

Leadership Capacity is in your hands

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In recent years, much has been made about a leadership "deficit." As baby-boomers retire en masse, Canadians worry that the leadership supply simply cannot meet future demand. To find solutions to this serious problem, we conducted extensive research aimed at answering three fundamental questions: What are the best ways to develop competent leaders? How to ensure Canada has a reliable supply of capable leaders? How to strengthen Canadian leadership within and outside our borders?

We assembled a representative sample of 295 exceptional leaders from coast to coast in all sectors of the economy. These accomplished individuals shared what contributed to their own development and made recommendations to expand national leadership capacity. Secondly, we spoke to 66 professionals involved in a variety of leadership development programs. These experts described best practices and provided insight on optimal program infrastructure.

A STRATEGIC APPROACH

Their message was clear: To ensure an abundant supply of capable leaders in all sectors of the economy, Canada must generate a critical leadership mass. This means aligning leadership development efforts in a concerted, conscious and aligned manner. Current initiatives operate in relative isolation, lacking integration and focus across sectors and regions.

Success will call for:

- Understanding and leveraging leadership development dynamics
- Putting in place extensive development infrastructures for children, youth and adults
- Designing and implementing national, organizational and individual leadership development strategies
- Setting up coordination mechanisms and entities to supervise efforts, facilitate information sharing and resource exchanges.

Solutions lie at a systemic and strategic level. "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," advises Dr. David Walker, Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences, Queen's University.

A NATIONAL STRATEGY

A national strategy is required to make leadership a priority, stress the importance of competence and the imperative to invest in this crucial resource. The strategy should include:

Leadership Education: 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" states Elizabeth Watson, Principal, Governance Advisory Services, and Former Managing Director, Board Resourcing & Development, Office of the Premier, British Columbia.

To equip people with useful frameworks and skills, interviewees recommended implementing leadership education at all levels, adapted to age groups. The goal is to produce well rounded, Canada savvy leaders tuned to the global context. People who are aware of their civil rights and responsibilities and willing to contribute to the country. If we start now, we might see significant results in 10-12 years.

Access to Mentoring: Respondents selected mentoring as the most powerful leadership development method. Hence, if more individuals had access to mentoring, more leaders would emerge. Therefore, expanding the scope and reach of mentoring programs to young people and adults and linking them to various communities will go a long way. Mentoring assumes having a pool of talented mentors. How can we identify leaders in the community? 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: A governing body or agency is required to devise a national strategy and act as a catalyst for information sharing, education and resource development. For instance, the Institute could act as a clearinghouse for the numerous leadership development efforts across the country, enabling Canadians to share best practices and learn from each other.

PROGRAM ARCHITECTURE

The most appropriate model is the apprenticeship system because it combines theory, practice and coaching. Apprenticeship acknowledges that proficiency doesn't happen overnight but evolves progressively, from the inside out. It also recognizes the importance of the master-apprentice relationship, providing extensive exposure to role modeling and mentoring.

Mastery is the goal: superb execution coupled with sound leadership judgment. It's about discovering and expanding flow, involving the whole person of the learner in the process. The goal is find and developing leadership identity, not filling gaps. Consequently, the best program configuration includes the following components:

- Education: to acquire frameworks, models, concepts etc...
- Practice: to hone leadership skills through carefully selected and monitored applications
- Self-Discovery: to understand one's identity as a leader and become aware of motivations and impact
- Support: to alleviate growing pains and sustain development with the help of mentoring, coaching, etc...
- Community: to minimize the sense of isolation and provide opportunities for sharing, problem solving, networking etc...

Our research showed that leaving leadership development to chance is irresponsible and unrealistic: the making of a leader requires considerable investment in time, effort and planning. Solid strategies and infrastructures are required: talent alone is simply not enough.

As an HR professional, you have an important role to play. Not only do you have to act as a leader, you are also tasked with the mandate to expand organizational leadership capacity. The next generation of leaders depends on you. It's an awesome responsibility and privilege. What can you do today to move this agenda forward?