The Seven Biggest Mistakes Companies Make with Leadership Development



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DEVELOP LEADERS • DELIVER STRATEGY • DRIVE RESULTS

Most companies want to keep their best employees and for their workforce to be engaged and motivated. But some are more successful than others.

From my experience in helping grow a high-tech company and from the high-tech clients I work with I see seven mistakes that get in the way of sustaining the growth they're aiming for.

1. The leadership development strategy is not aligned with the business strategy

Too often if there is a leadership development strategy it's defined separate and independent from the business strategy. That is not just poor practice. It's plain wrong.

Leadership development is not an HR strategy. It's a business strategy. Your business goals drive the quality and quantity of leaders you need.

And your strategy will be unique to the business context you are working in. If you're a fast-growing company you may need to focus on strategic sourcing and building your employment brand. If you're at a stage of globalising the business, your focus might be on integrating recruitment with an internal mobility programme.

If you're suffering from low engagement and employee performance, your focus might be on revamping performance discussions and development.

2. They don't take a long-term view when defining leadership

Fast-growing companies are often so busy focusing on the day-to-day tasks that they struggle to concentrate on the big picture and strategy for future growth. But leadership isn't about the here and now. Leadership is about the future and the company needs leaders who can take them there. Don't think that leadership is the same no matter what and take a one-size fit all approach that overlooks context. Leadership needs to be defined for the company vision so you need to identify the key roles and skills that will be successful in delivering the business strategy in that changing environment and marketplace.

3. They give people leadership roles because they're the best techies

There is a classic mistake summed up by a management idea called The Peter Principle. This is when selection for a position is based on the candidate's performance in their current role, rather than on abilities relevant to the intended role. And that is all too often the case in high-tech companies. The people who have performed best in technical front-line roles will be promoted into leadership roles as the company grows. But the skills needed for leadership are different from the skills they needed in their techie roles. Without development and support, it's likely they won't be up to the new role.

4. They assume everyone wants to be a leader

Senior people often assume that their employees will have the same ambitions that they had. But that's a mistake. If people love their specialism, they don't necessarily want to move into generalist management and leadership. Many techies are passionate about technology and have no wish to move away from working with software and systems. Even if they do want to move into a leadership role one day, their ambitions may not have the same time frame as the company's. You can only know if someone in the organisation has open, honest and helpful conversations with them about their careers.

5. They try to develop their leaders by sending them on generic training courses

I have nothing against executive education. I have worked with great business and management schools. But the mistake many companies make is thinking that leadership development is all about education in the classroom and nothing else. Adults only remember 10% of what they hear in a lecture style setting versus two-thirds when they learn by doing. Leadership isn't about what people know and think. It's about what they do and say. So leadership development must be designed around real work challenges for a real business impact.

6. They see leadership development as a one-off event

In too many cases, leadership development centres on single events. In truth, leadership skills and behaviours are like muscles. To develop them, one must actively and continually work on them, through various development experiences with each one re-enforcing and building on the last. This means putting potential leaders in positions that stretch them, and continually coaching and supporting leaders so they can build their abilities as rapidly as possible.

7. They don't build the routines, processes and systems needed to embed and reinforce the desired leadership behaviours

All too often I see a disconnect between the leadership behaviours a company says it wants and the organisational routines, processes and systems that are the norms. For example, the company who says they want their leaders to develop their people but then gives them personal targets that mean they have no time to focus on anything other than sales and delivery. Or the company that wants to develop a culture of collaboration but rewards employees individually which encourages competition instead. People only change their behaviour if they gain something positive from doing so.

Is your company making any of these mistakes? Learn more about how to address them by downloading your free eBook

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