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## *Leveraging Coaching To Build A Learning Mindset In Early Career Stage Leaders*

By Neta Moye and Melinda Allen

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# Leveraging Coaching to Build a Learning Mindset in Early Career Stage Leaders

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*In this article, Moye and Allen discuss the importance of, and practice of, developing an individual's capacity to lead at the early career stage by instilling a learning mindset. It is often said that individuals become great leaders only through experience. This adage is true only if individuals are attentive to learning from the experience; practice does not make perfect if you are not consciously engaged in reflective learning during and after the experience. As such, the authors believe that having a learning mindset is fundamental to developing the capacity to become a great leader, and especially at the early career stage. In their work with MBA students, Moye and Allen are utilizing executive coaches to encourage the development of a learning mindset, through instilling learning as a habit for each student. Their expectations are that those students who adopt a learning mindset will more readily learn from experience and will, therefore, more quickly and more consistently become influential within their organizations. The authors believe this will have positive impact not only on the individuals themselves, but also on the organizations in which they work. These individuals will help to support the climate necessary for an organization to become a learning organization.*

## INTRODUCTION

While leadership development – or the preparation of individuals for leadership roles within an organizational setting – has always been one piece of the broader human capital development puzzle, it has recently emerged among the top of the list of CEO concerns (The Conference Board, 2007). Broad demographic trends have many organizations realizing that as upwards of 50% of their current leaders retire over the next five years, they will not have a large enough pipeline of individuals groomed to fill these vacancies (Survey: The Battle for Brainpower, 2006). This scarcity in the leadership pipeline is a result of both demographic trends (fewer individuals in the “baby bust” generation) and downsizing which took particularly large chunks out of the middle management ranks.

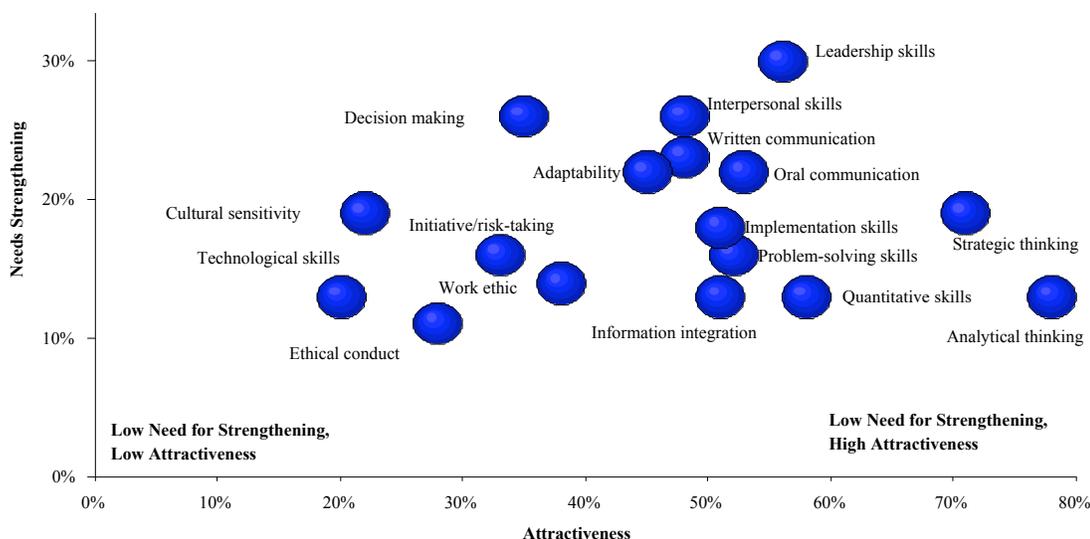
While considerable resources are being spent on leadership development, we believe some of those resources could be better directed. Organizations are currently focusing considerable attention and effort on leadership development for those who are already established leaders in the organization; those in mid- or late-career stage. When organizations do engage in leadership development activities for early career stages, it tends to be limited to a few individuals identified as high potential or “rising stars.” The types of leadership development activities are often various forms of job rotational programs. Less attention is paid to developing leadership skills and competencies in early stages of careers. This is a rational choice for organizational decision-makers – who often wait to see who emerges as the “winner” of the managerial race before allocating scarce resources, instead of allocating them to all potential managers at entry levels. We suggest, nevertheless, that this leads to numerous lost developmental opportunities that could add great value to the organization.

While it would be unreasonable to expect organizations to provide developmental training for all early career-stage professionals, this is where MBA programs come in. We propose that MBA programs are the ideal location for leadership development training at early career stages, since the audience consists of highly motivated professionals who are deliberately trying to direct their careers onto a managerial track. If promising MBA graduates are to take on rotational programs offered by their new employers, the MBA program should have provided -- or

“primed” -- them with the skills and abilities to take advantage of such rotational programs.

Although MBA programs appear to be the perfect setting for this kind of training and development, they are not currently realizing that potential. Numerous popular press articles, as well as the regularly conducted GMAC Corporate Recruiter Survey (2006), tend to agree that while MBA graduates are generally very strong in quantitative and analytical skills, they often lack interpersonal and leadership skills sought by those who recruit and employ MBA students (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. GMAC Survey of MBA Recruiters 2006**



As such, we believe that MBA programs need to define the underlying core competencies required for students to develop into future leaders. MBA programs have been very successful in understanding the underlying core competencies required for quantitative and analytical work and training their graduates in these. We would like to see them apply that same rigor when identifying the components of early career leadership training and education. Their graduates would therefore be primed to take advantage of subsequent work experiences and leadership development opportunities.

In the following sections, we will make the case for *learning mindset* as one of the underlying core competencies required for the development of future leaders. We argue that the best way to create this learning mindset in MBA graduates is through experiential learning – taking advantage of existing experiences, as well as creating new experiences specifically tailored to leadership development – in combination with coaching. We describe a program within which coaching is integral to leadership development in a particular MBA program.

*This scarcity in the leadership pipeline is a result of both demographic trends (fewer individuals in the “baby bust” generation) and downsizing which took particularly large chunks out of the middle management ranks.*

#### **WHY HAVING A LEARNING MINDSET MATTERS TO EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP AND EARLY CAREER STAGE LEADER DEVELOPMENT**

When we use the term “learning mindset” we are talking about a constellation of characteristics and skills that includes both the ability and the motivation to learn

continually. Thus a person with a learning mindset is someone who is always open to learning from experiences – whether successes or failures – and who engages in reflection about those experiences in order to apply lessons to future events. According to researchers at Darden's Graduate School of Business (Perkins, 1994), these characteristics and skills can include agility of thought (adapting easily to new situations and seeing patterns and connections), a focus on learning from many sources, and ready communication (often non-linear in nature) that includes metaphors and analogies. Similarly, researchers at the Center for Creative Leadership (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2004) notes that this type of mindset (which

they refer to as a high ability to learn) also involves skills such as being able to recognize when new behaviors, skills or attitudes are called for, being able to monitor and reflect upon the process of learning in day-to-day life, intentionally moving into areas where one's skills are not well honed, using a variety of learning tactics, and self-awareness of one's own behavioral tendencies.

*While MBA graduates are generally very strong in quantitative and analytical skills, they often lack interpersonal and leadership skills sought by those who recruit and employ MBA students.*

We believe that this type of learning mindset is critical to leadership development. Successful leadership is contingent on many situational factors and does not lend itself to algorithmic or formulaic solutions. This requires leaders to be able to diagnose the situation, decide which behavior is most appropriate, and authentically enact that behavior. As a result, leaders need diagnostic skills, as well as a large behavioral repertoire, which can most effectively be developed through experience and continual learning.

A recent analogy offered by Goleman (2000) reinforces this view of what makes a leader effective. Goleman draws similarities between an effective leader and a golf pro. A golf pro has a bag of clubs at his side, can quickly take into account the many conditions that will affect the trajectory of the ball, grabs (seemingly intuitively) the perfect club, and with the right technique, places the ball in just the right place in relation to the hole. A leader faces a similar situation – a bag of behaviors at his ready, to be pulled out in just the right situation. If employed with the right technique, the leader's behavior will lead followers to just the right place in relation to the desired goal. It is a combination of an available behavioral repertoire, and, more importantly, knowing how and when to utilize the behaviors in one's repertoire, that separates the effective leaders from the less effective. Most importantly, like the golf pro, getting to that level of effectiveness requires

diligent practice. Not just mindless practice, where errors in judgment are repeated, but practice where lessons are learned and taken forward into the next situation.

*A person with a learning mindset is someone who is always open to learning from experiences – whether successes or failures – and who engages in reflection about those experiences in order to apply lessons to future events.*

Accordingly, we believe that merely *having* experience is not sufficient in and of itself. In order to develop the intuitive (or tacit) ability to be able to diagnose a situation and quickly choose the appropriate behavior from one's repertoire, the leader needs to be continually learning from experience and practice. As noted in the *CCL Handbook*,

most people learn easily when they are in their comfort zone, but have trouble when faced with challenges. The observation that “there is a huge conspiracy in life to keep a person doing what he already knows how to do” (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2004, p. 208) is a very insightful one and emphasizes the fact that it takes deliberate and conscious effort for people to continually learn from all relevant experiences. It is not just developmental experiences that are important, but also having the mindset to learn from them.

As stated earlier, MBA programs need to identify and train the underlying core competencies required for students to develop into future leaders. We believe that the learning mindset is an underlying core competency and would serve to prime graduates to take advantage of subsequent work experiences and leadership development opportunities. As pointed out by Perkins (1994), the majority of executives approach their work in a methodical, linear manner and typically experience key events as points that mark progress, as opposed to opportunities for learning. While this may serve someone who wishes to become a great business tactician, it may undermine their ability to become a great business leader. To the extent that MBA programs reinforce such linear or formulaic approaches to decision making and problem solving, this may actually work against the development of a learning mindset among students. We believe, therefore, that the staff of MBA programs need to make a deliberate and concerted effort to cultivate a learning mindset in their graduates. In the following section, we describe the prominent role that coaching plays in creating a learning mindset in MBA students who are participating in a new Leadership Development Program being implemented within one graduate school.

*Coaching is the delivery mechanism for providing support for learning, and as such, is integral to the entire model.*

#### **HOW TO CULTIVATE A LEARNING MINDSET IN MBA STUDENTS AND THE PROMINENT ROLE OF COACHING IN DOING SO**

The leadership development program at the Owen Graduate School of Management at Vanderbilt University attempts to cultivate a learning mindset in its MBA students. The primary tool for cultivating a learning mindset in MBA students is through experience, but not just experience alone. As CCL's model for leadership development points out, leader development comes from a combination of assessment, challenge, and support (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2004). We believe this model can be used to create a learning mindset. With proper emphasis placed on helping the individual develop a learning approach to experiences, to reflect on what they have learned from their experience, and most importantly to value what they have learned, an individual not only develops their behavioral repertoire, but also an appreciation for – and hopefully a habit of – continual learning. In this program, coaching is the delivery mechanism for providing support for learning, and as such, is integral to the entire model. We hypothesized that particularly in the context of an MBA program, in which both challenge and assessment can be easily provided, coaching is particularly critical to ensure that the experiences are not just had, but are used for development.

In designing the new Leadership Development Program, we intended to leverage as many of the existing experiences within the two-year educational experience as possible. We then set out to make sure that these experiences were indeed developmental – that is, that they met the requirements of assessment, challenge, and support. In each case, we believe that coaching – in some form or another – is the key mechanism for providing support and for transforming mere experiences into developmental experiences. Following is a description of what we are doing in the Owen Graduate School of Management.

#### **Learning to Lead**

Learn to Lead, or L2L, is the MBA Leadership Development Program at Owen. The mandatory first-year program elements are in-depth personal assessment, peer feedback and team coaching. In the second year, there is a voluntary, year-long project-based experience called Leadership in Action. Between the first and

second year of the program, students participate in a Summer Executive Coaching Program that is currently being piloted.

Even before students spend their first day on-campus, they are being asked to start thinking about their leadership capabilities. Specifically, they are asked to take the Hogan Leadership Assessment Suite, which provides them insight into their own unique behavioral tendencies and how under times of stress those tendencies might become challenges for them, or even serve as career derailers. Hogan answers for students the questions of what they want, what they do, and how they hold themselves back – all from the perspective of a follower. By holding a mirror up to the students and showing them how they are perceived, we get past identity and focus more on reputation, which in turn helps them be more self aware. In addition to becoming more self aware, it is important that the students take this knowledge and learn how to turn this awareness into new insights and behaviors.

Without coaching, the tool itself only provides data and doesn't ensure learning. Data without analysis are merely data. Only if we analyze the data within a given context are we able to apply the knowledge gained or turn the data into action.

At Owen, each student has two follow-up sessions with an executive coach who has been trained on the tool. The content for each session varies. In the first session, the coach reviews the assessment results with the student. In the second session, the coach moves away from a debrief on the results and towards a developmental discussion about how the student can use the knowledge gained to better understand their behavioral tendencies and adjust

*By holding a mirror up to the students and showing them how they are perceived, we get past identity and focus more on reputation, which in turn helps them be more self aware.*

or change their behavior to minimize their derailers or leverage their strengths, thereby maximizing their potential. Coaching around the tool provides students with a road map that will help them reflectively assess a situation, how their tendencies might factor in, and how they need to adjust their behavior accordingly in order to maximize the positive impact they can have in any given situation or experience. As we are working with students in their early career stages, this is especially critical since they may not yet have an accurate perception of who they are and how that affects what they do.

Feedback and coaching are great ways not only to further develop self-awareness but also to help develop individuals by transforming the knowledge into action. *The McKinsey War for Talent 2000 Survey* asked over 2,000 middle and senior managers what factors drove development. Feedback and Coaching, following Job Assignments, were noted as the most important factors to drive development (Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, & Michael, 1998). MBA program staff have talked for years about the importance of working in teams and have designed and taught curriculum in teams, but where they have fallen short is in helping students learn from those experiences.

### **Leading Teams and Organizations**

At Owen, students are assigned teams for the first two modules (each semester is divided into two 8-week modules). During that time, the students have two team-based classes in the core curriculum — Leading Teams and Organizations in Mod 1 and Operations in Mod 2. After the first semester, they are assigned new teams for the final team-based class in the core curriculum, Strategy. During each of these three classes, students engage in two rounds of peer feedback. Using an electronic tool, they provide feedback to each member of their assigned team via

a survey and written comments. The feedback is integrated into the curriculum and timed to occur immediately after a pivotal assignment, presentation or deliverable. In this way, such an event can provide a context for the feedback and simulate as closely as possible the team environment they will encounter when they graduate.

The teams then meet to discuss the feedback in a team coaching session that is facilitated by a trained second-year leadership coach. Based on the model in Richard Hackman and Ruth Wageman's article regarding team coaching (Hackman & Wageman, 2005), the functional role of the coach grows and changes over time as does the content, which makes it a hybrid role. Initially, the role of the leadership coach is to facilitate discussion around giving and receiving feedback. In Mod 2, the role changes to an educational role, imparting the definition of team effectiveness and diagnosing and improving team processes. Finally, in Mod 3, the role becomes more consultative, with the coaches helping teams to more effectively make decisions and problem solve as a unit. As designed, the coach and the key learning points they reinforce about feedback, team functioning, and problem solving are integrated into the course curriculum of the MBA program.

*The coach turns the experience into an iterative learning loop – practice to feedback to insights to knowledge.*

The coach turns the experience into an iterative learning loop – practice to feedback to insights to knowledge. For example, during one of the team coaching meetings, feedback was shared with an international student indicating that he was not contributing enough to the team discussions. The student then suggested that the problem stemmed from the domestic students talking too quickly and rapidly moving from topic to topic. The international student was unable to contribute, given the language barriers. The coach facilitated a conversation about how the team members would ensure that the same problem didn't occur again as they headed into their next project. Out of that conversation, the team decided to give the international student a "red card" that he could pull out anytime he had something to contribute. The red card signaled to the domestic students to slow down and actively take the time to listen to the ideas and/or discussion points of the international student before they could move forward. The short-term result was that they had a more effective team by fully utilizing the knowledge of their entire team. The long-term result is that each of those team members will take the learning from that experience and apply it in future situations where appropriate. The unique advantage of using students as coaches is that they learn as much from the process as the teams they coach, which continues to reinforce their learning as well.

### **Summer Internship**

In addition to working in teams, another shared experience across all MBA students is their summer internship, which occurs between the first and second year of the program. Students spend 8-12 weeks in the business world applying their newly acquired knowledge and skills. The internship is a precursor to the type of work they will be engaged in upon graduation. By introducing executive coaching to the students during their internship, the students receive objective feedback and guidance within the real-time context of their summer experience as they work towards a mutually agreed upon behavioral goal.

The program is designed to do more than just initiate a behavior shift; it is designed to build reflective learners by using coaches to help broaden their thinking, identify behavioral patterns, and provoke them to build lifelong learning habits.

In so doing, we anticipate the students will also have a heightened level of impact within their organization. Students meet (either in person or via telephone) with their coaches a total of five times—once prior to the internship beginning, once after the internship ends, and three times during the internship period. Along the way, the coaches hold the students accountable to their goals, use immediate challenges to help drive behavior change, and continually reinforce the learning that can be gleaned from actions taken. At the close of the summer, the coaches further instill a learning mindset by helping students reflect over their recent experiences and the ways they can improve, grow, and develop in the future by analyzing what they would do differently and why.

*The most significant design challenge as we look ahead becomes how the practice has to be altered for someone early in their career in order to still arrive at the desired outcome.*

As with many of the other program elements, we are taking practices that are typically offered to employees in the middle to end of their careers and pulling them forward to an early career stage. The most significant design challenge as we look ahead becomes how the practice has to be altered for someone early in their career in order to still arrive at the desired outcome.

### **Leadership in Action**

When we reviewed all of the experiences students currently have during their MBA program, we realized there was several leadership competencies in which students need more hands-on practice, including accountability, visioning, and managing and developing others. Additionally, students would benefit from an opportunity to have a dedicated leadership role. We recognized the need to build an intensive leadership immersion experience for second-year MBAs that complemented the first-year program elements, while also augmenting the students' exposure to the gap areas. The resultant year-long, project-based experience called Leadership in Action, or LIA, is uniquely designed for those students who want to voluntarily take a deeper dive into their personal leadership development.

*Self awareness plus experience plus knowledge equals leadership development, but only if learning is involved.*

During LIA, the participants will source a project, develop a vision for the project, recruit team members, and effectively manage that group to project completion. The student project is wrapped with a series of tools designed to help reinforce the learning, including a weekend military leadership immersion experience, a monthly peer forum process, and an Executive Guide. The military component exposes students to the concept of AARs, or After Action Reviews, a practice long used by the military to evaluate at the close of a maneuver the actions that were taken and their effect. This is a practice that can be readily applied to project management and is one that promotes the learning mindset. The peer forum process provides students with the opportunity to learn from their peers in a highly structured meeting that is designed to foster problem solving and issue processing. Finally, the Executive Guide works individually with students to build self-awareness, foster skill development, promote accountability, and reinforce learning. After extensive thought and research, we decided that, given the critical nature of the role, the Guide should be an executive coach who acts in a hybrid role as part coach, motivator, and advisor. The guide becomes, in essence, the golf instructor who helps the golfer learn what clubs to use at what times on a specific course and then execute flawlessly.

### **Coaching and Habitual Learning**

The common theme across the program elements of leadership development at the Owen Graduate School of Management is that self awareness plus experience plus

knowledge equals leadership development, but only if learning is involved. We agree with Bob Nardelli, former CEO of The Home Depot, who said, “I absolutely believe that people, unless coached, never reach their full potential” (Dunn, 2006). This is why we have selected coaching – albeit more broadly defined – as our vehicle for turning students into habitual learners.

We will know if our key assumptions, methodology and design are effective in increasing the ability of our students to be more influential within their companies, because we will measure the program results over time through surveys, exit interviews, focus groups, and third party observation, in addition to other evaluative tools. Following the guidelines of program evaluation generally, the elements of good research design, and the practical advice of training evaluation introduced by Kirkpatrick (1996), we will develop metrics in each of the following four categories: participant reaction, learning, behavioral change, and impact. Some of the evaluation measurements can be gathered immediately or in the short-term, while behavioral change and impact can only be evaluated over time. Given that, the measures plan extends as far into the future as five years. While not an easy feat, we have included rigorous measurement and analysis into the purpose of leadership development at Owen and have allocated resources to accomplish this task. We are excited by the potential this program feature presents and look forward to presenting more concrete metrics as the program design rolls out. Only by rigorously measuring and analyzing impact and effectiveness of each program element can we learn from our own experiences. We will measure, adjust, and readjust the metrics as needed in a continuing process. Such serious evaluation will position Owen to share what we learn with business and corporate leaders as well as other management and business schools. As in a true learning organization, the beauty of doing this in the MBA environment is that we all learn – the students, administrators, academicians, practitioners and corporations.

*Our expectation is that coaching, when combined with experience, will be the catalyst to develop the learning mindset that does eventually make practice perfect.*

### CONCLUSION

It is the combination of experience and learning that develops the capacity to lead. By engaging individuals early in their careers, especially at the MBA level, we can positively impact the pipeline of individuals who are available and (more importantly) ready to fill the roles of retiring baby boomers. If companies followed suit, then it could shift the allocation of leadership development resources from mid-career and late-career stages to early-career stage. Specifically, if companies enhanced their existing practices with coaching, they should see an increased long-term return on their investment because the coaching would build learning as a habit for these individuals, which in turn would develop their capacity to lead.

Vince Lombardi once said “*Leaders aren’t born. They are made.*” We believe that they are made within organizations that support, in practice and climate, a learning environment. This approach has impact on individuals by helping them develop into reflective learners who step back after every action and analyze the outcome, how they got there, and what they would do differently next time. They approach their daily work with a learning mindset. The result will be an increased capacity to lead that will benefit both the individual and the organization. As an individual they will develop a repertoire of leadership skills that will enable them to be flexible and adaptable to any situation, context, or group of followers. The organization will benefit from their increased impact, which combined

with the technical insights that business schools provide, will lead them to have greater influence within the organization. Our expectation is that coaching, when combined with experience, will be the catalyst to develop the learning mindset that does eventually make practice perfect.

**Note from the Co-Executive Editors: Given the nature of the reported research and its initial stages, we intend to invite a follow-up article from the authors in 24-36 months time, to appear in a future issue of IJCO.**

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