Are more ‘junior’ leaders the same in essence as their senior counterparts? Apart from the differences of role and responsibility, does leadership differ for this level? And, with the benefit of hindsight, what do today’s senior leaders wish they had known 10 years ago?

Ashridge Business School has, over the years, been heavily involved in helping companies identify their future leaders but recently the emphasis on talent management and succession planning has intensified in the face of increasing career churn and the war for talent. Our expertise in senior leadership needed to be expanded to cover and include the quality of ‘leadership-in-waiting’.

A pilot study of senior leaders, high potentials and human resources (HR) professionals yielded the impression that the standard business school messages about leadership have now largely entered the corporate DNA. However, when we asked them what they knew now that they wished they’d known 10 years ago, the interviewees overwhelmingly said that they wished they’d known more about themselves.

Starting with an academic stance, we then shifted to a pragmatic one. If our research was not coming up with anything new about leadership, perhaps adapting a lesson from the Sony Walkman school of new product development might be more productive – design a prototype first! Why not design a programme for leaders of the future in a spirit of enquiry and action research?

The design of the study reflected the current preoccupations of many of the companies who come to us for tailored programmes, such as: how we could simultaneously speed up and deepen learning for this extremely busy target group; how we could bring forward in time the leadership lessons they need to know in 10 years so that they learn them early. Given that the future leader target group will tend to be at that crucial stage in their career paths where they are most likely to start to derail, what evasive action could they take now to avoid career failure? And, finally, how could we honour our growing realisation that, while leadership can be ‘taught’, it really needs to be learnt to be genuinely authentic?

**CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE**

We identified a number of critical incidents from which leaders seemed to have learned their most valuable lessons. While these critical incidents included a high number of references to life-changing experiences, such as going on a management training course, the overwhelming message was that learning on the job has the most poignancy. Some of the themes to which these key critical incidents related were managing self; managing change; dealing with staff; dealing with peers; dealing with success; dealing with failure; and delivering bad news.

One of the other pieces of research that informed our design was a paper by Charles E. Smith called “The Merlin Factor”. This paper takes its title from the legend of King Arthur’s sage Merlin who, according to legend, lived backwards in time, being born in the future and ageing as he proceeded into the past, influencing events in King Arthur’s court by drawing on his foreknowledge of their destined outcomes. This concept, coupled with the idea of ‘what I wish I’d known 10 years ago’ gave us the core principle of a ‘future leaders’ programme that would allow high potentials to learn now what they might otherwise have to wait to learn over the next 10 years.

According to Charles Smith, “exceptional leaders cultivate the Merlin-like habit of acting in the present moment as ambassadors of a radically different future, in order to imbue their organisations with a breakthrough vision of what it is possible to achieve.”

While it is already a perennial assumption that experience brings wisdom, our research showed that the crucial factor in determining how well a leader will...
cope with an unforeseen critical incident is whether or not they have the confidence and coping mechanisms from having weathered previous critical incidents. Simply, they are more likely to succeed if they have ‘critical incident muscle memory’. Our challenge was to find a way to enable future leaders to be equipped with this muscle memory in lieu of 20/20 foresight.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

Even if an organisation has identified someone as a high potential, the individual concerned needs to have the necessary humility and enthusiasm for development in order to derive maximum benefit from it. Our experience is that there is often confusion between being a future leader and being a leader. A future leader has been identified by their organisation as having the potential to be a leader, i.e., they are a leader under development. This means that, while any high potential programme is a reward, it is also the start of a journey, not the end of one.

**EXERCISING MUSCLE MEMORY**

We devised a programme that would take participants through a series of critical incidents in running a company of the future with the meta-learning objectives of increasing self-awareness and critical incident muscle memory. Depending on the skills and experiences participants bring with them, each programme would be tailored to the individuals involved, and all participants were sworn to secrecy to ensure that subsequent students could benefit from the same degree of surprise.

On arriving the night before, participants were introduced to their ‘company’ and given the opportunity to meet their new colleagues. The following morning they began to run their future company. This ‘in-company’ part of the process lasted for two days, during which the participants dealt with some of the critical incidents and challenges that face real-life leaders.

It is a challenge to assess the return on investment of a programme that is deliberately designed around a slow-burn principle, in that the learning will continue to percolate through over the coming months and years. Success will be defined when our participants meet a critical incident in 10 years’ time and say ‘I recognise this’. Feedback since has indicated that the learning was at the required level of depth for participants to make potentially significant changes now in the interests of their long-term career success. However, even at this early stage a number of implications emerge for the future of high-potential leadership development.

**ON THE JOB TRAINING**

Such programmes may be regarded as a gateway into a broader talent development path, but should not be used in isolation. While much of leadership may be personal and innate, skills-based training remains crucial, particularly early on in a career. As such, programmes such as the FLE may be useful in identifying which interventions are required, by acting as the vehicle for a leadership-focused training needs assessment.

These programmes can also help people identify their own potential ‘derailment’ areas before it becomes too late. The research shows that the very skills that get you to a certain position within an organisation may be the ones that prevent you from reaching the next. The ability to complete tasks effectively may not be the skills that take you to the next level. Self-awareness and the ability to reflect ‘in the moment’ help people avoid these pitfalls.

Radical programmes require bravery and resilience from both the participants and facilitators. One difference between the prototype design and the final version was our acknowledgement that deep learning is often uncomfortable, as the negative nature of many of the critical incidents identified showed. We therefore decided to change the focus of our assessment of the efficacy of the course to look longer term, when the strong emotions occasioned by the event would have faded to reveal the resultant learning. In doing so, we self-consciously took the decision that we would rather participants found the event uncomfortable but learned from it, than that they enjoyed it but went away empty-handed.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

For future leaders, learning needs to be real and timely – too early and they will forget, too late and they will regret. In the future, business management schools will be able to offer more comprehensive rapid response just-in-time training so that people at work can ‘download’ the modules they need as and when they need them. At present, this is achieved through Ashridge’s Virtual Learning Resource Centre (VLRC) and coaching call-offs via email or phone. Nevertheless, the FLE was in part born out of feedback from ex-Ashridge leadership course participants, who often say that they wish they had attended the programme earlier on in their careers. But when participants are not yet developed enough in their careers to share the problems of their peer group, the lessons learned do not stick. The FLE’s solution is to present future challenges in an immediate context, so that the learning required for the future will stick now. For participants to benefit from this, they need to recognise that these leadership challenges are, and will be, very real.

Future Leader Programmes are an ideal way to audition your talent pool. Research has clearly shown how crucial learning is to leadership, as is the ability to weather uncertainty and ambiguity. From this it is clear that those who relish opportunities to learn through an environment such as the Ashridge FLE are likely to flourish as leaders, while those who find it a strong challenge to their approach to leadership have an opportunity to review their leadership aspirations and career expectations.

**The very skills that get you to a certain position within an organisation may be the ones that prevent you from reaching the next**

This article is adapted from an original that appeared in the Spring 2005 edition of 360° The Ashridge Journal: www.ashridge.com/360