The Ultimate Leadership Development Guide

Rich Hall
Executive Coach and Chief Success Guide
rich.hall@richhallgroup.com
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One of the biggest gaps in the maturation of leaders is the lack of an effective leadership development program. If you search "leadership development training" on Google, you get over 800M hits with employee training spend in the billions of dollars. You would think someone would get it right. Yet very few people can name a program that really was effective for them or their team and sustainable over time.

Leadership development is tough and expensive. It is not a 3-day course that you can bring in-house and expect to have rockstar leaders. It requires training in multiple areas of employee development along with ongoing coaching/mentoring over time.

Many training companies will try to turn their product into a leadership training program only to hit part of the target with an ineffective solution.

I know what it takes because I've been on both sides, product and customer. This is not an easy topic, so I am not going to sugarcoat it.

Let's start with why most programs are ineffective.

The most common reasons for ineffective leadership development programs are:

- **One Size Does Not Fit All** – leaders of Fortune 1000 corporations need different training than leaders of small, family-owned businesses.
- **Situational Awareness** – lack of relevant scenarios to develop on-the-job situational awareness
- **Emotional Intelligence** – many courses teach it, but few spend enough time on it in the context of a larger training program. Very important but not all inclusive.
- **Lack of Sponsorship** – most companies sponsor the program but do not ingrain it into the daily operations from top to bottom of the company. Executives rarely model their own training.
- **Limited On-Going Feedback** – leadership is not a checklist. Very few resources exist to provide on-going feedback in the context of what was trained.
- **Circumstances Change** – employees, managers, and circumstances change over time. The program must be flexible and more evergreen than a one-time inspirational session.

I've seen companies develop their own programs that were marginally more effective than the "box" ones. They usually start with a central theme and add their flavor to it. Examples are:

- A course based upon a book that is popular at the time but doesn't cover all the bases. Interest quickly fades when a new fad comes along.
- An offsite facilitated training that is part training, part boondoggle, and part role-play but loses steam after real life back at the office continues.

Each approach has their own merit but should play their part and not outweigh other equally relevant areas.

What is the best approach to develop leaders?

The best answer lies in the combination of best practices within the culture of the company and the leaders being trained. What I am about to outline is a lot for a single course. I recommend having separate training programs along with an overarching strategy that is communicated to the future leaders. Show them how it all ties together and monitor their progress. Most HR systems today allow tracking of employee training and progress.

Let's dive right in.

A. Company-specific training
If you ask most management personnel to name the company values, could they? What about an accurate description of the business model? Doubtful.

An example is how Starbucks is not just about coffee but is an "experience" along with being a very good real estate company.

Many of the important factors of who, what, when, how, and why a company is run may not be fully defined or periodically refreshed with the employees. Giving a new employee the company handbook and walking them through it during orientation is not the way to train your leaders on the most important aspects of your company.

- a. Key Company Specific Items for Leaders
  - Business model
    - o Explain how the company makes money, what it takes to make the product or services, and how it ultimately turns a profit. Consider showing how employees' roles contribute to revenue or expense. We want to "maximize" revenue while "managing" expense (never say "minimize" expenses as that can have the wrong interpretation).
  - Culture
    - o Do you know what your culture is? Trust me – you have one whether it is easily defined or not. Discuss it and reinforce with the leaders. Get their feedback. Once they understand what it should be, they can learn how to model it. You should also survey employees on it. Is the "real" culture the same as you believe it is or are there "sub-cultures" that can be destructive?
  - Values
    - o Everything starts with values. Do you have values written down and readily available? Do all employees know them, abide by them, and are they held accountable to them?
  - Mission, Goals, Strategy
    - o These are important for leaders to know and convey. There are always issues and initiatives that can be distracting for leaders. Do their activities align with the mission and goals of the company? Are the strategies in place aligned as well?

All levels of employees need to know why the company is in business, how it makes money, what the goals are, and the value of their role. This helps them feel like they are a valuable part of the company and not just a commodity.

B. High Performing Teams training
A core element of a leader is to develop teams that can accomplish more than a combination of individuals by themselves. How they do it is equally as important.

Many companies do not have formal team training programs. They rely on outside programs the employee requests or ones their manager recommends for performance improvement. Examples are "how to be a better team player" or "how to be a better leader". Save your money.

I've always been a big fan of leadership training programs based upon Patrick Lencioni's book *"The Five Dysfunctions of a Team"*. It is scenario based which means people can really relate. It teaches team members to trust each other and to overcome the fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results.

The key takeaway for me is that everyone is focused on what is best for the company and not their own individual self-interests. When you trust each other, serve each other, and collaborate as a team, no hill is too large to climb. There may be individual sacrifices to be made for the greater good of the company over time.

There are other great HPT training programs out there. Investigate what is right for you and your organization and get some people trained. I prefer a "train the trainer" approach myself but you can decide which is best for your firm.

C. Personality assessment – Individual and Team
I've used personality assessments for years. I'm professionally trained in Birkman but have used DISC, MBTI, Predictive Index, and others. You can go as deep as you want with these.

The key use of personal assessments in a corporate setting is to recognize your own personality traits and learn how to best communicate with others. Create a cheat sheet of yourself and how you relate to your teammates. The single biggest problem in corporate America today is poor communication. Not poor intent.

Make the effort to see things from other peoples' perspective. You'll be amazed how communications will improve when leaders start communicating better among themselves.

The problem with assessments lies in how to remember everyone's traits, and how you should react, over time.

Shy away from assessments that are too high level or associate personalities with animals (i.e. Snake, Giraffe, Bull, etc.). Employees tend to be turned off when compared to certain animals.

Most assessments have a high-level categorization that indicates personality types. Red = Action, Blue = Thinker, Yellow = Organizer, Green = Social, and so on.

Companies that have successfully leveraged assessments over time use things like colors on their desk, door name plate, business cards, etc. Some even make a game of it. They find a way to operationalize it into their culture.

D. Mentoring/Coaching

I believe having a mentor, whether inside or outside the company, is a tremendous asset to any leader. Having the ability to bounce ideas off someone else and discuss real life issues will greatly improve a leader's growth and situational awareness.

You should also consider hiring an Executive Coach for key leaders. They tend to ask questions that make us feel uncomfortable. They try to stretch us into areas we need to grow and to look at things from different perspectives.

I like the coach that has been there and done that in the business world and is not afraid to broach difficult topics.

While many people may use different coaches than others, I prefer a coach that serves individuals as well as the team members as a whole. They attend meetings, watch the interpersonal dynamics, and ultimately advise individuals to be better themselves as well as members of the team.

A coach's value should be at least 5x the return on investment. You are paying for access to that person's experience, including successes and failures, and their recommendations. Never go cheap and evaluate wisely.

E. Repeatable Operational and Managerial Processes

As stated earlier, the company needs to clearly define what the goals are for the organization. Once defined, each leader and corresponding departments need to be aligned toward the goals. Everyone in the organization, from CEO to front line staff, needs to be on the same page to create a high-performing organization.

One of the best approaches out there is the Entrepreneurial Operating System (EOS). The implementation process walks you through defining clear goals and then breaks them down for each department and person in the company. Everyone knows what is expected of them and when. It establishes accountability and discipline for everyone in the organization.
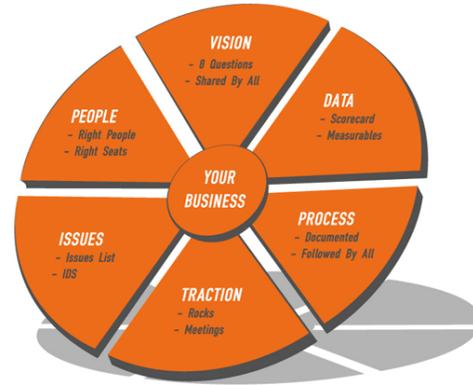
You can hire an "implementer" or get someone trained and do it yourself. I prefer both. Hire a professional and implement it right to ensure alignment with your culture while also having an internal resource trained for when the professional moves on. Your cost will increase, but the investment will pay dividends when you have new employees or need to make changes. Going back to an implementer can be more expensive in the long-term.

One of the best attributes of EOS is that it helps when you may need to change with the times and needs of the organization.

F. Sponsorship

If you really want to transform your leadership into top tier leaders, an initiative like this requires sponsorship and alignment from the CEO and executive leadership team. Remember – employees are always watching you. If you tell them they need to do something better, but you are not willing yourself, save your money. It will never work.

Attend the training as the sponsor. Before every new group of leaders go through the program, make the introductory announcement of your sponsorship. They need to hear it from you, so it carries the long-term value you want it to.

Be fully engaged as a sponsor and this guide will be transformational for you and your company.

FINAL THOUGHTS

A program like I've outlined here will work. It will not be easy nor inexpensive. Do not try to tackle everything at once. Phase it in over time. Some things will only need to be implemented once while others will need to occur periodically as the leadership team members change.

People who advance their careers into management and then executives may not have the foundation on how to be a great leader. They try things through trial and error. Many times, they fail because they don't have experience in how to be a strong leader.

If you need help or just want to talk things through, send me an email. Happy to discuss all aspects of this program with you.

Best of Luck!

Rich

RICH HALL
GROUP

www.richhallgroup.com
rich.hall@richhallgroup.com

Rich Hall is the CEO and Chief Success Guide of Rich Hall Group, LLC. RHG provides Executive Coaching, Leadership Development, and Succession Planning services for privately-owned, small to medium sized businesses.