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Think Like a Leader

April 18, 2007 - Kellye Whitney, Senior Editor

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Leadership development is to the CLO palette what the color blue is to a creative representation of the sky. Countless learning organizations center or begin the meat of their programming with leadership, knowing development at this level of the workforce has the power to create the fastest and more long-lasting impact on the bulk of an organization's workforce.

But how do you teach someone to act like a leader?

Michael Clingan, the Claymore Group LLC principal, said the idea of leadership development goes all the way back to the time of Aristotle, who attempted to teach the common people how to be leaders in a relatively short time frame.

"I'm an accidental businessperson and a physicist by training, and physicists tend to look at things from first principles," Clingan said. "There are a lot of physicists, as it turns out, who have written about leadership, including Aristotle. He has basically broken leadership down into ethos, pathos and logos. Ethos is about being true to yourself and your values and being authentic. Pathos is about empathy and passion. Logos is the ability to think precisely, creatively and to help others believe in what you're saying, to gain buy in."

Although it can be tough to pinpoint a concept as inherently subjective and individual as leadership development, Clingan said there are some explicit skills that can be taught in leadership development such as understanding causality, knowing how to resolve conflicts, how to plan effectively and how to gain buy in.

"There's another skill that's embedded in there, and that is learning where you're going to stand while you're trying to solve a problem," Clingan said. "This helps you to avoid putting a lot of effort into activities that don't solve problems or don't solve them well. All of us are in very fast-paced environments, and things are always changing. We tend to notice things and may even realize correlations, but we usually don't say, 'If event A happens, then event B happens, or if A happens then, it's likely that B will happen.'

"That's great if you're a leader by yourself, but most leadership nowadays happens with a group of people. You need to have more rigor and process so people can poke at things without it getting emotional. Take a little bit more work on the front end to say, 'OK, what problem are we trying to solve? And let's make sure we understand current reality very well.'"

Once some of the more explicit leadership skills have been identified for development, one of the next key stages of development revolves around how a leader can practice new skills.

Simulations, for instance, offer learners an opportunity to learn in a risk-free environment, but Clingan said that too often, simulations and other more technology-motivated learning activities are ill-suited to relay the necessary learning for this audience.

"The whole concept of critical thinking skills for leadership tends to be one that overwhelms the learner," Clingan explained. "Critical thinking is a massive body of work, and most of the time, it's like a dump truck backing up in a class: You hear the beeping sound, then all this stuff comes sliding off the back, and the leader is supposed to somehow grab onto the stuff that's most valuable. I take the other approach and try to boil it down first and give them only three or four tools that are going to do them the most good most of the time."

Clingan said only about 20 percent of his workshops are dedicated to lecture. Learners spend the remaining 80 percent executing real-life scenarios based on real problems in their business environment.

Further, adult learning theory centers on small learning objects, making learning real and then applying lessons learned immediately. All of these lead to development activities in class rather than in an online format.

"In a previous life, I did online components, but it really doesn't lend itself to the scrutiny," Clingan said. "One of the most powerful things an instructor can say when teaching a leader to think better is one word: 'Really?' It beats 'I think you're full of crap' — it has a more positive connotation. You can't do that in an online environment in quite the same way. You don't need to. If I have class time, I can move to a situation where I'm mentoring, and you use tools in a classroom environment that you're

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not going to online or in the field.”

Further, coming up with great ideas in class is fairly easy, but Clingan said it is equally important to communicate solutions effectively, something many leadership programs don't emphasize, thus buy in for the concepts or processes learned doesn't occur naturally.

“It's about breaking down the steps so there's agreement on the problem, agreement on the direction of the solution and agreement that the solution solves the problem,” Clingan said. “I expect students to be able to analyze a situation better and faster than they did before they came in. They should use causality naturally, and I expect them to come up with solutions and plans, whether they're working by themselves or playing well with others.

“Leadership is a group activity. I expect them to communicate the output from any planning effectively and get buy in. It's hard to measure the transition of a leader from one state to another correctly. It's much easier to judge the effectiveness of the leader by listening to their people — see how willing the followers are.”

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