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LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FROM A BUSINESS SCHOOL SETTING

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INTRODUCTION

In more than thirty years of combined experience in providing leadership coaching and development activities[1] for the Executive Master's of Business Administration ("MBA") students in the University of Tennessee's Haslam College of Business,[2] we have learned a lot about what works and what does not work, regarding leadership development. Listed below are some of the lessons, best practices, and critical elements of a successful leadership development program that we have come to understand and embrace over the years.

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   1. *See* Cheryl D. Barksdale, CURRICULUM VITAE, http://mgt.bus.utk.edu/facult y_staff/documents/CherylBarksdaleVitae22jan2015.pdf (last visited Apr. 16, 2016) (noting that Cheryl Barksdale has been teaching at the University of Tennessee since 2002); Michael L. Morris, CURRICULUM VITAE (Mar. 2016), mgt.bus.utk.edu/fac ulty_staff/documents/Vita-Morris-March2016.pdf (last visited Apr. 27, 2016) (noting that Michael Morris has been teaching at the University of Tennessee since 1992).

   2. *See* Master's Degree Programs, HASLAM COLLEGE OF BUSINESS, http://haslam.utk.edu/masters/ (last visited Apr. 16, 2016) (providing details about the two different track Executive MBA programs that we serve: Strategic Leadership and Healthcare Leadership). Additionally, we serve the Physician Executive MBA Program and the Aerospace and Defense MBA Program. *See* Graduate & Executive Education, HASLAM COLLEGE OF BUSINESS, http://execed.utk.edu/choose-mba.asp (last visited Apr. 27, 2016).

I. DEFINE WHAT YOU MEAN BY "SUCCESSFUL"

In an academic environment, we are accustomed to defining the learning objectives for any course that we teach. How can we know if our program is actually working or making a difference if we do not first outline the criteria by which we will judge "success"?[3] When it comes to leadership development in an academic setting, our approach is very personal and customized to each individual student in our Executive MBA programs within the Haslam College of Business. We do not "teach" or "train" our students on specific theories of leadership; rather, we seek to help each individual develop and refine his or her own unique leadership philosophy and style.

In support of this custom-built approach, we pursue two general learning objectives in our executive leadership development programs. In essence, we consider the leadership development effort to be successful to the extent that 1) our participants emerge with a thorough and accurate understanding of their own habits, styles, strengths and weaknesses, and personal leadership challenges, and 2) they are willing and able to plan and implement changes to help them leverage those strengths and cope with those weaknesses and challenges.

Because we work with leaders from a vast array of industries and backgrounds in our Executive MBA programs, and because these programs have only an eleven-month duration, this ipsative measure of success[4] works well for us. The definition of "successful leadership development" might naturally look quite different in a different context—for example, an in-house leadership development

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3. Keyur Thakur, *Knowing, Doing and Being Pedagogy in* MBA-LEVEL MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTING CLASSES: SOME EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE, 25 AUSTRALIAN ACCT. REV. 232, 233-34 (2015) (noting pedagogical improvements when a curriculum spanning traditional lectures, case studies, and practical field work were combined in an MBA accounting course).

4. Ipsative assessment is defined as follows:

Ipsative assessment compares existing performance with previous performance. Many informal and practical learning experiences are assessed in this way, such as sports coaching, music teaching and computer gaming. A personal best in athletics is an ipsative assessment. By contrast, in much academic learning, where assessment is made in relation to external attainment criteria or rubrics, credit is rarely given for how far the learner has advanced since the previous piece of work.

Gwyneth Hughes, *Towards a Personal Best: A Case for Introducing Ipsative Assessment in Higher Education*, 26 STUD. IN HIGHER EDUC. 353, 353 (2011).

program within a marketing or sales organization might define "success" in terms of a hard criterion such as growth in sales or change in employee turnover.[5]

II. MINDSET MATTERS

In our experience, the most critical driver of a successful leadership development program is not found in the program itself, but rather in the mindset of the participant. Although leadership development is a fixed component of the curriculum in our Executive MBA programs, we often see variance in the level of interest and engagement in this topic among the students enrolled in our programs.

The students who report that leadership development was a prime factor in their decision to enroll tend to show a unique pattern of beliefs and behavior from the very beginning of their program. First and foremost, despite their own substantial leadership and management experience, students who want to develop their leadership skills truly believe that they still have a lot to learn. These students are open-minded, guileless, and without shame in their continuous search for leadership wisdom and new perspectives. These "highly coachable" students tend to approach our leadership development activities with a genuine curiosity and desire to identify the blind spots and rough patches in their approach to leadership. Rather than seeking to deny or disconfirm critical feedback that they receive, they take ownership and work diligently to break old, ineffective habits and cultivate new ways of doing things.

Unfortunately, those who show the opposite pattern—resistance or cynicism, cursory or perfunctory engagement, or a stated belief that they cannot change or will not benefit from leadership development—can be quite challenging to work with and are much less likely to "succeed," as defined above. This may come as bad news to anyone who hopes to "reform" a problem employee by sentencing

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5. *See, e.g.,* Afroditi Dalakoura, *Examining the Effects of Leadership Development on Firm Performance,* 4 J. LEADERSHIP STUD. 59, 67 (2010) (providing a study to support that "the more an organization keeps a steady focus on leadership development, the greater the degree of improvement in its performance outcome," based on financial, market, and organizational performance); Bonnie Hagemann & Saudra Stroope, *Developing the Next Generation of Leaders,* 45 INDUS. & COM. TRAINING 123, 125 (2013) ("There is a need to utilize more objective-based assessments and rigor to estimate potential and readiness for future leadership roles.").

them to remediation: You can push a person into a leadership development program, but you cannot force that person to engage.

III. ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK ARE NOT ENOUGH

To help our participants experience success in our leadership development program, we provide each of them with a wide variety of tests and assessments. For example, we often use the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a classic self-assessment instrument, in conjunction with an extensive multi-source feedback survey and various custom-built simulation activities including conflict-laden leadership role plays and strategic decision-making exercises.[6] As one might expect, the vaster and more extensive the battery of assessments, the richer and more encompassing the feedback will be. However, with more feedback comes more complexity in the integration and use of that feedback. In light of this, we have come to believe that the structure and support that a leadership development program provides to help participants understand and utilize their feedback is as important, if not more important, than which and/or how many assessments are provided.

Toward this end, we have found that two elements are absolutely critical for success in our own leadership development program: 1) Providing carefully structured assignments and 2) pairing each participant with an experienced executive leadership coach.[7] The first element helps participants reflect in a meaningful way about their leadership history and style, integrate information across multiple sources of feedback to identify their high-priority development needs, and set useful, action-oriented development goals that document not only what they plan to change, but also when, where, why, and how they will make those changes. Pairing each participant with an experienced executive leadership coach, the second essential element, provides resources and new perspectives, objective observations and feedback, and even accountability and motivation. The coaches reach out to participants periodically and

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6. *See* Michael K. Mount & Steven E. Scullen, *Multisource Feedback Ratings: What Do They Really Measure?*, *in* HOW PEOPLE EVALUATE OTHERS IN ORGANIZATIONS 155-176 (London Manuel ed., 2001) (explaining the multi-source feedback process); *see also* Int'l Task Force on Assessment Ctr. Guildelines, *Guidelines and Ethical Consideration for Assessment Center Operations*, 41 J. MGMT. 1244-73 (2015) (explaining the simulation exercise experience).

7. Innovative and Integrated Curriculum, HASLAM COLLEGE OF BUSINESS, http://emba.utk.edu/about/overview.asp (last visited Apr. 16, 2016).

remain available for regular one-on-one consultations for the duration of the participant's Executive MBA program.[8]

This is certainly not intended to be an exhaustive list of all the factors that contribute to a successful leadership development program; indeed, we are not convinced that such a list is possible to create. However, we hope that these reflections and lessons learned are useful for you and inspire some insights of your own about what "success" means in the realm of leadership development. We welcome your comments, questions, and even your objections and disagreements—after all, we are both just students of leadership, and even after all these years, we still have a lot to learn.

"Be willing to be a beginner every single morning."[9]

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8.   Strategic Leadership, HASLAM COLLEGE OF BUSINESS, http://emba.utk.edu/about/leadership-development.asp (last visited Apr. 16, 2016) (noting that coaches remain available up to one year after graduation.

9.   Meister   Eckhart,   http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/beginning   (last visited Apr. 16, 2016).