

Best Principles Before Best Practices

By Ray Blunt

There is a game being played somewhere right now within almost every government organization. The game is called 'In Search of Best Practices' and it is played something like this: "We're about to launch a major change (like putting in a leadership development program). Before we do, let's benchmark the best organizations around to find out what they do, and especially, let's see what other government organizations are doing. After all, we don't want to reinvent the wheel now, do we?"

So the change team dutifully goes out, does their research, makes some site visits, documents their findings, and then prepares a menu of best practices from which a program is built. The game proceeds by briefings up the line which are bolstered by citations from the Who's Who of Best Practices—prominent companies in the news, selections from the 100 Best Companies to Work For, other Federal agencies, etc. The game is won when the program, designed around the Best Practices, is given the go ahead. So what's the problem? It may possibly be declaring a premature end to the game by failing to realize that 'best' is simply a local term, not a universal one, and that there may be better and prior wisdom that is being ignored in the bargain. It's something worth discussing.

Interesting Practices

The victory lap cannot realistically be taken until the program design actually produces the results that people intended because somewhere in people's minds is the sneaking suspicion that if we do it like the big boys and girls we will be like the big boys and girls. But that syllogism can turn out to be false, and some have fallen into that trap—including me.

Dave Ulrich, perhaps the wisest human resources expert around, uses the term "interesting practices" to describe such approaches to a range of human resources initiatives. They may work in the long run--or they may not. The key is to understand the culture of the organization, the capabilities the organization possesses, and the needs it is trying to address. Keeping up with the GEs or the Microsofts of the world or even the IRSs does not mean your approach to leadership development will mirror the outcomes of theirs.

Five Best Principles

It may make more sense to start with a solid understanding of what can be called 'best principles' in succession and leader development and then see which practices will work for your organization's culture and its specific needs for future leadership. If you begin with the best principles, you can then safely test out your proposed practices to see which ones best fit your situation. Here are five principles that have bred success, specifically in excellent Federal Government organizations:

1. They base their practices on the four proven principles of how leaders learn to lead—challenging and varied work experiences; significant relationships with senior leaders; self awareness based upon feedback, reflection and lessons from the hardship crucibles of life; and self development and selected training.
2. They make a business case for developing future leaders with decision makers that helps drive the mission and avoids the trap of simply being something 'good' to do.

3. They recognize that initiating leadership development, at least in the Federal Government, is most often a cultural change as well where leaders shape the culture and it is not simply a case of human resources development (HRD) standing up another new training program.
4. They understand that the key cultural change is this: it takes leaders to grow leaders—not trainers, not HRD experts, not consultants: leaders grow leaders—and that it will take a serious time commitment on their part.
5. Senior leaders hold themselves and their human resources development and training partners accountable for results—those results are that a next generation of good, solid leaders emerge (who, in turn, grow those behind them).

Getting It Right

In my opinion these are tantamount to being non-negotiable principles of developing future leaders, forged from experience. These must be the framework around which any leadership development program is designed before anyone starts thinking about best practices. And if you look carefully, four of these five principles are based on an assumption that it takes leaders to grow leaders. These principles are not a menu; each one is critical to success. Successfully applying these principles requires hard work and persistence over a long period of time—make no mistake about that.

So, what do you see in your own leader development efforts in your organization? If you are a leader, are you actively engaged in developing the next generation in your own organization at whatever level (and devoting the time it takes)? What barriers do you face in doing so? If you are an aspiring leader, what can you do to help imbed these principles if they are not yet implemented? Do you think you can make such an impact on those above you? Finally, is it a realistic expectation that the public service leaders of today have the time and the capability to help grow the next generation or the awareness that their contribution is sorely needed?