

Development of Senior Managers

Written by Administrator

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Those involved in the training and development of senior management today are faced with a tough task. They are constantly treading a high rope: on the one hand they seek to achieve high quality learning, which ensures that individuals and the organisation develop effectiveness. On the other hand, a whole range of senior management pressures conspire to make those objectives difficult to meet. Changes to the regulatory environment, new technology, competitive pressure brought about through new market entrants make it essential that senior managers must be not only fully aware of customer needs today but are planning well ahead to meet the next set of customer needs. Nowhere are these pressures more vividly illustrated than in the development of senior managers. They are the ones who are the custodians of the organisation's future; if they don't keep growing and developing then neither will the organisation.

In this article we aim to highlight some practical pointers in developing new and experienced senior managers.

A Five-Step Approach to Senior Development

We believe that a five-step approach offers an invaluable checklist for senior management development. Any training activity undertaken should 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, particularly awareness of the customer's point of view.

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

Step 4 Gain additional leverage

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

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

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

A clear vision - both personal and managerial - of what you want to achieve is vital. This includes having access to accurate market research and knowing how to translate that research into meaningful products and services from the customer's perspective. Having flexible options for the structure of the organisation and the means by which services are delivered is a critical mindset for senior management in the industry.

What do you expect them to do differently and why? How will these skills add value for the customer? What is the link between senior management behaviour and success in the marketplace. How do you know when you have got there? These are some of the most challenging questions we know if considered thoroughly.

You will find it relevant to consider the results of Cranfield research into senior managers' behaviours. Senior managers need to be able to

- Shape the future by their capability to create a shared vision. A leading global investment bank has created a vision of a 'One firm' firm to emphasise externally and internally a cohesive, united one-stop shop for its clients.
- Shape the team by understanding importance of high quality dialogues and the ability to manage sensitive issues. In practice many boards are made up a sectional and warring factions which fail to confront difficult issues and therefore never get beyond superficial agreement on a strategy.
- Shape the business by focusing on key future business issues. In your own industry, substantial change will leave you wrong-footed unless you successfully spot winners.
- Spread the message by providing direction, identifying and communicating key business values. BUPA invested £3 million in an employee communications programme to focus everyone on key values.
- Hear what is said by having the maturity to invite, offer and receive feedback and by having the wisdom actively to pursue ways forward. The Board of one company we worked with was shocked to receive damning feedback on their style and behaviour when they introduced 360° feedback. They have introduced a leadership programme to make substantial changes in their behaviour.

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The plain fact is that many senior managers are poor at doing all of these things - our research across many industries and countries verifies this. Senior managers of the future, therefore, need assistance in making a sea-change in their attitudes and behaviours.

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. There are few rules to hide behind.

The following is a competency profile of senior management fitness, derived from experience at Cranfield. Try scoring yourself as a training professional against this list.

- Knowing what outcomes you want, short and long term
- Finding original answers rather than single incremental progression.
- 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 as much as being influenced.

Step 2 Clarify where you are now

Traditionally not much attention has been given to first of all really understanding the true nature of the current situation, yet we believe it is vital to the success of senior management development. Dashing headlong towards a development and training objective will surely lead to disappointing results unless you give serious consideration to such factors as capability, motivation and culture. Against defined criteria such as those described in Step 1, what is the strength of your managerial population? Development Centres are becoming increasingly popular to help achieve such knowledge. The development 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.

Turning to the organisation as a whole, frequently little may be known of its culture. To get a wider picture of the organisation and its component parts we have found a big benefit in

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assessing the culture of the organisation. One way is to use an analytical framework. Cranfield calls its framework the Culture Web, a series of overlapping aspects of culture which make up the collective mindset. The Culture Web is best considered individually and then discussed with groups of managers. For example, look at your own organisation in relation to the following:

- Symbols - logos, offices, cars
- Power - who has power
- Organisational Structure - formal and informal structures
- Controls - what gets measured and rewarded
- Rituals - what are accepted procedures and rituals
- Stories - sometimes called 'war stories'

There are a number of useful questionnaires which you can use to audit your company's culture. They help to form a map of the context in which you are operating. If you don't understand and manage culture, it will manage you.

You also need to examine the type of training you currently provide and what will be needed in the future. If it is mostly prescriptive ('these are the rules') this will not cover all the requirements for senior managers. Other kinds of training are those which offer understanding, often through general strategic training, those that focus on future values and beliefs and lastly those with a strong individual focus, working on feedback and demonstrable behaviour. Effective senior management training combines all four, with the emphasis on translating training into personal change.

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 training as part of a wider process of change. For example, what links has your training got to any process redesign? To achieve personal change you need to go beyond classroom based learning.

There is a wide range of learning methods open to senior managers, in addition to classroom based training and development: senior managers are always pressed for time and encouraging learning at work in practical situations is a must.

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Executive mentoring has increased in popularity in recent years. Here a respected and experienced manager (sometimes external to the organisation) is identified in the role of advisor, counsellor and sounding board to focus confidently on long term personal and career issues. The mentee (senior manager) can draw on the wisdom and experience of his or her mentor to help him or her through difficulties and blockages. Our experience shows that many senior managers find the ability to confide in a trusted, external advisor an invaluable resource. An international accountancy firm established a system of mentoring for its senior managers as a result of feedback from a cultural audit - employees felt the top strata was out of touch and these individuals needed to change. Mentoring is particularly useful when the manager is new to the role or when internal politics prevent the manager from sharing personal experiences, for example in times of rapid and unpopular change.

Senior managers also are starting to be comfortable to use the services of coaches, either externally resourced or trained by the training and development function, to help increase their immediate effectiveness. A coach works on a one-to-one basis to help the individual achieve his or her goals. Typically senior managers work with coaches to increase their personal performance. For example a French MD of a well-known company was coached in persuasive presentation skills to his American bosses. The agenda for development if chosen by the manager, can range from improving presentation skills to giving feedback, time management, organisation and decision making and influencing skills.

Senior managers need to go beyond the familiar territory of their home department and take on board wider business issues. Many struggle to make the transition. In order to extend the senior managers' perspective, organisations are encouraging individuals to undertake self-study programmes such as part-time MBAs, study tours such as those run by Manchester Business School or even community-based activity and Sony and Royal Sun Alliance are examples of using the latter for development. The objectives of these approaches vary from manager to manager but the benefits of gaining experience in a variety of environments is well-documented: to get people out of a rut and thinking in fresh ways.

Step 4 Gain additional leverage

An honest personal re-appraisal can help to build a better reputation and increase a manager's ability to make a difference. This applies to you as trainers in the same way as any other senior managers because you are operating in this arena. To help strengthen their reputation and standing, many training activities will benefit from sharpening critical senior management aspects of their role:

- understand and work the political system

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- develop conflict/resistance handling skills
- strengthen personal coaching skills
- know the transition curve and its implications.

Politics

Politics is part of influencing at a senior level in the organisation, like it or not. We believe that those operating in the senior echelons of a company need to develop the ability to read political situations, or you will lose out or fail to make the most of opportunities. Equally an appropriately open approach is a valuable asset for managers to display to build trust and respect. If you are aware of the political situation but demonstrate manipulative behaviour, you need to be careful not to be thought of as a wily fox and viewed with suspicion. Unaware behaviour leads to attempts to ignore politics - and become a lamb to the slaughter or behave in a clumsy and inept way so that, you become a bull in a china shop, unable to control your behaviour to achieve the outcomes you want. Coaching and mentoring are effective ways to help people become more skilled, open and aware in a political environment.

Conflict/resistance handling

Conflict and resistance are bound to happen. People can sometimes try to just smooth conflict over or boil away inside instead of seeing the opportunity to clear the air and resolve deeply-held issues. Others lose their cool and regret it later. Cigna UK spent a lot of time and effort, department by department winning support for major process redesign and as a result overcame many potential obstacles and resistance.

Coaching skills

Both senior managers and internal training staff need sound coaching skills. Coaching requires ample skills in empathetic listening and summarising. If you can display these skills to senior managers, you stand a good chance of working on worthwhile and relevant development issues and bolstering your reputation at the same time. Many training departments bring in outside coaches because their own reputations aren't strong enough. To start to break this down, build alliances with these external coaches so that you are associated with these top-level activities, not just as a purchaser.

Transition curve

We all know that change isn't a rational or straightforward process. The transition curve is a theoretical model which explains how for many people experiencing change, performance dips before it edges up again and strong feelings are stoked up in this process. Understanding how to recognise where others are on that curve and offer appropriate support is a critical skill in developing senior managers. One French manager we knew was having a lot of difficulty

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adjusting to an English posting; an understanding of the transition helped him not only at work with his team but also with his family.

Partnering

Both senior managers and trainers need to draw on other people to strengthen their authority and effectiveness. A strategy many successful trainers are adopting is partnering with an external training resource provider, such as a consultant or a business school. What should you expect to gain from such a partnership? If the choice is carefully made, then outsiders can work with you by securing access to the top which may have been previously denied. 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. And of course, there is the cost which may be substantial and will need a lot of justification. All of these possible downsides can be managed to good effect.

What should you look for in choosing a partner? Our experience suggests such factors as:

- credibility within your business
- demonstrable return on investment
- a real understanding of your issues
- expertise not available internally

Miller Insurance Group is a specialist Lloyds insurance broker branching out into a range of new business areas. Competition is increasing from US and European sources. Highly traditional in its style. The challenge was to retain the best of the old yet develop new managerial outlooks. Succession was an issue which needed addressing- the top team were all due to retire in next 5 years. The Top Management saw the need to build successors who would manage for the next millennium, which meant a more strategic group of managers willing to confront well respected traditions in positive way.

Three groups of programmes were set up in 3-4 day modules over 12 months, covering

- strategy and the business environment
- managing people
- managing organisational change

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- key operational issues: I.T., service strategy.

Participants on each programme presented a proposed business strategy to the Board. The ensuing debate was lively, though filled with a considerable air of tension on the part of delegates who were not used to this/and/of potential risk. Since the first programme there has been increasing impetus to put together a forward looking strategy.

This new strategy is being devised with senior management involvement. New skills and awareness have developed. The programme is to be extended via the introduction of a junior management course, mentored by participants from the first programme.

The Management Development Director, John Smiley played a critical role in supporting the programme and its participants - initially there was resistance at first from some senior managers within such a busy, task-driven culture. However early participants became champions of change, and helped to carry the message forward.

John Smiley sees Cranfield as a powerful catalyst, bringing together disparate groups to work on common issues, 'The Cranfield approach was very practical and related to our needs. We're very pleased with the results so far'.

A well-known pharmaceutical multi-national was undergoing radical change; it undertook a 360° survey relating to the performance of its senior managers. As a result of the feedback a programme of coaching was instigated in order to enhance personal effectiveness, particularly communicating their vision and a way forward. In addition newly appointed senior managers, whose potential had been identified using an assessment centre process, were encouraged to adopt mentors, external to the organisations to provide encouragement and support in their new role.

The personal information from the 360° feedback process created an awareness of the need to change and the subsequent coaching and support assisted senior managers in this process of change. In addition the internal training and development department were asked to develop a leadership programme for the board to ensure top management were role models of the vision. Some general managers also opted to undertake MBAs on a part-time basis.

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The effect has been to speed up the senior development process and the creation of a more cohesive group, responsive to personal change.

The key learning points were:

- The power of a wide variety of development approaches, tailored to individual needs.
- Top management needs to be involved.
- Feedback is a strong catalyst, if carefully managed.

Conclusion

In a changing financial services market place, a new breed of senior managers is emerging, those who:

- anticipate customer needs
- shape the organisation to satisfy those needs
- mobilise support for their vision, in a way which is open to feedback and change.

Training and development professionals need to be confident and competent in offering senior managers approaches which demonstrably improve their organisation's ability to compete. The 5-step approach to development is a sound framework to make a difference.

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