

EXECUTIVE INSIGHT

A DISCUSSION OF KEY MANAGEMENT ISSUES | VOLUME 26 NUMBER 9 |

A MATTER OF EXPERIENCE

Do you have executives in your leadership pipeline who have great potential but need to be “battle tested”? Do you have a plan in place for broadening their experience base and expanding their capabilities? Too often, companies merely assume that promising individuals will be exposed to the right challenges and somehow take with them the intended developmental benefit. Chances are these organizations will be disappointed.

Done well, a purposeful strategy for providing experiences to critical talent **accelerates development and creates readiness** for more complex senior level roles. However, many executives move upward in their organizations carrying behavior, skill and knowledge gaps along with them. While the most resourceful individuals may have the ability to be aware of their deficiencies and figure out ways to overcome them, many struggle through a “trial by fire” process of learning. In the worst case, they fail to meet important business objectives because of the key gaps in their capability set.

The truth is, no one can be prepared for all the challenges faced by top management. However, **executives who have the advantage of a diverse experience base, combined with effective feedback, greatly increase their chances of success.** Because of this, world-class companies have learned it is wise to cultivate the organizational will to make experiential development a key component of their talent development strategy.

So, how do you go about readying your cream of the crop talent for very senior positions? Are the people who populate the boxes of your succession charts ready now? In two years? How will you get them from A to B? The board really doesn’t want to go outside the organization for the next opening at the top, and neither do you. Not that

outside talent is a bad thing — all companies need a balance of “build and buy.” But remember, **building is a long-term commitment that can pay huge dividends.** Buying is a risky and potentially expensive proposition that should not be relied upon too heavily.

Our research and experience at RHR International has found that executive development is maximized when there is an approach that takes into account three factors in equal measure: 1) the characteristics of the **individual** being developed, 2) exposure to business **experiences** that drive development, and 3) a process that provides timely **feedback.**

THE INDIVIDUAL It is vital to assess the unique makeup of the person chosen to be developed. Two people can be exposed to the same business experience and each will draw different benefits and outcomes. Why? Motivation, learning orientation and how people process feedback are all critical to the success of a developmental experience. These factors should be accounted for in advance before designing the proper experience around the individual and the needs of the company. **An objective assessment provided by an internal or external resource can be invaluable during this process.** Deep insights about individual psychology, including learning style, will enable the organization to effectively match experiences to the person that will optimize the developmental impact.



THE EXPERIENCE Every new business experience (defined as a change or expansion of responsibility that gives the executive exposure to new challenges) provides a unique set of learning opportunities. Developmentally rich experiences can occur within a role or through outside assignments. Here is where “organizational will” becomes very important. In other words, **does your organization possess the creativity and the risk tolerance for stretching talent in new and different ways?** In the absence of obvious openings for new roles — board memberships, task forces, projects, etc. — an organization needs to get creative about how it provides critical talent exposure to business challenges. It needs to be very clear about what abilities are needed based on company strategies, and then design a way for its talent to build those capabilities. Certain kinds of experience matter more than others (e.g., those that are highly visible and include novelty, complexity and pressure to perform). **Failure should always be an acceptable outcome of a developmental experience.** Sometimes the best learning comes from hardships in a supportive environment.

RESOURCES AND PROCESS Experiences should be provided with an eye toward development and not as a “test” to see who makes it (with little or no support). This means that you cannot simply throw someone into a challenging situation and expect him or her to “learn what it takes to be a leader.” **Learning and development is maximized when resources and processes are put in place to extract learning and generalize behaviors to current and future roles.** People need to get feedback at the right time in order to consolidate what they have learned. Efforts should be made to plot out in advance when coaching or mentoring conversations should take place so that learning occurs just in time (bearing in mind that “in the moment” feedback is necessary and essential as well). Such points of feedback are opportunities for the organization to leverage the system of resources around the executive (boss, peer, mentor, coach, etc.) to accelerate development.

THE BOTTOM LINE To accelerate the readiness of executives for more complex senior level roles, organizations need to:

- Possess the will to develop talent through experiences.

- Deeply understand the unique makeup of each leader in their critical talent pool.
- Design a process for experiential development that provides a unique set of learning opportunities.
- Include timely feedback to extract the maximum benefit for the talent.

CASE EXAMPLE A 10 billion dollar consumer products company recently restructured its supply chain to enable a strategy of becoming more aligned with customer needs. In doing so, the senior management hopes to strengthen their understanding of their customers and the company’s on-shelf availability of products. JoAnne, a Vice President of Sales, is a top talent who is thought to have the potential to become President of the company’s largest business unit. JoAnne has very little experience working in the supply chain. However, she knows the customers deeply from her experience in Sales (**Individual Assessment**). Dieter, another top talent who is thought to have the upside to become COO, has spent his career in the supply chain and knows as much as anyone in the company about logistics, supply planning, warehousing and transportation. Dieter is less customer-focused in his thinking (**Individual Assessment**). In a risky move (**Will**), the company made JoAnne and Dieter the co-leads of the newly structured global value chain (**Experience**) and provided an internal coach for both (**Timely Feedback**). The charter is for them to learn from each other (**Unique Learning**), and, together drive a culture of increased customer focus in the value chain.

ABOUT RHR INTERNATIONAL

RHR International is a firm of management psychologists and consultants who work closely with top management to accelerate individual, team and business performance. We focus on five key areas of client need — CEO Succession, Executive Selection and Integration, Accelerated Executive Effectiveness, Senior Team Effectiveness, and Management Due Diligence. We have been proven difference-makers for more than 65 years, unique in our combination of top management focus, psychologists’ perspective and high-level business acumen.



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