



Jobs

Key points

- Effective development of leadership on the individual level happens mostly in and through practice
- Trainings and interventions should be set up in a way that supports this learning in practice
- Reflection upon practical experiences helps developing leaders draw conclusions and change their practices accordingly

Leadership development happens mainly through experience and in practice. Research is largely unambiguous that “the primary source of learning to lead, to the extent that leadership can be learned, is experience.” While there is some merit to formal interventions, such as trainings, actual development requires on-the-job experience and the challenges coming with real jobs, which serve as both triggers and processes from which to learn. Accordingly, if you want to facilitate leadership development on the individual level, you need to leverage “real” jobs with a significant leadership dimension for your LD efforts.

“Give them a popcorn stand to run”. One often quoted approach is former GE CEO Jack Welch’s “popcorn stand”, whereby he gave young leaders who displayed high potential profit and loss responsibility early in their careers. (Of course, in the case of GE a popcorn stand might have been a multi-million-dollar business.) This kind of relatively manageable end-to-end responsibility was seen both as a stretch for these young leaders and – because of that – also as the most effective learning opportunity.

Practical experience does not automatically lead to development – it requires framing, feedback, and organizational support. The quote above from McCall rightly states that “people don’t automatically learn from experience. They can come away with nothing, or the wrong lessons, or only some of what they might have learned.” Practical experience requires a frame, feedback, and opportunities for reflection in order to yield productive learning. At the same time, while a certain amount of challenge has been shown

to trigger and foster learning, there can also be “too much” emphasis on challenges, which results in leaders being overwhelmed and left with a very limited likelihood to learn.

Strategy and jobs-as-development opportunities are linked. On the one hand, the strategy defines which tasks, assignments, and jobs are mission critical to reach an organization’s goals. On the other hand, the strategy defines which leadership experiences are critical to enable leadership learning and increase the odds of getting a strategy executed. As a result, when considering job assignments in the light of leadership development, you should always have the strategic objectives in mind. Ideally, focus your efforts on jobs that are directly related to executing the organization’s strategy.

When setting up on-the-job experience for learning, consider both the mode and the content of learning. While learning happens mainly through reflecting upon one’s own practice within a supportive context, observing other notable people can have a productive influence as well. This is best achieved through having role models and observing their practices first hand. But it’s also potentially important to learn from negative examples, drawing conclusions about observed behaviors to avoid in one’s own leadership practice. Similarly, the content of experiences will also determine the scope of learning experiences. It has been shown that major learning potential lies in challenges relating to transitions, such as a first-time leader role, being in charge of a major change, or being exposed to a new cultural context as part of an international assignment.

Tools

 [See tool section and downloads](#)
