



Four Levers to Develop Leadership

By Nik Kinley

How much faith do you have in your business' ability to produce the next generation of leaders? Just how successful is your firm in helping people accelerate their development? Because if you are confident your organization does it well, you are probably in a minority. That is the suggestion anyway, of repeated surveys of business leaders, which consistently report a lack of satisfaction with attempts to develop emerging leaders.

There is no shortage of activity. Most large and medium-sized firms offer some sort of development activities, and many have accelerated development programs for those viewed as 'high-potentials'. So where are things going wrong? Why the persistently poor perceptions of results? And just what can firms do to make sure that the investments they make in development activities succeed in delivering a strong pipeline of talent?

The answer to these questions lies in the independent academic research into what really works to help people develop. It shows us what is not working with what we are doing

now, and points the way to what we need to do going forwards. And, as we shall see, there is a surprising gap between what the research recommends, and what many firms tend to do in practice.

The good news here, though, is that this research is pretty clear in its findings. It shows that there are four key factors that have a significant impact on the success of development activities. And fortunately, all four are things organizations can do something about.



1. Individualize Development

One of the strongest findings from the research is the need to target and individualize development activities. And that means doing three things.

(A) Individualized development plans

There was a time when big, generalized leadership development courses were the development solution. Not so much, any more. One-size-fits-all programs can definitely add value, but they lack precision. They are not targeted at attendees' individual development needs. And the research unequivocally shows that development activities tend to be far more impactful when they are tailored to individuals. After all, different people have different learning styles and development needs, and so for maximum effect their development activities need to differ too.

Practically speaking, this means individual development plans that incorporate a blend of activities unique to each person. This in turn requires an increase in the use of development activities that allow individuals to focus on what they personally need to do, such as coaching and modularized courses.

This may sound more costly than just a single development program, and it is almost inevitably more logistically complex. But it need not be excessively so. We are increasingly being engaged to help create individualized development plans. And in our experience, more individualized plans tend to have a greater proportion of behavioral solutions, and less in the way of formal training actions. For example, let's say strategic thinking is identified as a development need. Rather than simply having attended a generic strategy course on a plan, what we more often see instead are actions such as reading more broadly, or practicing through creating mock plans.

So we need to individualize development, and we can partially offset the increased cost and complexity of this by focusing on more behavioral development actions. Yet to do this

successfully, we need to do something else first.

(B) Evaluate needs

In order to individualize and target development activities, we need to know both what each person needs to develop and how they can best develop it. The traditional way to do this is to ask managers during the annual appraisal process. But the ability of managers to identify the development needs of their people varies. And even when they are good at it, they tend to focus on the short-term needs of people, in role, and less on broader, longer-term development.

This is why many firms conduct an objective and formal assessment of individuals. It can help them understand both who to target particular developmental resources at, and what development needs each individual has. The benefits of doing this are evidenced in the research. It shows that people who go through this kind of assessment, and then also receive feedback on the results, tend to develop faster than those who do not have this. Why this acceleration happens is not certain, but the obvious explanation is that it helps both firms and individuals accurately identify what people need to develop. And people do seem to need help with this, given the research showing that almost all of us have at least one blind spot – an area where we think we are more skilled than we actually are.

(C) Bury the 70:20:10 rule

The 70:20:10 rule feels ubiquitous. Rare is the organization that doesn't reference it on at least one slide deck. It refers to the idea that 70 percent of learning should come from on-the-job experience, 20 percent from coaching and feedback, and 10 percent from formal training and learning interventions.

The benefit of the idea is that it makes everyone aware of the fact that learning and development is not just about formal programs. The down side, though, is that the 70:20:10 rule is NOT a rule. It is a generalization and a guess. And a guess that was initially founded on just a single piece of research, which asked senior leaders

what made them successful. As many others have noted, it is neither a scientific fact nor a recipe for how best to develop people. And to the extent that it leads us to overlook individual needs, and disregard the fact that some people may benefit more from training, it undermines our ability to individualize development and make development activities more effective. Far from a rule, it can be misleading and unhelpful.

Instead, different competencies require different sorts of development. For example, studies suggest that developing others is best learnt – initially at least – through training. Political savvy and networking appear best learnt through experience and coaching. And strategic thinking can be significantly improved through more educational activities.

So if we want development activities to be as effective as possible, we need to individualize development. To do that, we need to make sure that we have strong insight into people's development needs. And to do all of this, we need to be willing to forget and not be bound by the 70:20:10 generalisation.

2. Use Stretch Experiences

Having said that different people benefit from different types of learning activities, there is evidence that one particular type of activity – stretching work experiences – can help people develop more than any other.

Probably the most famous evidence for this comes from a series of studies conducted at the US telecommunications firm AT&T. Beginning in the 1950s, this research followed a group of managers through their careers. Two findings in particular are of interest to us here. First, those who reached the highest management levels at the twenty-year point in their careers had had more job changes across departments and locations. And second, that the degree of challenge college recruits experienced in their roles was a strong predictor of who made it to up to middle management levels after eight years. So experiences

that stretch us help us develop.

Knowing experience can stimulate development is one thing; helping people get it is quite another. It throws up two challenges: finding ways to source experiences for people, and ensuring people get the right experiences.

(A) Sourcing stretching experiences

For the most part, organizations' solutions to sourcing developmental experiences tend to revolve around helping people find new roles. Some firms actively manage people's careers, and move them from job to job. Others identify so-called 'crucible' roles, which are deemed particularly developmental, and ensure that only people viewed as having high-potential fill these roles. But what most firms do is to leave it to individuals to find roles themselves. The challenge with this latter option is that it relies upon visibility – on individuals being known to the senior leaders who are making selection decisions. Talent reviews and high-potential pools are both attempts to solve this issue. But too often these reviews and pools result in lists that remain largely unused, and are rarely referred to during actual selection decisions.

So what the research shows us is that if your firm's solution to sourcing developmental experiences centres on helping people find new roles, then some kind of active, formal intervention is required to make this happen. Just relying on the internal market or creating lists of 'high potentials' tends not to be enough.

There is an alternative to all this, though. New roles are just one type of developmental experience, and indeed research shows that too many role changes can actually hinder development, so other developmental experiences can and should be used, such as leading or taking part in special projects or even things as simple as someone accompanying their manager to high level meetings. Indeed, this kind of shadowing of managers is probably the single most underused development opportunity in organisations today. And other than the time required, it is free. So every firm has options it can use to

help source developmental experiences for people.

(B) Match experiences to individuals

Unfortunately, just giving people stretch assignments is not enough to guarantee development. It may work, but then it may not – research shows that some types of experience are more developmental than others. So if you want to help people develop through experience, it needs to be the right experience.

One undisputed finding here is that in order for an experience to be developmental, it needs to involve a degree of change or challenge. So any experience that involves this – be it speaking at a senior forum, leading a difficult project, or moving internationally – can boost development.

Yet just considering change and challenge is not enough, as different types of experience lead to different types of learning. This means that in order to ensure that experiences are truly developmental, we have to carefully match them to individuals’ needs. To help us think about this, researchers have tried categorizing the different types of challenges that experiences can provide. One common such categorization distinguishes between four different types of challenge:

Another, popular categorization describes seven types of developmental experiences. These are: early work experiences, first supervisory jobs, a switch from a line job to a staff job, handling a project or a task force, starting from scratch, fix-it/turnaround assignments, and increases in scope. However you categorize things, the key thing is that development will be boosted most if there is a careful and deliberate matching between people’s development needs and the experiences they have.

3. Use Scaffolding

Scaffolding is a term used in educational circles, and refers to the processes, tools and other support that can be put in place to help people extract the maximum learning from experiences and activities. It is the things you put in place to make sure development has the impact you want it to.

These are not just optional extras, either. One of the most consistent findings from research into the effectiveness of development is that scaffolding processes are actually more important in ensuring people learn than the quality and content of the development experiences and activities. It does not matter how world class your training, coaching or executive education is, if they are to stand a chance of working, the environment people work in has to

support change and development. If it does not, then chances are that people either will not be able to develop, or – at best – will develop less than they could do.

Many of the scaffolding methods receiving the most headlines recently have been technology solutions. They include apps to collect real-time feedback, track progress against development plans, and both prompt and record development conversations. But scaffolding does not have to be complex or high-tech. There is evidence that just providing people with information on how to change their behavior can increase the chances that they will succeed. And there are studies showing that simply by asking people to sign their development plans you can increase their commitment to them.

Other low-tech scaffolding techniques include providing networking opportunities, with an emphasis on information-rich peer networks more than supportive social networks. In this vein, there is also evidence that ‘development buddies’ can improve the effectiveness of development. These are individuals who pair up with people going through development activities to help them extract the maximum learning.

One scaffolding technique increasingly encountered is gamification – the use of techniques first developed for video games to increase engagement in non-gaming activities. The most common methods include points systems, leader boards, and progress markers. One of the first companies to use gamification to support development activities was Ford. It needed to increase employees’ engagement with an online training program. And through the careful use of gamification techniques, Ford was able to more than double employees’ use of learning materials.

Gamification often involves technology-based solutions. But again, it does not need to. One business we worked with introduced a kind of levelling to their high-potential development program. This involved people progressing through five awarded development titles such as ‘starter’, ‘advanced’, and ‘mastery’, according to how much development

<i>Type of experience or challenge</i>	<i>Learning / development</i>
New situations with unfamiliar responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broader perspective • Ability and willingness to rely on others • Business and technical knowledge • Managing ambiguity
Bringing about change or building relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking responsibility for a group or project • Negotiation skills • Creating cooperation • Ability to see others’ perspectives • Willingness and ability to involve others in decisions
High-responsibility, high-latitude jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisiveness • Decision-making and organizational skills • Ability to see the bigger picture
Negative experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of limits • Coping with stressful situations • Dealing with setbacks • Taking charge of challenges

they had demonstrated. And with each new level, new development resources and opportunities were provided for them. This is classic gamification, but also low-tech.

With all of these methods, the focus is on embedding development activities and experiences within a larger system that helps ensure that development genuinely happens. Which brings us to the scaffolding factor that can help ensure development happens more than any other: people's managers.

Start with managers

If you want to effectively scaffold development activities, then there is no better place to start than with someone's manager, because research shows that it is the single most important scaffolding factor. Managers simply being involved in their people's development is the first and biggest step here. For example, an increasingly common method used in coaching is for coaches to briefly contact an individual's manager at the end of each session. They can then advise the manager about any actions the individual has agreed to do, or anything in particular the manager can do to support the individual.

To be effective though, managers need to go beyond passive involvement. They need to coach people, helping them reflect on and understand the challenges they are facing. And they need to provide guidance and advice when it is needed, and support and encouragement when things get tough.

Unfortunately, research we have conducted with IMD business school shows that most managers do not feel well equipped to do this. While over three-quarters of leaders are confident identifying development needs and giving people feedback, less than a third are confident they know how to help their people improve and get the most from developmental activities. And increasing awareness of this is leading a growing number of businesses to invest in ensuring managers are better trained to enable, drive and support their people's development. It is also why in 2015, working with IMD, we wrote the book "Changing Employee Behavior", which contains over 100 different techniques managers can use to help people develop.

Of course, ensuring managers support their people's development requires more than just training and encouragement. And that brings us to the last of our four levers to help make development more effective.

4. Create Accountability

Strictly speaking, our fourth lever is also a type of scaffolding. But it is so important, it deserves its own place on our list. For research shows that the time required for people to develop from a junior role into a mid-level manager can be reduced by an amazing 30 percent just through holding individuals accountable for their development. In a similar vein, there is evidence that people develop faster when firms recognise and reward those who show more development. What both approaches require is tracking whether people have genuinely developed – a way to have visibility on whether progress has been made, performance improved, or behaviour changed.

There is no single best way of doing this, but here are some of the most common and effective ways we have encountered:

- Making reviewing development achieved a formal, measured part of performance reviews.
- Using shorter development plans, lasting just 3-6 months, in order to make it easier to see if people are succeeding in developing. (This is also often implemented with the rationale of 'if people commit to take some specific action to develop but don't do it within 3-6 months, they probably never will').
- Holding reviews of progress every month or two with an HR representative or other third party, at which the proportion of development plans implemented is agreed and recorded. These figures can then be collated centrally, so that the averages for each business unit can be tracked. And in some businesses, we have seen this combined with a leader-board, showing top progress-ers, which is made public.
- Giving individuals a monetary prize or public recognition and praise for successfully developing themselves.
- Using dynamic development costs, in

which central HR pays for development activities, unless individuals are felt not to be participating fully, at which point costs are transferred to individuals' business units.

With each of these, the aim is to create transparency and accountability about whether development is truly happening. And, as ever, accountability helps ensure activity.

A Place for Big, Generic Programs

Big, generic development programs may be less popular than in the past, and may seem to run contrary to our first factor, individualisation, but they have their benefits. They can be cost-effective, they enable networking, and they can help firms align people behind a common broader agenda. So if you are running them, it is important to ensure that they use each of our four levers as much as possible.

- Ensure everyone attending a program has as a development need in the capability area being addressed in the program, and that the program itself is designed to cater for different learning styles and experience levels. You can also make sure that attendees build individualised, behavioural development plans as part of the programme.
- Individuals can be exposed to stretching experiences through the program and/or to disruptive thinking and ideas.
- Scaffolding can be provided by engaging line managers and other key sponsors throughout the program to support the individuals, and by ensuring that the program is part of a broader system of development.
- And finally, attendees can be made accountable for developing in the same way as with individual development plans.

What Needs To Happen

Reading what is above, some of the factors we have described may sound obvious. But consider the traditional approach to development. A group of people is identified – it could be everyone at a certain level, or a few select individuals, as happens in ‘high-potential’ programs. One or more development needs is then identified in the population. And then some kind of program or intervention is created to target these development needs.

This may sound reasonable, but consider now what it does not typically involve. It does not usually involve much or any individualization. (Individuals may each have a development plan, but these typically rely on generic solutions). It often does not offer a structured and targeted mix of stretching experiences. It does not typically involve a systematic set of scaffolding for the development. And accountability for development remains a rarity.

So, as obvious as many of the methods we have mentioned may seem, we would suggest that they are not common practice. What makes this remarkable is that they are not really matters of opinion. They are what independent research shows us works in making development experiences and activities effective.

Practically speaking, most businesses will not be able to immediately implement all four of the levers to the fullest extent. But we firmly believe that all firms can do something, right now, towards each of them. And given the urgent need for leaders that most firms report, and the poor perceptions of development activities that currently exist, that would be a significant step forwards.

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