

Top 10 Snakes & Ladders for Implementing Leadership Programs

Posted By Tammy Heerman on February 8 and February 22, 2012



Building leadership capacity has become a fundamental challenge in all organizations today – whether the primary reason is to build a future supply of talent, create the leadership focus required to execute on a new business strategy, or imbed the change skills required to become agile and innovative in this fierce competitive environment. Organizations have good intentions when it comes to rolling out programs to achieve these objectives. What we’ve found in working with organizations of all sizes and in all sectors is that this becomes a bit like playing the

game snakes and ladders – some actions help move you ahead, others will take you backwards. While there are no hard and fast rules on how to do this, here are some things to keep in mind.

The Snakes: What to Avoid

1. **Implement leadership components with the best in class provider for each component (e.g. assessment, training, coaching).** Many leadership programs are implemented in a piece-meal fashion. Even with the best components, a fragmented program ultimately confuses leaders and erodes credibility and traction.
2. **Get rid of all symbols, rituals or anything that reinforces the status quo.** Getting rid of all symbols and rituals will create a negative reaction that will impede change. It is important to honour the past, and identify the elements of the past that are still valuable in the future.
3. **Make the leadership training about the most up-to-date topics.** Many leaders and managers are too busy for “flavour of the month”. They want meaningful topics that are real, align to their day-to-day realities and can be built upon over time. Core fundamentals need to be mastered in your organizational context.
4. **Keep your programs appropriate for the level of leadership – senior leaders should only talk about strategic things and front-line managers about tactical things.** In all your programs, you need to balance the strategic and the tactical. In today’s world, front-line managers need to understand strategic business issues as much as your senior leaders. What differs is how they need to execute on the tactics of the strategy.
5. **Ensure HR ownership of the initiative.** To drive long term sustainable success, leadership programs need to be seen as being owned by the senior leadership of the organization. HR plays a critical enabler function. However, if HR owns it, our experience has shown that programs do not sustain themselves over time.
6. **Ask participants to sign up for the training program.** The investment you are making in leadership development is considerable. You must ensure that leaders attend. Increasingly we are finding organizations making participation mandatory because the program is seen as a key strategic driver of the business. Also don’t brand the program as merely training – present this as



an important opportunity to connect with leaders across the organization and to propel their success as leaders of the organization.

7. ***Provide post-program support to those who ask for it.*** Your program needs to build in sustaining activities for everyone. Once individuals get back to their regular jobs, they will become immersed in the day-to-day challenges. Few will ask for ongoing help.
8. ***Have leaders give the “on the bus, off the bus” speech.*** When driving leadership change, there may be a tendency for senior leaders to provide a “speech” which outlines the consequences for leaders if they do not align to the direction of the organization. In some cases, the speech does not generate the outcomes desired. We find it is better to communicate a compelling story of the future to engage the hearts and minds of leaders and managers.
9. ***Use classroom training as the centerpiece of the development program.*** When you really want to build capacity, a blended approach works best. One that contains classroom learning with coaching, assessments, on-the-job assignments, pod coaching, etc. Also ensure that you make the required changes to align policies, procedures and rewards with the desired leadership culture. An important step of sustaining a new leadership culture is by ensuring that all formal structures and policies are aligned to the new desired behaviours.
10. ***Implement your initiatives at top speed.*** Too often programs fail because they are actually too ambitious. Every organization has limited bandwidth. It is critical to consider how much can be taken on to succeed over the long term. It is also important that the program not be seen as something separate to their day job. Leadership is their day job and the program is linked exactly to what they need to focus on while they’re engaging in the operational or technical aspects of their work.

The Ladders: What Will Help

1. ***Acknowledge that improvements in leadership culture require, at the core, a change strategy.*** There is no easy way to develop an effective culture of leadership without supporting and encouraging leaders to embrace change. Failure to do this will mean any resources spent on leadership culture will be squandered.
2. ***Develop a robust leadership communications plan that connects the dots.*** Too often, communications fail to help leaders connect the dots among a number of organizational initiatives. The more integrated the communications plan, the clearer your leaders will be on what is expected of them and the desired outcomes for the leadership program.
3. ***Define for leaders the future they need to create and be part of.*** Be clear about objectives. A clear definition of your future leadership requirements is the cornerstone of your success. It brings clarity to everything you do from program design, to communications and evaluation. It’s not enough to preach platitudes about improvements to leadership culture. Be specific about the expectations and behaviors you need your leaders to live up to. Make sure all leaders are walking that talk.
4. ***Focus your investment.*** Don’t spread yourself too thin. The goal may be to instill a new leadership culture in a broad stratum of your organization. However, it may be more effective to



focus only on, say, senior executives or high potential future leaders. Then, have those people go forth like missionaries and spread the new leadership culture.

5. ***Make sure the highest levels of the organization are not only supportive, but also 'seen' to be supportive.*** Senior leaders need to be seen as owning the outcome. Having the president or CEO present at workshops, talking directly to other leaders about the importance of the new culture, is a critical success factor.
6. ***Provide forums for leaders to connect across departments and business units.*** One of the primary benefits of many leadership programs is that they help leaders connect across departments and business units. Find ways to breakdown organizational silos. It will help your leaders build relationships with colleagues across the organization and result in the increased collaboration and innovation required to add more value to your customers.
7. ***Establish groups of cohorts.*** Cohorts represent groups of leaders that experience a development process together. Through this approach, leaders are able to strengthen relationships with their peers. A stronger leadership culture is established. Leaders then work together in a more aligned and engaged manner.
8. ***Ensure leaders are responsible for their own development.*** While organizations need to support the development of leaders, in the end leadership is a choice. Every leader needs to accept personal responsibility for their development.
9. ***Share stories of change and success.*** Once your program is launched, ensure that you are tracking and sharing stories of personal change and success. By sharing these stories, you begin to build momentum among your leaders that their new behaviours are having a positive impact on your organization.
10. ***Weed out leaders who don't model the desired leadership behaviours or values of the organization.*** As you roll out your program, it will become clear that some leaders no longer are aligned to the vision and values of your organization. Many may become non-performers. It is critical to support these leaders. If their behaviours do not change, then you need to act on them.

In the end you can have the best formula and the best content but unless you ensure that there's visible support for leadership development; that many are leading by example day in and day out; and that you confront and challenge laggards and cynics, you will likely not achieve the results you are looking for.



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