

# Leadership development through experience

Morgan W. McCall, Jr.

Human beings never know more than part, as "through a glass darkly;" and all knowledge comes to us in pieces.

—Thomas Cahill

What follows is my interpretation of what we know about developing leadership talent; that is, it is a relative truth as seen through the lens of my research and experience with the topic. I have set out below what I believe to be true—true enough to act on with confidence in most situations; what I believe to be contingent—things for which action depends on the specific situation; and finally, what I think we need to learn if we are to get better at leadership development.

What is the lens of my particular truth? My colleagues and I have done mostly qualitative research with managers and executives deemed successful or having high potential in large corporations.<sup>1</sup> The underlying assumption has been that what it takes to become a successful executive, to the extent that it can be learned at all, is learned mostly through experience. The goal of the research has been to understand what experiences matter in the development of executive talent, what those experiences potentially teach, the processes by which the lessons of experience are learned (or not), and how experience can be used more effectively in organizational settings to develop leadership talent. Pursuit of this knowledge has involved hundreds of managers and executives from all organizational levels, from many different types of organizations, and from the U.S. as well as other countries. Many of the results have been replicated in specific corporate settings<sup>2</sup> and in other cultures.<sup>3</sup> A number of companies have put the basic principles into practice.

As pleased as I am with our progress to date, it is important to remember that this work is about the development of corporate executives through experience. Other relevant populations and other approaches are based on different assumptions.

While I would like to think that what we have learned can be widely generalized, there are other truths.

## What We Know

The primary source of learning to lead, to the extent that leadership can be learned, is experience. The role played by training and other formal programs is relatively modest in comparison to other kinds of experiences. The implication of this belief is rather profound because it suggests that experiences (mostly assignments) rather than programs should form the core of executive development. Yet until recently we have known relatively little about how to effectively use experience for development, including what experiences are developmental, what people might learn from them, why some people learn and others don't, who to give what experiences to, and so forth.

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While experience is at the heart of development, not all experiences are created equal. As Dennis the Menace once observed, "The trouble with learning is that it's always about stuff you don't know." The vast majority of experiences reported as developmental involve facing adversity, going into the new or unknown, struggling with the unfamiliar. The broad categories of experiences that seem to matter most are challenging assignments (for example, start-ups, turnarounds, and substantial increases in scope and scale of responsibility), exposure to other people (usually either exceptional or terrible superiors—people don't seem to learn much from mediocre bosses), hardships (for example, making mistakes or getting fired), and personal events (mostly significant non-work expe-

riences). While these kinds of experiences offer different and somewhat predictable lessons, how developmental they are and what they might teach to specific individuals is, well, highly individual. The implication is that different individuals will benefit differentially from the same experience depending on prior experience, what they already know and don't know, and (as noted below) whether their own styles and the context around the experience promote learning.

People don't automatically learn from experience. They can come away with nothing, the wrong lessons, or only some of what they might have learned. Similar experiences repeated over time carry with them reduced learning, which is why careers spent doing similar kinds of things (e.g., multiple turnarounds) or within functional, technical, or product silos so often produce narrow executives. The challenge in using experience for development lies in giving the right experiences to the people who will learn the most from them (often described as "open to learning" or "learning agile") and then providing the kind of support that will help them learn what the experiences offer. This is anything but easy. It requires developing ways to identify what experiences are developmental and where they are, ways to identify the people with the ability to learn from those experiences, mechanisms for getting the right people into those experiences (and unblocking them when necessary), ways to identify and specify desired learning outcomes, and an understanding of the kinds of interventions that promote the developmental side of performance-driven assignments.

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If experience is the focus of executive development, then who gets what experience (usually a job assignment) drives it. Ironically, the person most likely to get a specific challenging assignment is the person who has already demonstrated the ability to do it (the ready-now candidate), rather than the person who has not yet shown the ability and could learn the most if given the opportunity. In my earlier work, I called the former the "A list" and the latter the "B list" candidates and suggested that effective succession planning would create and consider both lists before filling a key developmental job.<sup>4</sup> Of course that implies identifying the assignments that are key developmental

jobs as part of the succession planning process, not just identifying who the talented people are. Whatever the mechanism used to somehow match talented people with the assignments they need, there almost always will be a difficult decision to make between maximizing short-term performance by choosing the most qualified candidate and longer-term development (and presumably performance) by choosing the person with talent who could learn the most. This dilemma is one reason that a clear philosophy about developing talent is a crucial aspect of senior leadership. Developmental moves involve potential business losses due to errors, costs, and inefficiencies associated with the learning curve, and even possible loss of talented people if they do not succeed in meeting the performance objectives of the job.

Another reasonable certainty is that the development of executive talent does not happen all at once. In fact, the complexity of the knowledge, skill, and ability required to perform most high-level executive jobs effectively is such that we are talking in terms of decades.<sup>5</sup> A reasonable comparison point is research on expertise that demonstrates empirically that a minimum of ten years of intensive investment is required to produce a master chess player, and even longer for some other disciplines that are substantially narrower in scope than senior leadership positions.<sup>6</sup> It therefore makes little sense to begin executive development processes at very senior levels, as so many companies do. Instead the process must start early and pay special attention to crucial transition points, such as those described by Linda Hill in her seminal work on the move from individual contributor to manager and Ram Charan and his colleagues in their conceptual discussion of various transition points in the "leadership pipeline."<sup>7</sup>

In summary, through one lens we seem to know that experience is at the heart of development, that experiences vary in their developmental potential and in the lessons they can teach, that what is actually learned from experience varies depending on what the individual brings to it as well as the context for learning created around it, that a process for getting talented people into the experiences they need is crucial, and that acquiring executive competence through experience requires many years and a number of difficult transitions. These points seem to be universally true (if such is possible) in large corporations. They also suggest some important contingencies in development, some key places where it all depends. These include the business strategy itself, which determines what development is needed; what actions might enhance learning from a particular experi-

ence; and the role played by the traditional development programs if experience were placed at the heart of development.

### When It All Depends

When Aristotle explored rational thinking and logical error, he postulated four "causes," the last of which was "the purpose for which the thing exists."<sup>8</sup> From that perspective, the most significant contingency in executive development is the nature of the challenges that leaders face in enacting the business strategy. In other words, the purpose of leadership development in a corporate setting, philosophical and humanistic considerations of the value of learning for its own sake aside, is to insure that people in leadership roles have the competence to determine and to carry out the strategic imperatives. If competence is acquired through experience, then it is the strategy of the business that determines which experiences are necessary to build it. Leaders in a company with a growth strategy based on successful integration of mergers and acquisitions, for example, would need different experiences than leaders in a company committed to growing from within. Leading in a conglomerate like General Electric would require at least some different developmental experiences than leading in a more focused company like Southwest Airlines. The crucial links, which are almost always talked about but rarely effectively made, are from the business strategy to the leadership challenges it suggests to the experiences given to its talented people.

The idea that strategy can determine what developmental experiences are important begs the question of whether people will learn from the experiences they have. Learning from experience is not automatic. Some people learn only part of what they could learn, some learn the wrong things, and some steadfastly refuse to learn anything at all (a phenomenon Barbara Tuchman labeled "wooden headedness"<sup>9</sup>). Clearly the wise organization does what it can to improve the odds that its talented people will learn the lessons of the experiences they are given. For example, many organizations have instituted formal programs of coaching, mentoring, and 360-degree feedback that are available to their high-potential managers on an as-appropriate basis. It turns out, however, that different people and different experiences call for different intervention strategies. There are individual differences in responsiveness to various kinds of support and feedback, as well as differences in the ways in which different experiences offer up their lessons. Sometimes the best course of action

is to let people figure it out for themselves, while at other times access to a more experienced coach or role model is crucial. We don't yet understand as well as we might how learning from experience takes place, so our efforts to provide appropriate interventions in its service are mostly hit or miss. Nonetheless we know enough to say unequivocally that different situations require different strategies to enhance learning from experience.

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### The Role of Programs

This leaves at issue the role that training and formal educational programs should play in developing executive talent. I have suggested that experience, not programs, should be the centerpiece of development, but this does not mean that programs are irrelevant. It does mean that the value of program experiences, like that of other kinds of experiences, depends on how potent they are and how they are used. Passive training, like mediocre assignments or bosses, is not likely to lead to much learning. Strategically relevant, powerful, and well-timed programs, however, can be enormously valuable. This is not the place to go into detail on how to make training effective, but suffice it to say that much can be done once training is seen as a supplement to, rather than the core of, development. Training can play a significant part of learning when (1) it is used as an opportunity to reflect on and make better sense of actual experience; (2) it substitutes for experiences that are either unavailable to enough people or are too risky or expensive to use for development (teaching pilots on flight simulators might be an example); and (3) it provides experiences that are not available online, such as scenarios for future states of the organization or a forum for direct exposure to senior executives.

Needless to say, there are many other situationally determined aspects of executive development. These include the appropriateness of different experiences at different stages of a career, differences in criteria for selecting people for different kind of developmental opportunities, and tailoring development to individual histories, gifts, and needs. None of these is trivial, and together they highlight the importance of considering development as a career-long, if not life-long, process.

## What We Need To Know

There is no magic bullet here, nor a short list of to-do's that will guarantee an adequate supply of leadership talent. Like many other aspects of human learning, this one will always be a matter of probabilities, and improvement will come in the form of increased probabilities. It would be useful to have more studies of the kinds of experiences that matter, what they can teach, what can be done to enhance learning, who is most likely to learn, the impact of career stage, industry and organizational differences, the linkage to values, the role that the individual plays, how strategy translates into leadership challenges, and a host of other very relevant and important issues. With so much fertile territory, it is very difficult to follow the mandate for this article and choose just one.

## Learning from experience, viewed as it unfolds, happens in fits and starts.

But my most recent work does suggest one area that begs for further exploration. We have been following people over time as they move into demanding upper-middle-level roles. In weekly or bi-weekly contacts, we have tried to understand what they are learning from these potentially developmental experiences and what helps or hinders the process. The conversations reveal that Learning from experience, viewed as it unfolds, happens in fits and starts. People say things like "I knew that, but I had forgotten it until it happened again;" "I've made that mistake before, but I get a little better each time;" "I just did it again—but at least I recognize that I did it." Initial learning is almost entirely job- and performance-centered—such things as learning the boss's expectations, style, and hot buttons, mastering new technologies or customers or processes, diagnosing specific performance problems and causes—not the more generic or transformational kinds of lessons that would suggest the development of advanced leadership skills. However, after some months and looking back, substantial changes become visible.

To really make effective use of experience to develop talent, we need a much better understanding of the learning process as it plays out on line and of how to help people make the most of the experiences they have. Of crucial importance is what can be done to shift learning from job- and performance-specific mastery to the growth of new and larger skills that move such mastery along the continuum toward expertise.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> McCall, M. W., Jr. 1998. *High flyers*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press; McCall, M. W., Jr., & Hollenbeck, G. P. 2002. *Developing global executives*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press; McCall, M. W., Jr., Lombardo, M. M., & Morrison, A. M. 1988. *The lessons of experience*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books (Free Press).

<sup>2</sup> Yost, P. R., et al. 2001. Lessons of experience: Personal and situational factors that drive growth. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, San Diego, CA.

<sup>3</sup> Research Project: "The lessons of experience" in Japan (Research Report). June 2001. Recruit Co., Ltd., Tokyo, Japan.

<sup>4</sup> McCall, op. cit.

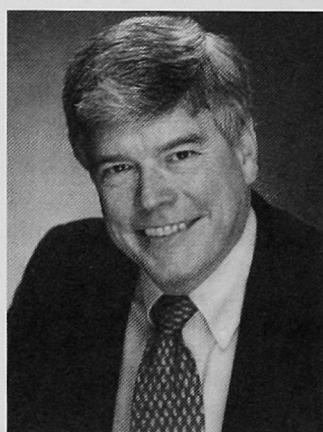
<sup>5</sup> Kotter, J. P. 1982. *The general managers*. New York: Free Press.

<sup>6</sup> Ericsson, K. A., & Charness, N. 1994. Expert performance: Its structure and acquisition. *American Psychologist*, 49(8): 725-747.

<sup>7</sup> Hill, L. A. 1992. *Becoming a manager*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press; Charan, R., Drotter, S., & Noel, J. 2001. *The leadership pipeline*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>8</sup> Cahill, T. 2003. *Sailing the wine-dark sea*. New York: Doubleday.

<sup>9</sup> Tuchman, B. W. 1984. *The march of folly*. New York: Ballantine.



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