

The Advisory Alliance

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Leadership Development is a Discontinuous, not an Evolutionary, Process.

In this month's 60-Second E-mail™, we look at leadership and its development as a discontinuous process. Although much of our experience with everyday leader-like roles suggests that becoming a better leader happens gradually, upon closer inspection, we know, even intuitively, that this is not so.

I remember vividly the Sunday afternoon almost 15 years ago, when I left our house to return a movie to the local video outlet. With tape in hand (I did say it was 15 years ago), I set out for the three-block walk, thinking "I'll never be able to do this again." The "this" I was referring to was the ability to leave the house somewhat spontaneously with a quick "Be right back", knowing that things would be more or less the same upon my return. My wife was to be induced the following morning and we were to become parents for the first time. Heading off to the video store would soon involve a bit more planning and collaboration.

It is interesting and humorous to note that with the arrival of our second child, I believed I was somewhat more prepared. I obviously had been through the process of becoming a father already. This second child would therefore simply be, for me, becoming a father a second time. Sort of like being *more* of a father. Maybe a little different, but really more of just the same. Wrong. As I was to quickly find out, fatherhood is not an evolutionary process; one doesn't necessarily become a better father simply with the passage of time and addition of children. Fatherhood (and motherhood) is a discontinuous process. A family of three is qualitatively different, from a family of four and from a family of five. Likewise, being a father to one child is qualitatively different from being a father to two or three.

So why the talk about parenthood in a newsletter on Leadership? Because Leadership and its development is a discontinuous process as well. Our wording sometimes gives us the impression that it is an evolutionary one. We say that someone "is on the fast track", as if there is one path to be followed, and should one stray, one will fall off that track, and with it, the ability to ascend to higher levels of leadership. In fact, leadership is more like a train trip with several transfers. Yes, you need to follow the track you're currently on. But at some point, you'll need to transfer to a new track and a new destination. Do you know when that will be? Do you know when you will get there, to the transfer point? Do you know what you will have to "pay" to travel the new track? And what skills and experiences will you need to bring with you to have a safe and prosperous journey?

In their book "The Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership-Powered Company", authors Charan, Drotter and Noel note that there are approximately six Leadership Passages in most large organizations:

1. From Managing Self to Managing Others
2. From Managing Others to Managing Managers

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3. From Managing Managers to Functional Managers
4. From Functional Manager to Business Manager
5. From Business Manager to Group Manager
6. From Group Manager to Enterprise Manager

Although some companies may have somewhat fewer or more passages depending upon the organization's size, the essence of each passage is the same. As a Leader leaves one "level" (e.g. Managing Others) for a new one ("Managing Managers"), the Leader confronts new challenges that require different skills, new time horizons and applications, and new work values. Yes, you may have excelled at managing others, but that doesn't necessarily mean you can manage managers, even though you've been with the firm for 10 years.

Unfortunately, many companies still use the outdated evolutionary model of leadership, wherein once one "becomes" a leader, one is expected "to kind of grow" as a leader. This is especially so in organizations where you're responsible for your own career and development. But it just doesn't work that way. Past experience as a leader may be a requirement for the next leadership role, but that experience alone is often insufficient to qualify you for the next level of leadership. Yes, once a parent, always a parent, but once a leader, not always leader, and certainly not always the next great leader.

It is well accepted that although great leaders may initially bring more to the table than others, they, like moms and dads, are truly born in the crucible of daily life along with their constant novel and qualitatively different challenges. If you are not developing your leaders with the full understanding that leadership, like change, is a discontinuous process, you risk having first-time "parents" in charge of multi-generational "families".

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Until next month, best regards,

David

David Harper
Member and Directing Manager