

The Importance of Leadership Development

Why Is It Important?

Someone once said, “*Leadership is the most important factor in the success of an organization.*” (Maxwell, 1995) and I would add, “and the organization.” Ultimately success hinges on the ability of the leader or leaders to develop a team that will work together to accomplish the mission of the organization.

Leadership development is indispensable for a successful church. We see numerous examples of leadership development throughout the Bible; from Nehemiah and his dream to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem to Jesus’ intentional team building with his core group, the twelve disciples.

Why is leadership development so important? Because working as a team is the key to multiplied effectiveness. Remember the old Chinese proverb, “Many hands make light work?” I find that to be true, don’t you? The yard work gets done much quicker when my daughters are helping. We have all benefited from the value of teamwork.

What is a team? Webster defines it as “a cooperative unit.” I expand the definition to include, “A team is a group of people with often different, yet complementary abilities and talents, who are committed to the same mission or vision.” Have you ever watched rowing? About the only time I do is during the Olympics. There’s a real beauty to the slender boats on the water, the perfect cadence of the athletes. It’s a sport that demands endurance, strength, and the drive to keep going even when your body screams to stop. But what’s really fascinating is the teamwork. The crew, made up of individuals willing to sacrifice personal goals for the team, will be on the medal stand together. Winning teammates successfully match their desire, talent and blade work with one another.

How to Raise the Importance?

So, how does the leader move his followers toward the importance of team development? I remember hearing a story about Walt Disney’s early days, before he created what today is the Disney Empire. Walt Disney would take his two daughters to a park on Sundays. The park had a carousel which the girls loved to ride. As he waited for the ride to be over, Walt says, he noticed two things: One, the horses looked beautiful at a distance, but up close they were covered with chipped paint. Secondly, the horses on

the outside went up and down, but the inside ones did not. From this, he literally conceived Disneyland and what it would look like, summing it up in one sentence, "No chipped paint, all horses jump." A leader like Walt Disney must have the ability to see the possibilities before they become obvious. Vision is a foundational component of leadership. Leadership development requires vision.

One day I finally realized that leadership development was not going to happen on its own and that it would only happen if it became a priority to me, the pastor, the point leader of the church. I would have to have a vision for it and be able to communicate that vision with others passionately and effectively.

This is why leadership development rarely happens in a church. The pastor and others in leadership positions are driven by immediate needs and never seem to have the time to put into it.

Once you have created a plan of how you want to develop your leaders and what “success” looks like, you must start implementing the program. Start small, with one or two people. This will allow you to work out the bugs inconspicuously. There are different ways to begin the program but specific leadership training events and mentoring are the two I use most.

Some training events include:

- learning how to communicate effectively
- learning conflict resolution skills
- team building exercises
- relating to different personality styles
- time management
- the importance of a good attitude

Training events are no match for the importance of coaching or mentoring. All of the top professional and Olympic athletes recognize the importance of a personal coach to help them reach peak performance. The same holds true when it comes to training church leaders.

Jim Loehr reminds us that the development of others requires that we focus on their whole life, not just their “work” life. We must help each person understand that their growth and development must be experienced in every area of life. Look at what Loehr says:

Full engagement requires drawing on four separate but related sources of energy: Physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. If growth and development take place from the bottom up--from physical to emotional to mental to spiritual--change is powered from the top down. (Loehr 2003)

That means that the team cannot be fully committed or focused unless all four areas of their life are aligned to a purpose that really matters.

A mentor or coach provides other leaders with the one-on-one attention needed to help take them to the next level quickly. Many leaders have some natural tendencies: they train others how they were trained, they try to motivate others according to how they are motivated, and they tend to miss-direct their energies. It is important to have a plan all can follow so that the organization moves ahead on the same page.

At some point it will be important to promote leadership development. The best time to roll it out may be after refining it as you work with a few leaders. Have those that have been involved share publicly a success story. If others can share their excitement and tell of their experience and success, they can build momentum to the program and add others willing to grow. Be careful to point out that the goal is to do our best. Use your leaders to coach others and consider bringing in an outside person to help your leaders coach others more effectively.

Question #5 – “How do you look for someone to mentor?”

Answer – I look for three things: character, attitude, and capacity.

How do I discover this? I want them around me so I can see if they have the character, attitude, and capacity; things like people skills and the intelligence needed. Next, I give them something to do. This initial test gives me a pretty good sense if I can continue pouring time and energy in this person as a leader.

In looking for leaders, beware of character flaws. Some examples of what to look for include truth telling, energy, bias for action, etc.

Who has influence over others? Who impacts the room? Leaders persuade and influence others. I try to assess their bandwidth, the wider the better. What do I mean by bandwidth? Bandwidth is the ability to influence and lead different groups of people. Some people have people skills along a certain bandwidth only (i.e., people of the same age, same economic level, same culture, etc.).

Question #6 – “Where and how do you mentor?”

Answer – My practice is most often informal. I try to use time wisely, such as in the car while taking them with me on a visit.

Mentoring is not only about time, but energy. We usually undervalue the importance of our physical, emotional, and relational health. Each person has a well of emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual energy. I ask, “How deep is that well? What is keeping you from where you want to be, from your desired destination?” We often minimize the importance of renewal.

Great leadership mobilizes, focuses, and renews energy. Renewal is so important! We must manage energy not time. Growth in your life will follow whatever you give your energy to. Time is a tool. Where do you invest your time? Energy? In the past, you worked until dark, then you read by candlelight, or spent time with the family. Today, you have email, faxes, Blackberry’s, that keep us working. We give life to whatever we give our energy to. Are you taking care of you? Physically? Emotionally? Mentally? Spiritually? What are you watering. I can’t give what I don’t have. (Groppel 1999)

Question #7 – “Have you ever made a mistake in choosing a potential leader to develop and how did you handle it?”

Answer – Two things I have learned is you have to “right size” the challenges you give others by giving escalating responsibilities. You have to evaluate capacity. Secondly, you have to be willing to make the tough call. I had someone once ask me, “Tell me one thing I did wrong.” They didn’t understand they did not have the capacity to go where we needed to go. This is gut check time. You will either pay the price now or later. Again this highlights the importance of having the right people on the bus.

Question #8 – “What if leadership is not my gift?”

Answer

informally, taking advantage of teachable moments whenever they arise. Noel Tichy says, “The winning leaders I have met all view teaching as one of their major jobs, and they spend a lot of time doing it.” (Tichy 1997)

Leaders that excel in leadership development have what Tichy calls “a teachable point of view.” Having a teachable point of view means having a clear idea and being able to communicate those ideas, values, and mission
