



WHY YOU SHOULD CONSIDER LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Questions to detect leadership BS

1. Does this development opportunity place a large emphasis on developing leadership confidence? Such programs are a dime-a-dozen and usually lack leadership-management substance. Is this what you really want?
2. Does this development opportunity expand and deepen your knowledge, skills and behaviours around essential leader-manager functions, such as strategic thinking, change management and problem solving and decision making? If so, make sure it's practical and not simply theory from a text book.
3. Is the material you'll be learning based on solid research? So much of what is on offer has no credible evidence base. Some material sounds quite interesting but, in reality, it's more fiction than fact. Fads often fall into this category. Can you risk your career on this type of experience?
4. Who put the material together and who will deliver the program? Take a look at the 'About Us' of course designers and course facilitators. Do they have relevant, credible qualifications? Do they have relevant, credible business experience?

Tackling the 'shonky leadership' elephant in the room

Upfront, let's acknowledge that there is a lot of shonky leadership training out there! It prompted leading business theorist and leadership expert Prof Jeffrey Pfeffer to title his recent book, 'Leadership BS'. In this unregulated field, Pfeffer despairs at the vast number of leadership providers who have neither appropriate qualifications nor a sound, evidence-based approach. Consequently they dish up BS! That said, Pfeffer also points out that there is a great deal of high quality leadership and management research and development that genuinely benefits individuals, organisations and society.

The rise of functional leadership – leadership in context

In the past couple of decades, leadership researchers have increasingly focused on what leaders actually do, rather than the more old-fashioned ideas associated with leader characteristics, attributes or style. The latter approaches proved largely ineffective because people weren't able to apply their insights in their day-to-day contexts. Interesting theories did not translate to improved outcomes.

Functional leadership, in contrast, is outcomes oriented. The focus is on activities that are likely to drive team effectiveness and achieve team goals. Its context is organisational rather than abstract. In a nutshell, functional leadership is a form of organisation-based problem solving.

In a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) world, those in leader-manager roles need to draw on a wide range of knowledge, skills and behaviours to overcome challenges and deliver on expectations. Experience is undoubtedly a great teacher but, in the absence of solid, evidence-based frameworks, individuals won't be sure which behaviours should be repeated in future to achieve similar outcomes.

Develop and demonstrate competence

One important reason for engaging in leadership development is to nurture the suite of practical frameworks and tools that guide leadership-management decision making and behaviour, in your own context. Ultimately, this is about you being able to demonstrate that you would be competent in the specific role you seek.

Research on the recruitment of senior managers highlights what organisations are looking for and, indeed, expect. First, you'll likely have the technical (professional) competence required in the role. Then, you'd also need to demonstrate a practical grasp of strategy and thinking strategically, managing change, as well as general leadership and management skills appropriate for the level. You'll also have the ability to work and solve problems collaboratively, so that you can deliver on organisational goals and purpose.

Develop connections – build your network

Success in organisations is seldom achieved by 'lone-wolves'. Research on high performing organisations shows that their people and teams are generally much better connected than those in organisations that don't perform as well. It won't be a surprise either that high performing individuals are generally better connected than colleagues who are less well connected and perform less well. Unsurprisingly, connectedness is also strongly associated with innovation and breakthrough.

Ideally, your overall leadership development agenda should include opportunities to build and strengthen your personal business network. Importantly, it's not about the size of your network but rather its quality. For example, it's a good thing to have some connections in: your immediate team and business unit; other parts of the business, including in different geographies if your organisation is configured that way; and outside your organisation and even outside your sector. If you participate in leadership development, you should work to enhance your personal business network, even if that isn't a primary focus of the program.

Confidence from competence and connection

Some, especially those focusing on women in leadership, suggest that what an aspiring leader needs most is confidence. Consequently, all they offer in their training are ways to appear confident. For example, they'll talk about being assertive, speaking up and maybe even dressing for success! It's about the sizzle rather than the substance, and it all unravels very quickly, when individuals aren't able to deliver required knowledge, skills and behaviours in context.

In contrast, those who have developed a clear sense of competence (i.e. the suite of approaches, practical frameworks and tools that work in their context) are fuelled by a well-grounded sense of confidence. If they are also supported by a sound personal business network, developed and cultivated with care, then their confidence is strengthened even further.

A leadership development opportunity can also prompt a competent and connected individual to clarify their personal purpose, values and goals and do the same for others in the context of their organisation or next role. All too often, in the cut and thrust of daily business life, people neglect this, despite research showing that it massively affects outcomes.

Why should you consider leadership development?

In summary, good leadership development should result in a bigger, better organised suite of practical frameworks and tools that are applicable in your context. It should also help you build and strengthen your personal business network and lead to justified confidence in your ability to deliver effectively.