

Who is the Client for Leadership Development: The Concept of the Perfect 30

One of the core truths in consulting is “know who your client is”. Yet war stories continue to be told of high quality consulting work wasted because the “real” client emerged at the 11th hour with unmet expectations. I believe that the challenge in leadership development consulting is compounded because there are in fact three clients who must be satisfied if leadership development is to have an impact.

First, there is senior management who must believe that the key to their company’s performance rests with the leadership of their people. Now, this can become a bit tricky. Good leadership is like quality—nobody in their right mind argues against either one. Call it the motherhood and apple pie syndrome. In my experience, however, people who are really passionate about motherhood and apple pie actually make better mothers (and apple pies). So what we’re really looking for from senior management when it comes to leadership development is not sign-off. It’s sign-on. Passion. Commitment. A real belief that without better leadership, the strategy of the entire company is at risk. We’re not talking about sending a group of managers off to a conference center, or giving Harry a coach because he hasn’t had one yet. We’re talking about a commitment from the top of the company to make the company more competitive with a better, deeper leadership bench.

The second group that needs to be engaged is the human resource organization. I say “organization” because in too many companies, leadership development has devolved to the Learning and Development group within the HR organization. To be sure there is a learning and development component to good leadership development. But good leadership development must also be integrated with the talent development strategies of the company, and those typically are owned by others in the HR organization outside of L&D.

Finally, individual leaders themselves are third group that must also be enrolled if leadership development is to have an impact on the company. This group is quite possibly the toughest sale. If they have any longevity at all with the company, they will have already had some experience with something called “leadership development”. In 1998, one of my colleagues, working in conjunction with the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) estimated that American business spent more than \$10 billion that year on leadership development training. You’d have to have been living under a rock to have missed some kind of initiative. Unfortunately a lot of those initiatives, unhooked from the strategy of the

company, and not supported in an integrated fashion by the HR infrastructure have generated mixed results. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised if individuals respond to the opportunity for more leadership development with a skeptical or even cynical response.

So what do we do? Here's what I do. I look for "Perfect 30" opportunities. That's when on a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high), you can give a 10 to each of the following questions:

- To what extent does senior management believe that the quality of leadership throughout the company will make or break the company's chances of meeting its strategic goals?
- To what extent is the Human Resources infrastructure aligned to attract, develop, promote, and retain leadership talent?
- To what extent are the leaders of the organization (present and future) motivated to stretch themselves and grow in their role as leaders?

The Perfect 30 Opportunity, then, is one where individual managers are highly motivated to develop themselves as leaders in an environment where the most senior members of the organization act as sponsors for their development and the HR infrastructure enables rather than hinders their progress toward greater career opportunity.

Sounds great! Have I ever seen one of these Perfect 30s? Well, no. Most companies come up short on one of these three dimensions. In some companies senior management outsources leadership development entirely to the HR function. In this situation the HR function typically creates programs that address specific skill needs of the population. But without the commitment of senior leadership, participation in the programs is given low priority, no matter how much the skills are needed by the leadership cadre. In other companies the senior leadership sees the need, but the HR function is so divided or under-funded that nothing meaningful takes place. And then there are the situations where street-smart individuals see no need to develop themselves, preferring to rely on the just-in-time street-smarts that they're convinced got them to where they are today.

In my experience, you don't get Perfect 30's. Instead you get unbalanced 20's. An Unbalanced 20 occurs when you can rate two of the three components around 7-8, but the third component comes in under 5. In these cases, it's important to work on all three components: executive sponsorship, HR champions, and individual readiness, but you'll need to put special emphasis on using the strengths of two of the components to bring the other component up to a reasonable level. If your rating falls below 20, you have to ask yourself whether the prospects for success warrant the effort that you know will be required to meet the needs of these three groups.