrics into a measurement process that will define what success would look like for any development intervention, and how far progress has been made. Amongst the benefits of a rigorous approach to evaluation are that it:

- Enables discussion with all those involved on how well development is working
- Provides information to adjust the development process
- Tracks changes in managers' perceptions resulting from the process

Who could possibly argue with this? Few would raise objections to thorough measurement, but most find such a process time-consuming and demanding and therefore fail to do it.

We recommend the introduction of a two-tier programme of evaluation: a company key metric tier, and a traditional reaction evaluation approach. For the latter we suggest a pre and post learning event questionnaire, also re-run at the strategic points for longer development programmes. For the former we suggest making full use of the company's own key measures of success to help clarify the effectiveness of the programme in terms the company understands.

We normally issue tailored pre-programme questionnaires that focus on participants' expectations and learning needs which have been discussed with their manager. This informs a starting point and establishes the benchmarks for the mid- and post-programme review. The mid- and post-programme reviews focus on what has been learned and applied. It is also valuable to gather information on individuals' further learning needs and on what learning can be extrapolated to organisational learning in the company as a whole.

Conclusion

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Senior managers are pivotal to the success of many organisations, helping or hindering the profitable meeting of customer needs, shaping their organisation to satisfy those needs and mobilising commitment to their vision. Learning and development professionals need to be confident and competent in offering senior managers approaches which demonstrably improve their organisation's ability to compete.

A rigorous and systematic approach, such as the five-step approach to development, is a sound framework to tackle this difficult high-visibility, high-investment task.

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