

The leadership gap: A call for a national strategy

issue: May 2007 Networked Government – Canadian Government Executive Magazine

by Francoise Moissette

In recent years, much has been made about a leadership “deficit.” As a country, we must determine what are the best ways to develop competent leaders? How do we ensure Canada has a steady supply of capable leaders? How do we strengthen Canadian leadership within and outside our borders?

As baby-boomers prepare to retire, the need is bound to intensify. Canadians, public and private sector, worry that the leadership supply simply cannot meet future demand.

To find solutions to this serious problem, my colleague Amal Henein and I conducted extensive research to answer those questions. We sought the expertise and advice of two credible groups:

- 295 exceptional leaders from coast to coast, in all sectors of the economy: arts, business, community, cooperatives, sports, current and former political leaders, and 69 senior public servants at the federal, provincial and municipal levels.
- 66 leadership development professionals involved with a wide variety of programs in the public, private and community domains. The public sector is represented by seven programs, including the Canadian Forces, Revenue Canada Agency, CMHC and SaskEnergy.

PARADIGM CHANGE

To fill the leadership gap, Canada must generate a critical mass of leaders. This represents a huge paradigm shift from the image of a lone hero who appears during a crisis and saves the day, to the imagery of a flock of Canadian geese flying in a V formation: every bird in turn leading and following. “Leadership is not a spectator sport,” former Ontario Premier Bill Davis has observed. Neither is leadership development. To get the desired results, we must get engaged; we must start thinking strategically and align efforts in a deliberate, conscious and proactive manner.

An apt parallel can be found in elite sports. Following the 2004 Athens Olympics, the Canadian Olympic Committee implemented “Own the Podium” to align and focus resources involved in athlete development. A goal of 25 medals was set for the next winter games, and considerable time, effort and money were invested. It paid off handsomely at the 2006 Turin Games.

Leaving leadership development to chance is unrealistic. Solid strategies and infrastructures are required; natural talent alone is not enough. “We can’t expect leaders to ‘pop up’; they have to be nurtured through a culture that values leadership, promotes good leaders and gives them opportunities to burnish their skills,” Dr. David Walker, Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences, Queen’s University, advises.

A NATIONAL STRATEGY

Leadership matters, and to accumulate an abundant reserve of capable leaders a national strategy is required, making leadership a priority, stressing the value of leadership excellence and the imperative to invest in this crucial resource. The strategy should include:

Leadership Education

Outside of business schools, leadership is almost invisible as a field of study. “How come I didn’t learn anything about leadership until I was in the workplace? We need to focus on leadership development in early childhood and youth education,” Elizabeth Watson, principal, Governance Advisory Services, and

former managing director, Board Resourcing & Development, Office of the Premier, British Columbia, told us. To equip people with useful frameworks and skills, we propose implementing leadership education at all levels, adapted to different age groups.

“Leadership cannot be taught, but it can be developed,” said Ken Dobell, former DM, and Cabinet Secretary, Office of the Premier, BC. Therefore, students should be enticed to get involved in school or community projects. “Leadership education should be mandatory in primary and secondary schools, and project driven. For instance, my daughter has to organize a blood drive in her school,” Isabelle Courville, president, Hydro-Québec TransEnergie, reported. Through such projects, students would learn that as citizens, they have both rights and responsibilities.

The goal is to produce well-rounded, Canada-savvy leaders who are connected to the international context and willing to contribute to our country. If we start now, we might see significant results in 10-12 years. “Start in the early days. Build a foundation of self-confidence. Give them opportunities to take on leadership roles at school while they grow. Support them through coaching and mentoring, so they can behave well in leadership roles. Above all, inspire them. People model themselves based on leaders they see,” Janet Milne, former ADM, Finance and Administration, encourages.

Access to mentoring

Mentoring is the most powerful leadership development method, our leadership sample reported. If more individuals had mentoring, more leaders would emerge. Therefore, we propose expanding the scope and reach of mentoring programs and linking them to various communities. “If we focus on leadership development and allow people to realize their potential, it will provide young people the opportunities to serve that they deserve,” said Dr. Alan Bernstein, O.C., FRSC, President, Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

Mentoring assumes having a pool of talented mentors. How can we identify leaders in the community? “Get prominent people to be in open dialogue with students; this will balance theory with experience,” has been the experience of former Vancouver mayor Philip Owen. One solution is to tap into the mentoring potential of baby boomers looking for opportunities to give back. When established leaders reach out to younger ones, they will energize each other.

National leadership institute

We need an umbrella organization to devise a national strategy and act as a catalyst for information sharing, education and resource development. “Set up a leadership institute connected to many organizations to showcase how to develop leaders. Stimulate and demonstrate leadership. Make learning and leadership development opportunities more accessible,” advises Glenna Carr, former DM, Management Board of Cabinet, Ontario, now working in the private sector.

This institute should adopt the same philosophy as the Canadian military, Captain Alan Okros, former director of the Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, Royal Military College recommends: “Leadership development is not part of what we do, it is what we do.” In other words, leadership cannot be an afterthought; it must become a relentless pursuit, a national obsession, much like hockey.

SITTING ON A GOLD MINE

As the world gets flatter, smaller, more complex and interdependent, the importance of integrating various perspectives, achieving win-win solutions and collaborating with diverse people increases.

Success will belong to the integrators, not the bullies. Therefore, Canadians are uniquely positioned to succeed: “Canada has a golden opportunity. We are well respected because of our past, because we

are a peaceful place and have a social conscience. Other countries are looking up to us and we need to step up to the plate. We should be a leader in helping people from around the world. To do this, we need to move more quickly and decisively, be proactive instead of reactive,” according to Doug McCallum, former mayor, Surrey, BC.

We are sought after on the international scene because we are not suspected of ulterior motives or a domination agenda: “Canada is an affluent and non aggressive country. We are seen as the good guys, the blue helmets, the pacifists who promulgate humanitarian values,” Herménégilde Chiasson, the Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick, noted.

We lead in an inclusive way. As Bill Davis describes, “It is important to bring people to the table, plant seeds and let them appropriate the vision. The greatest successes are through persuasion, not confrontation.”

We have strong process skills such as soliciting input, building consensus, developing teams, resolving conflicts, integrating complementary perspectives. Denise Amyot, VP at PSHRMAC and head of the federal public service’s Leadership Network, and former President of APEX, said: “Before something is presented, we make sure discussions have taken place so there is buy in. People want Canada on their team because of our collaborative approach. Adaptable and flexible, we can play different roles.”

Our style is eminently suited to global realities, but to leverage it, we must assert our leadership identity. This means defining “core Canadian,” our essence to protect at all costs, while remaining open to multiculturalism. It means clarifying our leadership stance by deciding what kind of leaders we want to be.

A better understanding of ourselves will enable us to commit to leadership and select appropriate avenues suited to our skills, temperament and values. If we play our cards right, we just may fulfill Lester B. Pearson’s vision: “The 21st century will belong to Canada.”

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