Tool 6

Leverage Assignments for On-The-Job Leadership Development

Quick guide

Use the trigger questions below to identify how leadership development can be integrated with actual jobs and assignments. Do this either for yourself – thinking through your own assignment – or in a conversation or facilitated session helping leaders to come up with ideas and define actionable steps.

Purpose

Real leadership development happens in and through jobs, the reflection upon those jobs, and the application of insights in a next iteration of on-the-job action. This tool helps you to analyze your assignments for their potential to provide development opportunities, and to set yourself up to develop your leadership capabilities.

Set

Time	Difficulty	Material	People
1h for an initial, personal discussion	simple	Paper and pen and a quiet conversational context allowing focus and exploration	individually, with a conversation partner or within a small working group

Approach

The trigger questions below fall into two categories, distinguishing the system level from the individual level.

The *system level* refers to the organizational or institutional context which may influence the way leadership learning is approached. For example, there might be hard-wired competency models or pre-defined career trajectories that result in priority topics for leadership learning or that influence the language and terminology in which learning goals are described.

The *individual level* or personal level is about defining a self-directed learning approach towards leadership: for example, what do you consider important, what motivates your learning, what is it that you want to achieve personally in building leadership capabilities?

Trigger questions

System level
How does your organization condition your opportunities for on-the-job leadership development?

→ What are leadership challenges resulting from your organization's strategy and objectives?

→ What are major organizational changes resulting from this strategy?

→ What can you learn, as a leader, in overcoming those challenges and driving this change in your role or sphere of influence?

→ What are personal transitions resulting from the strategic direction of the organization *(Examples could be a location change, increased responsibilities, intercultural management, new technical skills required)*?

→ Are there existing competency models and/or performance management systems against which you are formally evaluated? Have personal priorities been defined based on those models/ systems (e. g. in terms of a development plan)?

→ Does your formal job description explicate leadership competencies you should display or develop towards?

→ Are competency models, if existing, providing specific examples of events, tasks, or achievements that are linked to building certain competencies? *(For example, successfully planning and leading a strategy workshop on an important topic may count as an experience developing strategic thinking)*

→ Are there stakeholder expectations (e.g. in senior management) regarding valuable developmental experiences or leadership competencies that should be displayed? *(For example, is there the expectation to have filled a certain role or to have led certain activities/projects in order to develop as a leader?)*

Personal level
What is your personal approach and action plan to develop leadership skills on-the-job, and how can you ensure true learning outcomes for yourself?

→ What are you curious about in thinking about your leadership role?

→ What are things and experiences you expect in your leadership role?

→ What are potential opportunities (in terms of tasks, experiences, achievements) for yourself and for the people around you in the coming months?

→ What are specific goals and results you want to work towards as a leader? How would you recognize that you have made progress towards those goals? *(Examples: extend your network, improve on your communication and listening skills, strengthen the notion of purpose in your team, introduce the notion of shared leadership in your team, find a mentor)*

→ How could you experiment with certain leadership actions and behaviors for the purpose of learning? *(Examples: practice delegation and empowerment, facilitate a vision workshop, practice active listening)*

→ How can you ensure instant feedback and re-iterate your leadership experiments?

→ What helps you stay focused on your leadership experience during action? What distracts you from focusing on your leadership action and how can you avoid that distraction?

→ How much time and energy are you willing to invest in your leadership learning? What is the time frame for your effort?

→ How can you ensure room for reflecting on your leadership experiences? *(Examples: a trusted conversational partner, keeping notes and a development journal)*

→ How can you develop an understanding of what enabled or stood in the way of achieving your goals and how your actions and behaviors made a difference?

→ Are there notable personalities in your organization that may serve as a role model and/or conversational partner in driving your learning agenda?

→ How can you proactively create opportunities to practice new skills?

→ How can you proactively create opportunities to observe skilled leaders in action and spend time working with them?

→ What are formal training courses or other sources of knowledge and practice that could serve as a resource for supporting your leadership development?

Output

→ A sketch for a personal development plan and specific action steps to learn leadership on the job

Tips

→ Tip: iterate the conversation on leadership learning and refer back to the trigger questions after a first iteration. Additional ideas might be triggered to further develop your personal learning journey and define more specific, actionable steps

→ Tip: for a quick start, scan through the trigger questions above and pick the three questions that resonate most with you. Find a partner to brainstorm ideas and potential action steps.

Tool in Action

A newly appointed manager within a technology company assumed responsibility of a newly formed global business division with an innovative business model, consisting of a relatively small and junior team. Understanding the novelty of the challenge both for the organization and for himself he felt that his leadership would be an important driver of the success of the initiative. Given the size of the business, the institutional context in terms of formal HR systems was very lean and practically non-existent when it came to leadership development. He ensured support both from an informal mentor, a former boss, and two peer managers from across the organization to regularly check in and discuss his leadership activities and experiences. First working through the trigger questions for himself, he prepared an initial set of thoughts and potential actions to discuss with his mentor and peers with the goal of strengthening three concrete leadership behaviors within three months.

Common issues …	… and how to deal with them
While challenging assignments can provide valuable experiences to learn leadership, over-stretch can prove counterproductive, and kill the learning orientation of leaders	Provide support to leaders (or organize support for yourself) and help them to set plausible development goals for their assignments. Ensure frequent feedback and opportunities for reflection on action, progress, and set-backs
Leadership development is set up as "box ticking" with regard to a codified competency model and linked to formal performance management systems	Strongly framing leadership development in performance terms risks taking away the learning orientation and leads to people becoming risk averse and avoiding experimentation. Accordingly, keep performance evaluation and leadership learning progress separate and ensure maintaining a learning frame when approaching leadership development
Senior management holds a strong belief in hard-wired talent and is skeptical to invest time and energy in leadership development. Jobs are given to candidates which already have sufficient experience in a certain role, dealing with a certain challenge - the 'ready-now-candidate'. Developmental aspects are foregone and candidates which would have most to gain are surpassed.	Run a work session/conduct interviews with senior managers on their personal development path as leaders: uncover which events, jobs, and experiences let them grow as leaders and invite their reflection on how those events where linked to leadership capabilities they consider important