



How Long is Your Leadership Development Runway?

With all the time I spend in airports, it's not surprising that I have runways on my mind. Anyone who has white-knuckled a landing will agree that the possibility of running out of tarmac is always top of mind. Yet, with today's gargantuan aircrafts, runway length is actually increasing and it is the take-off, not the landing, which usually requires the most real estate.

I bring this up because the reverse is true in most businesses today. Or so it seems to me. Leadership development used to be a long runway – a measured, step by step process that took place over years and was seen as a necessary and worthwhile long-term investment on the part of the business. High potentials grew into their jobs over time, adding layer upon layer of management skills from experiences gained at all levels of the business. When they were finally given the pilot's wings, these 40 and 50 year olds were rightfully expected to know every inch of the craft and how to command it.

Today, the business world is moving at supersonic speed. New leaders are

coming to the job younger – many in their 20s and 30s – and are expected to attain lift-off more quickly. With intense shareholder expectations and competitive pressures, young leaders do not have the “luxury” of a long runway to get their skills up to speed. If anything, they must be helicopters, capable of immediate verticality.

But that's unrealistic. Are there any tools businesses can deploy to compensate for shorter leadership development cycles? This is not an idle question posed by someone bored out of her mind waiting – still waiting – for her plane. (Although I am.) The reality is that the baby-boom cohort of leaders is heading off (or at least cutting back) and the younger generation has to be ready to take over... soon. There is a critical talent gap emerging and businesses can't expect talented but unprepared high-potentials to take over. The risk of crash and burn is too high. Today's development track for high potentials needs to be about content AND experience at the same time... in real-world work scenarios.

I'm not advocating a return to the "good old days" of functional apprenticeships and slow simmering maturation of leadership skills. What I do think has particular relevance and value today is personalized executive coaching for young leaders – focused one-to-one assistance in helping them transition to a new and unfamiliar role. Executive coaching can accelerate the learning curve tremendously by helping individuals gain the interpersonal skills, executive presence, cultural competencies, and political savvy – to name just a few critical

attributes – that used to develop over time.

If you currently have a leadership development program but are not seeing the results you would like, consider adding executive coaching to the mix. This can be in the form of individual coaching, group coaching, or both. In many cases a little coaching help will go far in helping tomorrow's leaders accelerate their development in ways that are relevant to the organization's operational requirements and growth objectives

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