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russell consulting

Developing Business Leaders in Your Company

**Strategies for Identifying & Developing Future
Leaders in Your Company**



RCI White Paper



Developing Leaders in Your Company

There are days when you feel as though you're the only one with a vision of your company's future . . . when you feel worn out from being the only voice calling for quality, change, improving services to the customer, or reducing operating costs. Yes, leadership—the capacity to attract and sustain the dedication and commitment of others—carries weighty responsibilities. With leadership comes the responsibility of guiding others towards great expectations in quality, customer service, product development, and profitability. Fulfilling this responsibility on your own, however, can be a tiring task. Long hours and eternal vigilance is often the price of, single-handedly, leading your enterprise into the future.

So, isn't it about time that you identified and developed others to *share* the leadership? When you invite others to work with you in articulating and demonstrating your company's vision, it helps assure that, when you take a vacation, enjoy a free weekend, or attend an out-of-town conference, your business will carry on in the right direction and in the right way.

What should you do to find and develop your company's future leaders? You first need to develop your definition of leadership. Does it mean guiding others towards a compelling goal? Does it involve challenging the status quo? Does it include taking risks to nudge the company in a new direction? Leadership is more than just getting people to do it your way with enthusiasm. Spend some time thinking about what leadership means and what it might look like in your company. With this definition in mind, you are ready to communicate your expectations to those who may be ready to lead.

After you've defined your leadership expectations, you need to demonstrate these qualities in your daily decisions and interactions. Modeling the leader behaviors that you want to see in others has a dramatic effect on your company by shaping its culture. Demonstrating the leadership values and behavior you believe in lets people know that you take your leadership role seriously and that you have high standards for leaders. Your prospective leaders will take their cues from you when they see you set challenging goals, deal effectively with failure and adversity, respond quickly to opportunities, guide staff through tough problems, or sensitively deal with an upset customer.

With leadership well defined and your active demonstration of these qualities in your work, your next task involves identifying those from among your staff who show the most promise as future leaders. Characteristics and behaviors that suggest the capacity to lead include: displaying interest and enthusiasm for the company and its business, asking thought-provoking questions, demonstrating a willingness to go the extra mile in customer service, freely offering ideas for improving service or product quality or getting

the work done faster, and demonstrating a willingness to help or guide others in your company towards the desired outcomes.

Once you've identified a prospective leader, you then need to nurture and develop her capacities and skills. This begins with exposing her to the depth and breadth of your business. It means developing in her a broad-based knowledge of the industry and its directions. You want her leadership to reflect insight and a perspective that's informed by what's happening in your industry. While you need her to also think outside the box of your business niche, her value as a leader is enhanced when she knows the territory. The jazz musician and conductor Wynton Marsalis argues that to be inventive and creative in any musical realm requires that one first master the classical forms. So too in business. Your future leaders need to know the territory almost as well as you before they can offer the most useful ideas and changes to guide the company towards long-term success.

You also need to give your prospective leaders *real* business problems and challenges to solve. There's nothing like asking one of your developing leaders to consider a key challenge your business is facing—such as how to improve the sales in your western region or how to attract and retain higher quality employees—to bring out her critical thinking skills. By presenting her with a real business challenge, you ask her to think about the company's future. Such challenges, at their best, push the prospective leader out of her comfort zone. It deepens her awareness of your company's complexity and it builds ownership and responsibility. In addition, it enables you to gain a new perspective on your company's future and it can give you insight into how she thinks and what her future leadership potential is. By involving your developing leaders in your company's real problems and challenges, you are testing their commitment, knowledge, insights, creativity, and resiliency—key qualities that you'll need from your future leaders.

It's not enough, however, to give your prospective leader a problem to solve or a challenge to overcome. He must also receive your support for taking action to address the challenge. Although you might disagree with his ideas or solutions or you might have additional ideas or issues for him to consider, if you're serious about developing his leadership, you will give him the opportunity to act on ideas that, to some degree, are his own.

Of course, leaders do much more than just come up with new ideas and approaches to problem solving. They lead because they attract *followers*. While we prefer the term "partner" rather than follower, the idea is the same: leaders achieve great things through the work of others. For this reason, your leadership development efforts must also include mentoring and training your prospective leader in how to *coach* others, create attractive performance goals, give performance feedback, motivate and inspire others to excellence, and build a team. Leading others requires a new set of people skills that give other employees a reason to follow your developing leader.

Finally, developing future leaders in your business requires that you provide opportunities for rewards, recognition, and growth as a leader. You will find that some of your new leaders thrive on just the joy and challenge of leadership. All that this type of leader wants is the opportunity and the freedom to shape the company and the people who work there. Other leaders may want greater financial compensation, new job titles, or even part ownership of your company. Whatever your budding leaders may desire as a reward for helping you and your company move successfully into the future, you need to ensure that you know what keeps them motivated as leaders and—if you are willing and able—that you provide these rewards for good leadership.

Developing leadership in others enables you to build a strong company—one that's stronger because it is less dependent upon you for vision, direction, and inspiration. While the thought of people other than yourself providing leadership for your company can be scary, the alternative can be even scarier: being the only person in your company who carries passion for building a great organization. That's why developing leaders in your company is one of the most important things you can do.

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