

Why Leadership Development Fails to Produce Good Leaders

Ray Williams

Leadership must be important — more than 20,000 books and thousands of articles have been written about the critical elements of and the impact it has on people, organizations and countries, if not the world. Yet despite the fact leadership training programs abound, they have failed to produce good leaders.

Despite the collective wisdom of centuries on this topic, confidence in our leaders is low and continues to decline. In a 2012 survey by the National Leadership Index (NLI), released by the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School and Merriman River Group, 77% of respondents said the United States now has a crisis in leadership and confidence levels have fallen to the lowest levels in recent times.

In the past 20 years, 30% of Fortune 500 chief executives have lasted less than three years. Chief executives now are lasting 7.6 years on a global average down from 9.5 in 1995. According to the Center for Creative Leadership, 38% new chief executives fail in their first 18 months on the job.

It appears the major reasons for this have nothing to do with competence, knowledge, or experience. Sydney Finkelstein, author of *Why Smart Executives Fail*, and David Dotlich and Peter C. Cairo, in their book, *Why CEOs Fail: The 11 Behaviors That Can Derail Your Climb To The Top And How To Manage Them*, present cogent explanations, most of which have to do with hubris, ego and a lack of emotional intelligence.

In a provocative article in the *Harvard Business Review Blogs*, author Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic argues “the main reason for the uneven management sex ratio is our inability to discern between confidence and competence. That is, because we (people in general) commonly misinterpret displays of confidence as a sign of competence, we are fooled into believing that men are better leaders than women ... the only advantage that men have over women is the fact that manifestations of hubris — often masked as charisma or charm — are commonly mistaken for leadership potential, and that these occur much more frequently in men than in women.”

But he goes on to say that “arrogance and overconfidence are inversely related to leadership talent — the ability to build and maintain high-performing teams, and to inspire followers to set aside their selfish agendas to work for the common interest of the group.

So why, when leadership development and training programs proliferate, do we continue to see significant levels of failure in leaders today?

Part of the reason why leadership development programs fails is inextricably tied to our notions of what makes a good leader. Tasha Eurich, author of *Bankable Leadership: Happy People, Bottom Line Results and the Power to Deliver Both* argues “Though scientists spent most of the

19th century convinced that good leadership was inborn and fixed, the research of the early 20th century told a different story—that leadership is largely made. A recent study by Richard Arvey at Singapore’s NUS Business School revealed that up to 70 percent of leadership is learned. But business leaders are divided. The Center for Creative Leadership reports that 20 percent of C-level executives believe that leadership is born, and more than 28 percent believe it’s equally born and made. But, the evidence shows otherwise.”

Leadership training has become a big business, with publishers, universities and consultants jockeying to position themselves as the “go-to” partners and gurus to develop leaders, yet research shows most development programs fail to deliver expected returns.

I am convinced that the focus on leadership development is in the wrong place. Most initiatives focus on competencies, skill development and techniques, which in some ways is like re-arranging the deck chairs on a sinking ship. Good leaders need to become masters of themselves before they can be masters of anything else.

Those involved in coaching leaders should ensure the following areas are emphasized:

Self-awareness. Leadership development needs to be an inside-out process that focuses less on competencies and skill acquisition and more on increasing your self-awareness and understanding how your leaders’ behaviour impacts others;

Emotional self-mastery. Again, a superficial program of increasing emotional intelligence through techniques and tips of such things as listening skills or facilitation skills avoids or neglects the more important requirement to understand, manage and master a leader’s emotions and how they understand and respond appropriately to the emotions of others;

A personal stake in self-development. Leadership development is frequently seen as the responsibility of the organization rather than a shared responsibility with potential and current leaders. Rarely have I heard a leader say he wants to take personal responsibility to become the best person he can be and take charge of his personal growth;

Recruit potential leaders that are humble; not those driven by hubris or ego. Organizations continue to recruit leaders who fit the stereotype of a charismatic, narcissistic with little humility and a big ego.

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