Experience-Driven Leader Development

Models, Tools, Best Practices, and Advice for On-the-Job Development

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Introduction

INDIVIDUALS BROADEN AND deepen their leadership capabilities as they do leadership work. In fact, there are good reasons to believe that learning from experience is *the* number one way that leader development happens.

As a leader development practitioner you know this. You know it from the research-based professional knowledge you consume and from your own observations and experiences in organizations. Yet the field continues to focus considerable time, money, and resources on the other two major sources of growth and development for leaders: (1) education and training, and (2) relationships for learning. U.S. companies spend an estimated $13.6 billion annually on formal leader development (O'Leonard & Loew, 2012). The vast majority of this investment goes toward education and training. On average, another 20 percent or so of an organization's leader development solutions are relationship-based (for example, formal coaching or peer networks). In contrast, the average percent of experience-driven leader development solutions range from 9 percent for first-level supervisors to 14 percent for senior managers (O'Leonard & Loew). The number one driver of leader development gets the least attention in leader development systems.

How can organizations rectify this imbalance and better harness the power of experiences for leader development? In our search for answers to this question, we connected with practitioners who had taken up the challenge of enhancing experience-driven development in organizations and communities—in many different ways and with a wide variety of audiences. We did not discover a formula or a step-by-step process, but rather an array

of tools, techniques, interventions, initiatives, and models. We invited these individuals to share their work. The result is a compendium of resources that you can use to jump-start, guide, and stimulate your own efforts to use experience more intentionally to develop leaders.

Let's first return to the imbalance and understand why it happens. A number of forces draw your attention and energy away from experience-driven development and toward coursework and relationship-based development:

- The field is part of a larger society that takes for granted that learning is something that happens in the classroom, yielding knowledge and skills that are put to use later in one's career or back on the job or in some other aspect of one's life. This cultural mindset is pervasive. Classroom language is even used when describing learning outside of that realm (for example, "the school of hard knocks" or "leaders teaching leaders"). Putting experience-based development ahead of formal education and training is countercultural—not just for leader development professionals but for their customers, too.

- Practitioners have developed a wealth of knowledge and expertise about how to design and deliver effective programs, coaching initiatives, and formal mentoring processes. Done well, these practices do make a difference—they impact the development of leaders in important ways. It is no surprise that people focus on what they know how to do well, particularly when they can point to the positive impact of their work. There is much less knowledge in the field about how to best use experiences to develop leaders.

- Experience-driven development is messy. Programs have a beginning and an end, specific objectives, and design elements that support those objectives. They can be managed, evaluated, and continuously improved. On-the-job experiences are unfolding and unscripted. Teasing out the impact of a particular experience on a leader is tricky. When training or coaching, the practitioner is right there guiding and encouraging the learner. Give a leader a stretch assignment, and he or she is in charge of any learning that happens.

- Experience-driven development is less visible. It is hard to quantify and, when done really well, is a natural part of business and organizational processes. The closer you come to embedding leader development into the ongoing work of the organization, the less visibility you have for your work. In fact, a real success means that leaders themselves will own and take credit for the development of leaders in the organization.

But it's not as if the field has been devoid of experience-driven development practices. Job rotation programs are common at entry levels in organizations. Organizations often move high potential managers through a series of assignments to broaden their knowledge

and skills in preparation for higher-level leadership responsibilities. Apprenticeship models of learning and development are standard in numerous professions. Action learning is in the toolkit of many practitioners.

Yet we sense a shift in the field. Not a shift away from coursework and relationships as important modes of learning, but rather a move to make learning from experience a more central part of the practice. What's the evidence for this shift?

- *Increased visibility for the concept of experience-driven development.* You can find more publications on the topic. The topic shows up more in conferences and practitioner forums. More research—some of it published in top academic journals—is available. In human resource circles there is even a catchphrase, "70–20–10," to describe leader development that puts more emphasis on job experiences (the 70) than relationships and training (the 20 and 10). Popularized by one consulting firm (Lombardo & Eichinger, 1996), the phrase is now used regularly in the field.

- *More sophistication in established experience-based practices.* For example, action learning projects that are part of leadership development programs increasingly engage participants in demanding work with real consequences for the organization (rather than safer study-and-recommend projects that might simply end up on a shelf somewhere). Take expatriate assignments as another example. Organizations are now more likely to carefully select candidates, prepare them prior to the assignment, coach them during the assignment, and capitalize on the expatriates' gained insights, connections, and skills in their next assignment.

- *Ongoing experimentation with new practices.* As awareness and understanding of experience-driven development has grown, practitioners have been at the forefront in designing new ways to make it happen and to support it throughout the organization. If you are like us, as you read about the models, tools, and practices in this book, you'll be excited—and sometimes surprised—about innovation in the field.

- *Practices that link and integrate experiences, relationships, and coursework for learning.* One of the criticisms of the 70–20–10 concept is the implication that these three ways of learning represent separate paths. However, what we see in practice is the integration of these three approaches within the same initiative or practice to get the biggest boost for the investment.

This book is about how individuals in the field are making this shift happen. Before you jump in to learn directly from these individuals, we want to accomplish two things in this Introduction: (1) provide you with a brief overview of the stream of research that helped fuel the shift and (2) orient you to the content of this book.

The Research Catalyst

A significant stimulus for the shift toward more focus on experience-driven leadership development happened in 1988 with the publication of *The Lessons of Experience: How Successful Executives Develop on the Job*, authored by Morgan W. McCall, Jr., Michael M. Lombardo, and Ann M. Morrison. The book became a catalyst, moving the focus away from what distinguishes effective leaders to how leaders are developed. As a result, experience-driven development emerged as a new focus for organizations and leader development professionals.

The book was based on qualitative data from 191 executives who were asked to reflect on their career and identify three key experiences that had led to a lasting change in the way they managed. The executives described their experiences in detail, including the skills and perspectives they gleaned from these experiences. The analysis of the executives' stories yielded five categories of key developmental experiences:

- *Challenging Assignments*: A job or a task within a job that stretched the executive because it was new, complex, or demanding. Examples include being responsible for turning around an operation in trouble and moving from a line to a staff position.

- *Other People*: Positive and negative role models—primarily bosses and others higher in the organization—who strongly influenced the executive's approach to management.

- *Hardships*: Setbacks and failures that generated a sense of loss and aloneness. Examples include business mistakes, demotions and missed promotions, and personal life traumas.

- *Coursework*: Formal training and academic programs.

- *Personal Life Experiences*: Experiences that occurred in the family, in school, or in the community, and that varied in nature from difficult situations to inspirational ones.

A majority of the experiences (56 percent) were challenging assignments, and for the most part, the other people and hardship experiences were also happening on the job.

That people learn a great deal from their experiences was certainly not a new discovery. Learning from cycles of action and reflection is a familiar concept in the field of adult learning. What was galvanizing about *Lessons of Experience* was threefold. First, it grounded this abstract concept of learning from experience in the vivid, real-world experiences of executives. It's like the idea of "seeing is believing"—the stories provided the depth and texture that compelled the reader to believe that the concept was significant. Second, it went beyond saying "people learn from their experiences." The research pointed out what kinds of experi-

ences developed executives, what drove the learning in these experiences, and which capabilities were most associated with which experiences. This more detailed examination of developmental experiences created knowledge that could more readily be used by practitioners. Finally, another piece of data from the study was eye-opening. Of the 616 key experiences described by executives in the study, only thirty-eight (6.2 percent) were coursework experiences. This small percentage made people in the program-centric leader development profession pause.

Lessons of Experience spawned a new stream of leader development research. Because the participants in the original study were almost entirely white American males in senior executive roles, the research was replicated in more diverse samples, including senior women executives, African-American executives, middle managers, global executives, and executives in each of several Asian countries (Douglas, 2003; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002; Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987; Yip & Wilson, 2010). In some of these studies, the percentages of other people or hardship experiences were higher than the original study (and the percentage of challenging assignment experiences was lower)—making it clear that 70–20–10 should not be understood as a one-size-fits-all solution. However, the same overall pattern was clear: On-the-job experiences are a significant driver of leader development, particularly experiences that challenge leaders to lead in novel and diverse environments, to create change in high stakes situations, and to work across organizational and cultural boundaries.

Researchers also began building evidence that leaders who have a broad range of challenging leadership experiences are more effective than those who do not, for example, they are more competent at strategic thinking and are rated by others in the organization as more promotable (De Pater, Van Vianen, Bechtoldt, & Klehe, 2009; Dragoni, Oh, Van Katwyk, & Tesluk, 2011). And they explored individual and situational factors that influence who learns the most from developmental experiences. The leader's level of learning orientation (for example, the motivation to gain new skills and master tasks) is one factor that influences the impact of developmental experiences, and access to feedback can offset the diminishing returns associated with high levels of developmental challenge (DeRue & Wellman, 2009; Dragoni, Tesluk, & Oh, 2009).

Lessons of Experience was more than a summary of a research study. It began to lay out a workable approach that organizations could use to better harness the power of experiences for developing management and leadership talent. This approach included identifying developmental jobs, creating a talent pool, helping people learn from experience, and clarifying line management's responsibility for the development process. It identified foundational building blocks necessary to make this approach work, for example, a strong corporate identity, the willingness to take risks, and a culture that supports learning. Practitioners began to find ways to make elements of this approach work in their organizations, themselves learning by trial and error and by sharing with and learning from their like-minded colleagues.

Sharing the Practice

Today researchers are generating new insights about learning from experience. Organizations are creating tools, processes, and practices that enable them to more intentionally use experience for development. So what's missing from this picture? From our perspective, what is missing is the documentation and dissemination of these tools, processes, and practices. They are being invented, designed, tested, implemented, and embraced—but there is little systematic and widespread sharing. You hear about a tool or practice here or there in presentations or through your professional network, or you may read about a particular process in a trade magazine, but there is no central resource for finding out what practitioners are actually doing. Filling that gap was our motivation for creating this book.

We drew on our own experiences, networks, and reading to find people who had material to share—things they actually used in their practice or that their organizations had put into place. Thus, although we are confident that this approach yielded useful contributions, we make no claims of being systematic or exhaustive in our search. We were intentional about only including models, tools, and practices that you are free to borrow (and we encourage you to do so). There are commercially available tools, publications, and other materials that are used to support experience-driven development in organizations, and these are mentioned in several of the contributions, but our goal was to share what practitioners can do in their own settings, not to provide a compendium of things you can purchase.

We were also intentional about only including practices that are consistent with research on effective leader development and about capturing applications from a wide variety of organizations and sectors—corporate, nonprofit, government, education—and in different parts of the world. Some of the processes and practices described in the book are still in early stages of experimentation and refinement while others are well-established. They range from tools that can fit on a single page to major initiatives in organizations. And even though we use the phrase *experience-driven development* to label this field of practice, we welcomed and preserved the various labels used by others, including learning from experience, on-the-job development, experience-based development, and real-world development.

The book is organized into four sections, each targeting a critical element of experience-driven development:

1. *Developmental Experiences: More Intentional for More People.* Many people do get on-the-job developmental experiences—stretch assignments, new responsibilities, unexpected obstacles—without any sort of intervention from leadership development professionals. Yet how can you help more people gain leadership experiences that target their particular development needs?

2. *Leaders: Better Equipped to Learn from Experience.* Having a stretch experience does not guarantee learning from that experience. How can you enhance leaders' ability to learn from their experiences so that they extract the maximum developmental value?

3. *Human Resource Systems: Designed for Experience-Driven Development.* Most organizations have formal systems and processes for selecting and developing leadership talent. How can you build experience-driven development into these processes, embedding it in the organization's DNA?

4. *The Organization: Enabler of Experience-Driven Development:* Many aspects of an organization—its shared values, the behaviors and perceptions of its employees, its processes and routines—can either support experience-driven development or get in its way. How can you influence the organization more broadly to enable rather than inhibit experience-driven learning?

We have also visually tagged each contribution based on whether it shares a:

- *Model:* a conceptual framework or typology that guides thinking and action.

- *Tool:* an activity or technique that leadership development professionals can put to use.

- *Organizational Practice:* a specific process, program, or initiative that an organization has put into place.

- *Advice:* an overview of an important topic with insights based on expertise or research.

You might choose to read this book from cover to cover to gain a broad view of what is happening in the field, starting with how to create more experiences for more people and ending with how to influence the organization in ways that support experience-driven development. You might just pull it out when you have an immediate need, finding those pieces that are most relevant for you in the moment. You might want to read it with your colleagues, getting together along the way to share ideas that it has stimulated for your own work. Whatever your approach, our aspirations are that these tools and practices provide you with resources to accomplish the critical goal of developing the best possible talent in organizations—and that through leader development, you enable positive change in people's lives, in organizations, and in society overall.

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