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FOR MEMBERS

OVERVIEW

Accelerated Leadership Development

How to Turn Your Top Talent into Leaders

by Ines Wichert

Recommendation

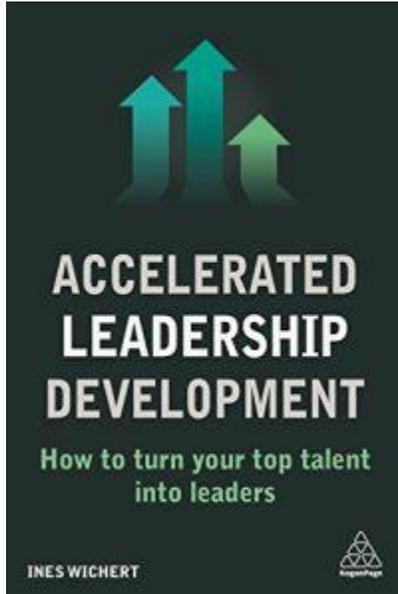
Your company needs an effective program to prepare its young leaders to move up when senior people advance or retire. To protect its future, the organization must help high-potential leadership candidates develop their flexibility, problem-solving acuity and decision-making ability. Occupational psychologist and HR consultant Ines Wichert details a strategy for “accelerated leadership development” that incorporates the newest material from academic research. Her manual is a valuable resource for HR professionals, high-potential employees and senior business leaders.

About the Author

Occupational psychologist **Ines Wichert** has a PhD in organizational psychology and is the founder and managing director of TalUpp, a leadership development consultancy.

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Accelerated Leadership Development

How to Turn Your Top Talent into Leaders

Ines Wichert
[Kogan Page](#), 2018

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Your company needs an effective program to prepare its young leaders to move up when senior people advance or retire. To protect its future, the organization must help high-potential leadership candidates develop their flexibility, problem-solving acuity and decision-making ability. Occupational psychologist and HR consultant Ines Wichert details a strategy for “accelerated leadership development” that incorporates the newest material from academic research. Her manual is a valuable resource for HR professionals, high-potential employees and senior business leaders.

Take-Aways

- To groom future leaders, your organization needs an “accelerated leadership development” program.
- A formal leadership development programs often has seven primary elements: assessment, experience, risk, on-the-job learning, knowledge consolidation, reflection and support.
- Select the right young executives, and offer them the right assignments within a supportive corporate culture.
- Don’t rush people through leadership development; give them plenty of time to reflect.
- Accelerated leadership development is particularly important for women and millennials.
- Organizations and young leaders must jointly plan the right leadership development path.
- Senior executives are responsible for developing their organization’s young leaders.
- Fundamental guidelines can help you set up and implement your company’s leadership development program.

Summary

To groom future leaders, your organization needs an “accelerated leadership development” program.

Experienced leaders can navigate a world characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA), but how can younger and midlevel leaders learn to handle such chaos? Many organizations run accelerated leadership development programs to bring junior leaders up to speed. This kind of program requires agreement between the company and its up-and-coming leaders. The firm provides the infrastructure for learning and career development, while leaders-in-training promise fully motivated participation as they learn to solve difficult new problems.

“Accelerated leadership development is about carefully balancing a number of factors such as drive, support and burnout at an individual level – and cost, time, quality and scope at an organizational level.”

These programs often guide participants through stretch assignments and rotations that often are temporary. They put new leaders in situations where they can build specialized expertise and transferrable leadership skills as opposed to static technical skills. These young leaders use these opportunities to reflect on their career path, leave their comfort zone, and develop their knowledge and skills.

A formal leadership development programs often has seven primary elements.

Accelerated leadership development programs often include career counseling and workshops. Formal programs generally have these seven elements:

1. **“Assessment of potential”** – Target the right young executives. Seek participants with the most promising leadership potential.

2. **“Breadth of experience”** – Provide a wide array of educational work experiences, including department rotations and placement overseas.
3. **“Risk taking”** – Companies and future executives must learn to embrace calculated risks in a “risk-averse world.”
4. **“On-the-job learning”** – Experiential learning unfolds in four stages: exposure, observation, conceptualization and active experimentation. It’s not a “sequential, one-time process.”
5. **“Consolidation phases”** – Organizations must provide opportunities for young executives to balance periods of “high activity and personal sacrifice” with periods of “consolidation and dialing down” so they can solidify their new knowledge.
6. **“Reflective learning”** – Encourage young leaders-in-training to take time to think about their experiences and to consider what they have learned.
7. **“Supportive environment”** – Young executives need “appraisal support” through feedback, “instrumental support” in the form of hands-on advice, “informational support” and “emotional support.”

Select the right young executives, and offer them the right assignments within a supportive corporate culture.

The youngest cohorts in the workforce – millennials and generation Z – will need your organization to lay out a “clear development path” for them. Giving young leaders well-planned development tasks shortens their path to senior leadership by 25% to 30% compared with those who do not get such help.

“Career management, mostly driven by employees themselves, can provide a cost-effective foundation for accelerated leadership development.”

Organizations use various formulas to guide future leaders’ career progression. One view holds that emerging talent in junior roles should move to midlevel roles within two years or less; midlevel executives should take senior positions after two or three years; and senior leaders should move up within three to five years. Alternatively, the “three-by-three” rule calls for career movement in three-year segments across the three corporate levels: “leading self, leading people” and “leading leaders.” The “three-five-seven” tenure rule calls for staying in a role for at least three years, with five years being the ideal and seven years being the maximum.

Don’t rush people through leadership development; give them plenty of time to reflect.

Leadership development must use healthy acceleration and a reasonable pace to avoid precipitating burnout. Some young people in these programs may fail in their new assignments, but leaders-in-training can learn from failure.

“Good leadership is no longer part of a high-potential’s basic education; it has become a strategic differentiator.” – Torsten Schmeichel, former head of people development, Global Microelectronics

Young leaders who move constantly from one stretch assignment to another might not build the networks they will need to manage future challenges. Firms make a mistake when they pull targeted young leaders out of their stretch assignments too early, thus handicapping their progress. Many young leaders get moved to other roles before learning – and living with – the results of decisions they made during stretch assignments. Organizations do face the risk that unproven junior leaders may not meet the goals of high-profile assignments. To address that risk, have senior leaders monitor their work.

Don't rush young leaders through development programs. Give them time to consider whether they want to remain on an accelerated track. Encourage them to become more reflective. Working with a coach and keeping a journal can help younger executives evaluate their progress.

Accelerated leadership development is particularly important for women and millennials.

Female executives often face bias in the workplace, so the higher up you look in most organizations, the fewer women you are likely to find. Senior executives often don't regard women as apt candidates for promotion. Data show that far fewer women than men have access to career-enhancing experiences, such as turnaround projects, operational experience or international assignments. Women who rise to the top often advance due to participating in fast-track leadership development programs. To meet the goal of achieving equity, organizations should give young female executives access to accelerated leadership development as well as the chance to develop themselves and encouragement to join an "old girls network" where one exists.

"We need to take exceptional leaders and then develop them well and quickly." (Jo Hindle, head of HR asset services, Cushman & Wakefield)

Male senior executives may overvalue traditionally male traits like action-orientation and assertiveness, while undervaluing traits seen as typically female – such as nurturing and caring. Be aware that young leaders who feel their present company is treating them poorly aren't reluctant to leave their jobs for more attractive positions.

Organizations and their young leaders must jointly plan the right leadership development path.

Human resources practitioners and senior business leaders should consider implementing these organizational design recommendations:

- **"Develop a business case for acceleration"** – Link your accelerated leadership development program directly to your company's business strategy.
- **"Forecast your leadership requirements"** – Consider such factors as hiring, retention, turnover and career progression data.
- **"Define what acceleration means for your organization"** – Discover the average time each employee spends in specific leadership roles.

- **“Determine the unique drivers of acceleration for your organization”** – Analyze your company’s frameworks, tools and processes that either enhance or detracts from career advancement. Use these findings to develop evidence-based acceleration policies and activities. Consider which traits and habits your most rapidly promoted employees share.
- **“Focus on experiences rather than roles and career paths”** – The seasoning that young leaders gain by participating in special leadership experiences stays with them throughout their careers.
- **“Regular readiness assessments”** – Incorporate your readiness assessment into regular annual or semi-annual development conversations, such as discussions about your degree of preparedness for overseas assignments or operational roles.
- **“Secure senior management buy-in”** – Fuel your program’s success with the approval and day-to-day involvement of high-potential employees.
- **“Remove process barriers early”** – Make sure that job rotations occur fairly and on schedule by precluding the possibilities of red tape and overcoming senior executives’ reluctance to have their best people take on new assignments.

Recommendations for high-potential employees include:

- **“Embrace change and uncertainty”** – Become comfortable with the ambiguity and new circumstances that represent the “new normal.”
- **“Don’t neglect emotional intelligence in a technology-driven world”** – To inspire and lead, future leaders will need the emotional intelligence to understand other people’s feelings. They should learn how their behavior affects other people’s emotions.
- **“Demonstrate your commitment to career development”** – The more initiative you demonstrate, the more likely your senior managers are to recommend you.
- **“Look for breadth of experience”** – Identify your experience gaps, and develop a career plan to gain the experience you lack.
- **“Identify the right people”** – Seek managers and executives in your company who are known for their expertise and accomplishments. Aim to get close to individuals whose knowledge is interesting to you in hopes of joining their teams for special assignments and projects.
- **“Consider shadowing”** – Gain experience by observing the behavior of both effective and ineffective senior executives, either officially or by taking careful notice on your own.
- **“Communicate”** – Occasionally remind senior leaders of your desire and readiness for stretch assignments, so you will be “top of mind” when opportunities arise.

Senior executives are responsible for developing their organization’s young leaders.

Most senior leaders are reluctant to assign high-profile jobs and assignments to young and relatively inexperienced leaders. Pushed hard by stockholders to meet quarterly business goals, senior executives want their most experienced leaders in the most important jobs. However, if young leaders never expand their experience and expertise, organizations will suffer when seasoned leaders retire.

“Rigorous evaluation of...stretch assignments and acceleration efforts must be in place and shared widely to ensure that the organization can apply changes to processes and systems.”

Senior executives must cultivate leaders for the new era by buying into accelerated leadership development and support programs – as well as mentoring, coaching, cultivating and enriching the career paths of young leaders.

Fundamental guidelines can help you set up and implement your company’s leadership development program.

If you are working on leadership development programming in HR and other departments, heed these basic organizational tips:

- **Set realistic expectations** – Make sure younger leaders understand that their continued involvement in an accelerated program depends on the effort and energy they put into it.
- **Limit how frequently people can change roles** – Constant moves can result in burnout.
- **Evaluate frequently** – Keep your assessments of young leaders up to date and accurate.
- **Reward managers for working on leadership development** – Recognize senior managers who properly develop younger leaders. Use surveys and feedback to measure managers’ efforts to enhance young people’s skills.
- **Prepare mentors** – Your accelerated young executives will need them.

Ambitious young executives should:

- **Build their ability to manage people** – Your immediate supervisor will pay attention to your business outcomes. To attain favorable results, treat the people you lead with consideration and respect.
- **Take a few breaks** – Take the prescribed rest periods during your development activities.
- **Be worth the risk your boss is taking** – Do due diligence to ensure that a particular stretch assignment is right for you.
- **Showcase your future possibilities** – Make sure your senior executives know that you want to grow professionally and develop new skills.
- **Network** – Create your own web of contacts, including people who can provide help and feedback.

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