Leader development will be more effective when developmental beliefs are taken into account

The development of leaders can be made more effective by discovering their beliefs about the possibility of learning leadership capabilities and, if necessary, modifying those beliefs. Someone who believes that leadership capabilities are more likely to come from genetics rather than experience, that leaders are more likely to be born than made, will not enthusiastically embrace development opportunities and are unlikely to benefit fully from them.

Knowing that a potential leader does not believe that some leadership capabilities can be developed, a coach or manager can be asked to initiate a conversation with the individual about potentially self-handicapping behaviours and what might be done about them. If it is the case that beliefs about the difficulty of learning some leadership capabilities are widespread throughout an organisation, those designing a development program can ensure that any potential resistance is addressed and resolved at the beginning of the program.

The fact is that beliefs can be challenged and altered. Modifying the beliefs of those who doubt leadership capabilities can be learnt will reap large rewards by ensuring that development is more effective.

Leader development is not always effective

While of the critical tasks in managing leader succession is to develop the talent pool within an organization, a leadership development program may not be as successful as was intended. The content can be too academic and confusing; the learning process can be limited and not suit everyone; the work environment may not be supportive when the participants return to it. It can also be the case that a development program is poorly targeted, risking its effectiveness for some individuals.

Not every potential participant will want to develop their leadership capabilities and, if sent on a program, can often be resentful of the fact that they had been taken away from their normal work. When this is the case, it should not be a surprise that those participants think that the program is a waste of time and show little benefit from having attended.

While a lot of time is spent assessing the potential of an individual to learn from a development initiative (Are they able to learn?), typically less effort is put into determining whether they are ready to embrace the initiative (Are they willing to develop?). Not taking into account an individual's "Readiness to Develop", that is, "their ability and motivation to attend to, make meaning of and incorporate new knowledge into their long-term memory structures" (Avolio and Hannah, 2008), creates a critical risk to a development initiative.

Why doesn't Mark want to be developed?

Mark is the leader of the New South Wales branch of a national research institute. He is in charge of 26 professionals and 2 support staff. He is highly intelligent, open to new experiences and loves to learn. The HR Department believe that he has the potential to be the CEO of the institute and want to see him develop into that role.

It was suggested to Mark that he should attend a Leadership Development Program at a prestigious Business School. Mark refused point-blank, giving as an argument that he had too much work to do and could not afford the time away from his day job. For whatever reason, Mark could not see the value in the formal development of his leadership capabilities.

There are many reasons why Mark may not have been interested. It could be that he did not have a strong motivation to lead; it could be that he was uncomfortable with feedback of any kind, positive or negative; or it could be that, in his heart of hearts, he believed that leadership could not be taught. He is certainly not the only one with this belief. Beliefs, be they articulated or unconscious, can affect behaviour, well-being and performance in all areas of life.

Some scientific background – beliefs are important because they affect behaviour and hence performance

We all have beliefs about ourselves, our potential, our challenges and our colleagues. Whether they are explicit or implicit, our beliefs

influence our attitudes and behaviours and help us make quick, consistent decisions.

The study of the effect of beliefs on performance originated in Educational Psychology. In one study a group of children were presented with a graded series of mathematical problems. They were asked to try to solve the problems but were not forced to take part in the exercise and were able to stop when they so desired. What was observed was that the students approached the problems in one of two ways: an adaptive one and a maladaptive one.

Some students relished the thought of attempting challenging problems, looking forward to increasing their skill and mastery. Other students seemed frightened that they would not be able to perform as well as or better than others and, when they found the problems difficult, reverted to avoidance behaviour. When researchers looked for the causes of these behaviours they found that they were driven by the students' beliefs about the origins of intelligence and ability.

Students with an adaptive response had a belief that intelligence and ability can be developed; those with a maladaptive response believed that intelligence and ability are essentially fixed (Dweck and Leggett, 1998). Collective beliefs about the source and improvability of intelligence are referred to as a Mindset (with regard to intelligence). Students in the first group were described as having a Growth Mindset with regard to intelligence; those in the second group were described as having a Fixed Mindset.

Mindsets influence cognition, well-being, behavior and hence performance. In particular, those who believe that intelligence and ability can be developed tend to embrace challenges, persisting in the face of setbacks. They see effort as the path to mastery, learn from criticism and find lessons and inspiration in the success of others. As a consequence they attain ever-higher levels of achievement.

Those who believe that ability and intelligence are static tend to avoid challenges, giving up easily if things do not go well. They regard striving to improve to be useless, ignore negative feedback and are threatened by the success of others. As a result, they may achieve less than their full potential, interpreting their experience as further confirmation of their

deterministic view of ability (Dweck and Leggett, 1988).

A Fixed Mindset can hold an individual back from achieving their full potential. This is true, no matter what the focus of the mindset is. A Fixed Mindset about creativity leads to less creative behavior (O'Connor, Nemeth, and Akutsu, 2013); a Fixed Mindset about negotiation skills results in sub-optimal negotiated outcomes (Kray and Haselhuhn, 2007). A manager who believes that an individual's character is essentially fixed ("Everyone is a certain kind of person and there is not much that can be done to really change that") tends to find it difficult to notice improvements in an employee's behavior and tends to produce a biased appraisal (Heslin, Latham and VandeWalle, 2005). Furthermore, those employees who have been appraised by managers with a Fixed Mindset about character are more likely to perceive the performance appraisal as having been procedurally unjust (Heslin and VandeWalle, 2011) and to see their managers as ineffective coaches (Heslin, VandeWalle, and Latham, 2006).

Of course, both genes and experience will contribute to a leader's performance. Although it is clearly true that we inherit a lot of our potential to be effective leaders, it is also clearly self-defeating to believe that one's capability in a particular area cannot be enhanced through effort, training and practice. If someone accepts a Fixed Mindset with respect to the development of a particular capability, they are condemning themselves to fall short of achieving their full potential.

The good news is that fixed mindsets can be modified

An individual's beliefs can be changed through simple interventions based on the principles of self-persuasion. For example, in the study of performance appraisal mentioned above, a number of subjects with a Fixed Mindset about human nature were inducted into the study by being primed to be more attuned to the possibility of changes. They reported a shift towards a Growth Mindset that seemed to be sustainable, at least over a period of a couple of months, and showed more sensitivity to behavioural changes than those who were given a placebo induction.

In the study of coaching behaviours, when those with a Fixed Mindset were persuaded that human nature can be changed, they reported a higher willingness to coach and were judged by independent raters to have provided more and higher quality suggestions to improve performance than their peers whose mindsets were not challenged (Heslin, VandeWalle, and Latham, 2006).

In light of existing research, one can expect that a Fixed Mindset about the development of a specific leadership capability can be modified to a Growth Mindset. There are many ways to do this, including the presentation of written or video evidence that the capability can be developed, challenging the beliefs through counter-attitudinal reflection and advocacy (Miller and Wozniak, 2001), discussions with colleagues or coaching.

A more effective way of developing leaders

For a manager wanting to get a return on his or her investment in development or for a HR manager wanting to manage the risks inherent in of leader development, it is important to know who will be serious about and ready to be developed as a leader. They need to assess a potential's mindset about capability acquisition and incorporate this assessment into the design of leader development.

Not all potential leaders believe that leadership capabilities can be developed. We have developed a survey to understand whether an individual believes that a range of capabilities, generally agreed to be important for leadership success, can be developed or are more likely to be innate. In a recent trial of the survey with 138 high potential leaders in a multinational corporation, more than a third of them believed that over a quarter of the organisation's "essential leadership behaviours" could not be learnt. Those who are interested can find details about the design and trial of the survey in the paper "Assessing beliefs about capability acquisition – the design and trial of an on-line survey".

Knowing that a potential leader has a Fixed Mindset about capability development, a manager can work with them to modify their beliefs. While beliefs about capability development are only one contributor to an

unwillingness to develop, nevertheless they are a contributor that an organisation can proactively manage.

The hidden risk to the effectiveness of leader development that comes from a potential's mindset about capability acquisition can be measured and mitigated. Someone in the organisation must take responsibility for determining and improving the developmental readiness of their future leaders, whether during an external hiring process or internal succession planning. The belief that leadership capabilities can be improved through effort and energy should become a prerequisite for a potential leader before an organisation invests in their development.

For further information and access to the survey, please contact Geoff Eagleson (geoff@geoffeagleson.com) or Ingo Susing (ingo.susing@leadershipsuccession.com.au).

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