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Is Leadership Development Still On The Agenda?

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Niels-Peter van Doorn, Head of Leadership Consulting at Borderless, joins Jack Zenger in this installment of the Zenger Folkman Leadership podcast series to discuss the results of the Borderless Leadership Development Survey 2016.

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Could you tell us about your survey?

We were interested in knowing how effective leadership programs are today. In 2016 people tend to focus on business needs and we have the impression that leadership is starting to become less important. We wanted to know to what extent leadership is still on the agenda, how leadership is organized, and how people perceive the effectiveness of leadership initiatives.

We sent a survey to 45,000 people and 1,000 of those completed the full survey. This gave us an interesting look into the kitchen of a variety of organizations. About 65% of respondents were from Europe, 25% were from North America, and the remainder were from the rest of the world. Most of the respondents work for global organizations, so it was interesting to get insight into how people perceive the development of leadership as it is organized today.

What were the major conclusions and what were the major differences you saw in organizations?

The biggest surprise was that half of the respondents were not enthusiastic about the effectiveness of leadership-development initiatives and the funding, attention, and support they get from upper management.

At the same time, people stated quite clearly that commitment from the highest level of executives is key to developing any kind of leadership and that to deliver business results and to adapt to strategic business changes, leadership is essential.

Does it appear that organizations are centralizing the leadership-development function or are they pushing it out to the divisions and giving them more autonomy and local freedom?

That depends on the organization, but generally, the best practice of leadership development combines the best of both worlds—having leadership principles that are defined centrally and are applied to the whole organization, but at the same time, leaving the freedom to adapt to regional differences in terms of markets and staffing.

This paradox is fairly instrumental in ensuring that leaders are effective. Effective leadership in 2016 is determined by having a number of common management principles, but at the same time being able to combine different people, markets, and personalities in an effective leadership style.

According to your survey, what are the major leadership challenges?

We asked people to look at leadership from two different perspectives. We first asked them what the main leadership challenges in the organization were and to what business challenges these leadership aspects were connected. We then asked, on a personal level, what were the most important traits for a leader.

The answers to these questions were distinctly different. When people focus on the needs of the business, they come up with leadership challenges such as delivering business results and being cost effective. It was very much an economist's view on what the company needed. But when we asked them what they personally think are important leadership traits, almost all respondents came up with soft skills.

We concluded that people separate the hard aspects and the soft aspects of their businesses, whereas in our opinion, leadership is organized in the most effective way when the hard business needs and the soft skills needed are combined in one comprehensive approach.

The programs inside companies are often provided by outside vendors who don't always pay attention to the business' needs, while the best leadership development programs are linked to the business' strategies and needs.

A big client of mine here in Europe recently sent the top 200 in the company to Harvard for one week to pay attention to recent developments in the field. They have also been working with a couple of the most prominent experts in the world. This is great, but it is also just the beginning. It is like a top athlete getting to learn from Usain Bolt how to run for two days and then saying, "You're on your own."

That doesn't work. I'm working with this client to figure out, after returning from Harvard, how they will integrate the lessons learned in their daily work. You might be working with excellent external service providers or renowned experts, but in the end it comes down to integrating these lessons, and a combination of hard and soft skills, in your everyday work.

According to your survey, one of the most successful tools is coaching. How is coaching used to sustain what people learn in leadership-development programs?

Almost everybody said that coaching was the #1 most-effective way of developing leadership and that it is best accomplished by a combination of external and internal support, but one-third of respondents said that there was no coaching in their organizations.

Good coaching combines business insights and business acumen with the psychological and personal aspects of coaching. Internal coaching in the everyday working environment can be comfortable for executives

because they get some time off where they can talk freely about their own development. But at the same time, the risk is that the coaching process becomes detached from the everyday business life. We attempt to focus on integrating the hard and soft parts of the business in the coaching process.

In a previous survey about the first 100 days of executives in their new roles, they said that this type of internal coaching and mentoring was very instrumental in them being able to deliver results quickly. Internal mentoring programs are a very cost- and time-effective way to ensure that people develop their leadership skills and also learn how to cooperate in a more personal way.

How have you seen successful organizations combine the leadership-development process with their leadership challenges?

According to our survey, these things are not really coming together. I think that many organizations know that they should be doing something about leadership, but they just do something and hope it turns out all right.

The observation of many respondents is that it is important that leadership development is linked to the highest level and that the CEO has a vision of leadership. Companies where the CEO has a very clear idea of the kind of behaviors that are necessary to add value do significantly better than companies where that vision does not exist.

This afternoon I talked to a client that was struggling with this topic. I asked him, “What is your vision of leadership?” And I got an answer that was politically correct. If he would have been honest, he would have said, “Niels, I just don’t know. I haven’t given it much thought.”

Actually, we like that kind of honesty, because we can build on that. When companies build leadership-development programs on a politically correct approach that lacks substance, the effects are less impressive.

Good leadership development starts as a dialog with the board of an organization to determine what leadership is relevant for the situation the company is in today. This means that, at the board level, we start reflecting and thinking before launching leadership initiatives. If you do that, you can come up with a leadership style that is connected to the market situation and is much more effective.

I refer to a sports metaphor regularly. The best leadership initiatives that I've worked on have lasted for a year and had monthly recurring events where people thought about leadership, even if they didn't need external help or service providers. Just like professional athletes, you only get better if you pay attention to your performance on a regular basis.

Do you see any correlation between what people are investing in leadership development and the outcomes?

I don't think there is a linear connection between the money you spend and the outcomes. I've worked with clients that didn't have a lot of money. In my opinion, it's not about the money—it's about the attention paid to the topic of leadership development. If they pay attention to it on a regular basis, initiatives can be very successful.

Generally, the strongest reaction of respondents was that they don't see a lot of leadership development, regardless whether it is with external support or not. In the end, investing a lot of money in leadership development is not necessary to be effective.

Is there anything else that you've seen organizations use that have been particularly successful?

There's a general concept that was researched by a colleague based on a successful leadership-development initiative he worked on with an American company. He found that the reason this initiative was so successful is that it consciously applied three different elements and integrated them effectively.



In many organizations, leadership development is either about the business or about individual development. This colleague discovered that the business, team, and individual aspects are all distinctly different.

When you are dealing with the business, you are analyzing facts and numbers. When you are dealing with the team, it is not so much about objectives, but about the interaction between people. And on an individual level, having the right attitude and having the right leadership approach requires reflection.

As a good leader, you need to be able to analyze, connect, reflect on your own attitudes, and integrate the insights of these three elements. For me, this is the first and foremost lesson I would give anybody wanting to develop leadership skills—to avoid a one-sided focus and to make sure you are comprehensive in dealing with leadership challenges.

Listen to the full discussion at zengerfolkman.com.

To see the results of the survey, go to:
Borderless Leadership Development Survey 2016.



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