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THE BUSINESS WORLD

Learning How to Be an Effective Leader: Lessons from the Executive Roundtable

Leadership skills are widely considered critical to organizational success, and companies that manage to effectively develop leadership capabilities tend to outperform their competitors. Ironically, while the popularity of leadership development programs continues to escalate, organizations still struggle to find programs that deliver solid results—the magic bullet, it seems, has yet to be found.

According to The Conference Board of Canada, the majority of Canadian organizations regard their leadership development practices as “relatively ineffective” and express only “lukewarm support” for them. There are indeed serious questions about whether Canadian organizations have the leadership development systems in place to effectively support their future leadership requirements.¹

Given the leadership talent gap, it is time to look beyond traditional approaches to leadership development. In this regard, the efforts of such forward-thinking organizations as The Executive Roundtable appear to be moving leadership development forward.

The Executive Roundtable (www.theexecutiveroundtable.ca) is a successful Canadian consulting firm that offers a uniquely different and powerful approach to nurturing and developing leadership talent. Glain Roberts-McCabe, founder and CEO of The Executive Roundtable, developed “The Roundtable for Leaders” program after she noticed that up-and-coming corporate leaders enjoyed expanding their leadership capability through interactions with other leaders of the same level and ambition.

In 2010, Roberts-McCabe launched a 10-month program that featured *peer mentoring*, and today the program is used by an impressive list of corporate clients, including PepsiCo Canada, RBC, Torstar, Maple Leaf Foods, and the Canadian Automobile Association (CAA).

What makes The Executive Roundtable’s program different? A third of Canadian organizations already provide mentoring and coaching programs for their managerial-level employees, but such programs are based on the belief that knowledge is best transferred down from more seasoned, or even soon-to-be-retiring, managers to less-experienced employees. In contrast, “The Roundtable for Leaders” has been designed in large part around the concept of having “high potential” managers work in small exclusive groups, led by an executive facilitator, to share and exchange ideas, perspectives, and actionable advice.

Participants meet regularly to discuss key issues and topics relevant to their jobs and stage of career and to provide each other with advice and feedback. The sessions are structured and led by an expert facilitator, who brings additional skills and experiences to the group and to the learning process. The program is offered to large corporate clients as well as to the public, in which case managers from different organizations gather around the table.

The program combines peer mentoring with more traditional one-on-one coaching. It is striking how the program participants perceive the value of peer mentoring differently than that of coaching. The coaching process helped them establish and clarify their short- and long-term goals through challenging questions and personal reflections. In contrast, peer mentoring helped them generate concrete ideas for dealing with specific

¹ Kotlyar, I., & Karakowsky, L. (2013). Leading edge leadership development: A lesson from The Executive Roundtable. *HR Edge*. Retrieved from www.theexecutiveroundtable.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/HR-Edge-Article1.pdf.

work challenges, exposed them to different ways of thinking, and provided a sounding board as well as an opportunity for vicarious learning. While some individuals saw more value in peer mentoring and others in coaching, depending on their personal developmental needs, most liked the blended approach of “The Roundtable for Leaders,” where peer mentoring and coaching were combined into one program.²

Can leadership skills really be acquired effectively from one’s peers rather than from those higher up the hierarchy? According to participants in this program, the answer is a resounding “yes!” Participants in “The Roundtable for Leaders” program include everyone from senior managers to directors and vice-presidents at companies from different industries. And these executives are very enthusiastic about their experience. According to one executive, “We liked it so much we convinced Glain to set up an Alumni program and so we stuck together for another year and continued a similar approach.”

Based on their accounts, the program facilitates two types of learning outcomes: work related and career related. The former includes enhanced abilities to address various strategic and tactical challenges, deal with subordinates, and make better decisions. Participants describe the value they obtain from being able to receive critical feedback in a supportive, nonthreatening and noncompetitive context—which is a unique opportunity since traditional performance appraisals are notoriously poor at juggling the mentoring function and the performance evaluative function. They also report how much they benefited from the rare opportunity to practise providing coaching advice to others.

The second type of learning outcome can be called career-related learning. Participants describe how their participation in the program elevated their level of aspiration and created a different outlook on their careers. These two types of personal learning appear to be related and mutually reinforcing. As one participant explained, “It’s a great opportunity to really make sure that you understand who you are as a leader and as a manager, and how you want to envision yourself and grow.”³

It appears there are a couple of key elements that make peer mentoring successful. First, the diverse composition of roundtables appears to be critical to the effectiveness of the program. Participants in the program generally represent a range of functional backgrounds—finance, marketing, sales, operations, human resources—thereby contributing a rich variety of expertise and perspectives to group discussions. A common sentiment among participants was the appreciation for being exposed to such diversity of views and experiences, which enhanced their capacity to apply different lenses when analyzing their own situations and expanded the mindset they needed for success in their senior leadership roles. As one participant, a vice-president of a large advertising firm, commented:

I like that it brings people from different roles together, and we share problems that we all have. [While] the exact problem might not be identical, there are similarities that we face in our various roles, and we explore those together, and what I think is very interesting is that we all tend to have a different approach to how we might solve a different problem, the questions we might ask, and it’s very interesting to hear how others provided their objective counsel on what they might do or might not do, and we learn from that. It’s very interesting to hear other people’s points of view and at the end of the day it causes you to be more thoughtful about how you might approach a similar challenge if you were to face it.⁴

² Kotlyar & Karakowsky, 2013.

³ Kotlyar & Karakowsky, 2013.

⁴ Kotlyar & Karakowsky, 2013.

Similarly, a director at a large media company commented that “The perspective the people brought to the table was great, because someone from HR is going to have a different perspective than someone from finance or someone from marketing or operations. It was great to see that cross-section and from different industries.”⁵

Second, the quality of the facilitator seems to be another essential ingredient. The role of the facilitator is to establish a sense of trust and confidentiality, which in turn facilitates openness and sharing, and without which the effectiveness of peer mentoring as a leadership development tool would be greatly diminished. The Executive Roundtable employs former senior-level executives who bring their first-hand leadership experiences along with facilitation skills to guide the discussion.

Overall, peer mentoring appears to represent an effective approach to leadership development. Although it is often assumed that “leadership” is best learned from the top, it appears that organizations can acquire unique benefits by having up-and-coming leaders learn from each other. Peer mentoring may become a best practice for more and more organizations seeking to expand their repertoire of leadership development initiatives.

WHY STUDY MANAGEMENT THOUGHT?

Leading and managing people is clearly central to an organization’s success in today’s context. However, what is the best way to manage people? Are there philosophies of managing?

Regardless of whether we are looking at a small business or a giant corporation, any type of organization must be managed. When we refer to the notion of a *manager*, who are we referring to? A manager can be an individual at any level of the organization. For example, *top management* could include the chief executive officer (CEO) or president along with vice-presidents; *middle managers* could include such figures as departmental or division heads, plant or branch managers, or deans; *supervisors*, or first-line managers, might include department heads, forepersons, or supervisors.

Individuals can take on formal or informal managerial roles. For example, a *team leader* may or may not be formally assigned a managerial role, though that person may have much of the responsibilities of a manager. Regardless of your profession or your role in an organization, no doubt at some point in your career you will be required to apply some sort of management or leadership skills.

The field of management can indeed be systematically studied, and a consideration of it is of benefit to anyone who wishes to understand the philosophies that have guided managers for the past century. In this chapter we will consider the body of knowledge that attempts to identify principles employed by managers in their daily practice. However, before we embark, we need to ask a simple question: What do managers do?

⁵ Kotlyar & Karakowsky, 2013.