

By V Pradeep Kumar



The recent global financial slowdown and downtrend is not just caused by corporate greed or system failure. It's more to do with failed leadership. The churning that's happening in today's environment has caused tremors and shaken not just corporate leadership, but even political leadership across the world.

Consequently, a new brand of leadership is emerging.

This new leadership is not just a timely necessity, but is also an outcome of the serious debacles we have experienced. As businesses face newer challenges and opportunities, there's need for a new generation of leaders to emerge from the shadows of current leadership. It's important to identify and nurture talent within, to avoid business risks of losing out to competitors waiting to exploit weaknesses and continue the strategic direction in periods of growth or turbulence.

Grooming leaders within an organisation, however small or large is a critical task. The best of management institutes don't teach us the art of grooming though we can learn a lot from the success stories of organisations such as IBM, Intel, ICICI, Infosys, etc. Many large organisations have established training academies of excellence and have institutionalised the process, with fixed responsibilities. In smaller organisations, the CEO does directly handle this task.

A comprehensive succession plan has two types of leaders to be developed. One is for the top positions, which requires competency in cross-functional skills to lead the organisation strategically and ethically needing a high quotient of IQ, EQ and SQ. The other is for specialists in core functions such as marketing, finance, technology, etc, Leadership development is also required at multiple levels, where level 1 would be for positions at the board level and going down depending on the size of the organisation.

Obstacles to grooming

Grooming leadership as a critical task cannot happen by choice. It should happen by default and on merit; and not as a favour granted by the mighty and powerful. There could be several obstacles to grooming leaders within and we need to ensure, the organisation is free of these.

- Corporate culture: The philosophy and culture within should be such as to foster an atmosphere of openness, transparency and teamwork. The organisation should be professional and free from inter-personal problems and politics.

- Secure retirement systems: The senior management must be prepared to take up the responsibility of grooming and making way for future leaders, which is the main obstacle to leadership development. Senior leaders should exit the organisation with dignity through a proper and secure retirement system.

- Fear of loss: Senior leaders sometimes suffer from imaginary fear of loss due to transfer of leadership down the line. Instead of the fear factor riding over the issue, there should be judicious decision-making process, with back end support.

- Inadequate talent: There should be abundant talent with the required self-confidence amongst the identified group. As it happens so often, there should be no gaps between the 'desire to lead' and 'ability to lead'. If the ability is lacking, there should at least be potential to develop and harness the skills, through training and development.

- Instability in top leadership: Many organisations suffer perpetually from high turnover at the top level. This can be a serious obstacle to the leadership of the company and not merely, the process of grooming. An organisation focusing on leadership grooming, has to first attain a fair level of stability at the top.

The process of grooming

- Build the right culture: The practice of identifying and grooming leaders from within the organisation has to be part of corporate culture and philosophy.

- Systematise the process: A mere statement of intention to groom from within isn't enough. There should be a systematic approach including establishing an institute if required, or a functional department to oversee this process. Large and professional organisations have in fact set up, institutes and academies of excellence.

- Anticipating corporate leadership requirement: This should include leaders with specialist skills as well as cross-functional skills. Most importantly, strategic direction and competitive challenges in the global market should lead to a mapping of leadership skills required.

- Identifying future leaders: There are people who go through life and there are those who grow through life. The key is to identify & separate the two.

- Evaluating gaps in skills: Many individuals have tremendous potential, which may not be apparent beneath an invisible exterior. We need to uncover the dynamics of the 'inner self' to discover the potential and skills and determine the gaps in skill sets to steer the organisation ahead.

- Training to fill the gaps: No one is perfect and gaps are bound to be there. Just as diamonds, which need to go through the rigorous process of cutting and polishing, future leaders need an in-depth knowledge and understanding, especially in cross-functional areas, which can only happen through a rigorous process of testing and training.

- Delegation of important tasks: Senior leaders responsible for grooming should periodically delegate important tasks to the identified future leaders with adequate guidance. Credit should be given for success and failures should be considered, as lessons for future.

- Mentoring: Senior leaders should assume the role of mentors. Mutual trust and admiration, working together with openness and strong inter personal relation between mentors and future leaders are essential.

- Strike the right balance: Organisations should strike the right balance between merit and loyalty, both of which are important from different perspectives.

- Participative leadership: A participative leadership style with a shared vision, mission and long-term strategy is essential. Working together fosters a strong commitment and builds self-confidence, within the team.

- Check the inner dimensions of emerging leaders: As managers graduate to become leaders, they need to do the 'right things' instead of only 'doing things right'. As leading author, Stephen Covey says, "Management works in the system whereas leadership works on the system". A high EQ and SQ is critical for success, as this instills a sense of social responsibility taking business leadership to its highest levels.

- External leadership development programmes: Several management institutes have advanced leadership development programmes, which help to acquire latest skills, and are also an opportunity to transfer the knowledge down the organisation.

- Feedback system: The feedback system should be fair and transparent. Techniques such as 360° evaluation are extremely useful at different levels including the mentors and the emerging leaders. However, the consequences of faulty implementation of 360° evaluation should be kept in mind.

Popularity is not leadership, though we see amongst us, several corporate leaders who are popular almost attaining a celebrity status. As Mahatma Gandhi said, “The history of the world is full of men who rose to leadership, by sheer force of self-confidence, bravery and tenacity”. These are people who worked on brilliant ideas and concepts, building large and successful organisations by leading from the front and ensuring a smooth transition and handover of the reins to the next level of leadership.

The greatest challenge for emerging new leaders is to have that innate ability to think holistically connecting all pervasive but diverse things, inspiring themselves and their team by a corporate vision, evolved collectively. Only this ensures a stability and continuity of thought, strategy and action, which is important for the spirit of a business enterprise to thrive and succeed perpetually.

About the author

Mr.V Pradeep Kumar, hailing from Bangalore has over 28 years of hardcore management experience in all aspects of management in a variety of Industries including FMCG, Industrial marketing, Media and Publishing.

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