

Making the Most of Stretch Assignments

A Whitepaper

by

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Introduction

Of all the modes of experiential leader development, the one that has captured the most attention in recent years is “stretch” assignments. In this paper we will examine what distinguishes a work experience that contains “stretch” and how it serves to “stretch” the developing leader who undertakes the assignment. In so doing we will make explicit the unique appeal of the word “stretch” as a metaphor for personal and professional growth and the distinctive power of stretch assignments as a mechanism for realizing that growth.

As you will see, effective use of this strategy has implications for individual leader development, corporate governance, and enterprise sustainability. In true systemic fashion, the positive effects of “stretch” can both express and shape the organization’s broader philosophy of leadership. The promise of these impacts will become more plausible as we provide specific guidance on how to realize them, and that is the primary purpose of this whitepaper.

Readers are encouraged to *actively* read and re-read this whitepaper, noting your reactions along the way. Use it as a stimulus for reflecting on how your organization currently approaches leader development. You may even wish to recommend that others read it and discuss the relevance and potential benefits of using a systematic stretch-assignment strategy in your organization. In any case, we shall now begin by considering the rationale or business case for stretch assignments.

Rationale for Stretch Assignments

For years we have known that one of the best ways to sustain and accelerate the upward trajectory of those with high potential for senior leadership is to place them, time and again, in new assignments that present ever-increasing levels of challenge.¹ The demands of such “stretch” assignments require developing leaders to step out of their comfort zone, acquire new skills, and cope with the anxiety induced by uncertainty and risk-taking. With each new experience these leaders grow more adaptive, resourceful, and resilient. As a result, they bring even greater capacity to their next new challenge, and thus emerges the competence, confidence, and maturity of the general manager or future enterprise leader.

At first blush, you may associate this experience-based development strategy with what has been called a “sink-or-swim” approach. Others may recall the idea of pre-planned job rotations as a mechanism for exposing future leaders to the business. While both

¹ Since the publication of *Lessons of Experience* (McCall, Lombard & Morrison, 1988) by the Center for Creative Leadership there has been continuing support for the belief that upwards of 70% of all leadership development occurs through on-the-job experience. This phenomenon has become known as the “70-20-10” rule, i.e., development occurs in three ways: 70% on-the-job experience, 20% through relationships and feedback, and 10% from formal training opportunities. This approach has been adopted by organizations as diverse as Eli Lilly, Janus Capital Group, and Princeton University. You will find more on experiential learning at the Center for Creative Leadership (www.ccl.org) and also in a recent book by Yost & Plunkett, *Real Time Leadership Development* (2009).

practices seek to facilitate development of future leaders through real-world work experiences, each has limitations when compared to stretch assignments. The sink-or-swim approach, as that language implies, operates under the faulty assumption that it is not necessary to calibrate the level of challenge or match the person's readiness to the challenge. As a result, it suffers the disadvantage of a high failure rate and the risk of too many "false negatives."

As for job rotations, this strategy was conceived at a time when most organizations had more stable and predictable career paths and organizational structures. Its aims were focused more on "exposure" and "rounding out" future leaders than on stretching their capacity to lead and master new business challenges under conditions of significant risk and uncertainty. Consequently, it might be argued that a job rotation strategy generates too many "false positives." Today the exposure and rounding aimed for in job rotations is expected to accrue as a collateral benefit in the process of taking on one challenging stretch assignment after another.

The rationale for stretch assignments, then, is that they represent a more valid and reliable strategy for developing future leaders, leaders who are equipped to face today's fast-moving and unforgiving business climate. Validity in this context means that one's performance in a stretch assignment – success, failure, or mixed results – fairly and accurately measures one's potential to advance and one's needs for further development, which in turn suggests what one's next assignment should look like. Reliability, on the other hand, means that this approach, when properly used, consistently minimizes if not eliminates false positives and false negatives.

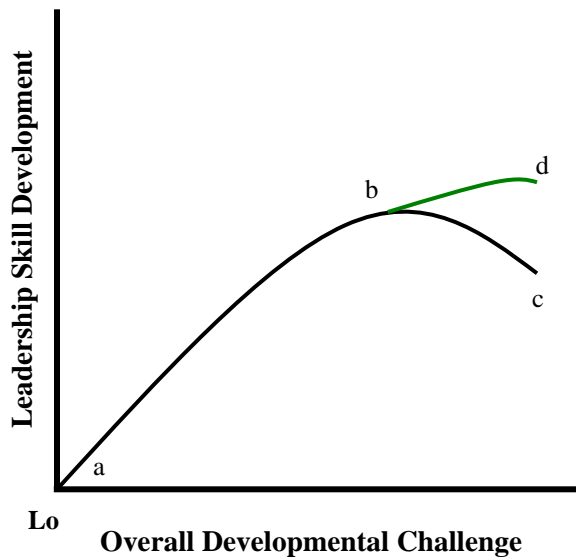
Relationship between Challenge and Development

Of course, any company undertaking the use of stretch assignments as a development strategy must balance the risks and rewards of putting important work in the hands of people whom they know are somewhat lacking in experience for the project. Given this context, it is only prudent to inquire as to how an organization might mitigate risks of failure while optimizing the benefits that future leaders obtain from stretch assignments. On the one hand, you could choose to err in the direction of being too conservative, thereby limiting the opportunities for developing leaders to contribute and learn. On the other hand, if the match is not made with a proper dose of realism, you could be setting up the leader and the organization for failure.

Fortunately, we have the advantage of recent research and theory development to guide our approach to these decisions. The results of one such study by DeRue and Wellman (2009) are presented in figure 1. They found that the relationship between the level of challenge of a stretch assignment and the gains in leadership skill obtained from the assignment is curvilinear (a-c). That is, increasing levels of challenge are associated with gains in skill development up to a point (a-b), and beyond that point further increases in level of challenge produce diminishing returns in skill development (b-c). These results offer empirical validation for the role of challenge in sparking motivation and stimulating learning. They also make it clear that there is an upper limit to these effects, and that at

some point, the leader can begin to feel overwhelmed with the novelty and complexity of the challenge.

Figure 1. *Moderating the Effect of Developmental Challenge*



Note: The curvilinear relationship between level of challenge and skill development is moderated by the availability of feedback as represented by the green line b-d.

Note: Based on data reported by DeRue & Wellman, 2009

You will also observe in figure 1 the effects of a “moderating variable,” namely the availability of feedback, represented by the green line (b-d), which serves to change the shape of the learning curve. Specifically, this research found that those who had access to feedback in the course of undertaking new, challenging assignments were able to offset the diminishing returns associated with high levels of developmental challenge. This finding suggests that it may be quite important to identify the sources of feedback that promise to be most helpful to the person undertaking a stretch assignment. It also implies that leaders must be able to make effective use of the feedback available to them. It is left to us to consider how access to feedback produces this moderating effect – more on this later.

Appraising Challenge and Making the Person-Assignment Match

The curvilinear relationship between level of challenge and skill development calls our attention to just how critical it is that the organization and the developing leader know what he or she is “getting into.” Framed as a question, we might ask “What features of the assignment should be examined in order to adequately characterize the level of challenge?” DeRue and Wellman (2009) proposed five characteristics of challenge to guide such a thoughtful appraisal (see table 1). Any assignment may incorporate one or more of these characteristics. Using the table as a prompt, we might simply ask, “How would this assignment challenge the leader with *unfamiliar responsibilities, creating*

change, high levels of responsibility, working across boundaries, and managing diversity?”

Table 1. *What Makes a Developmental Experience Challenging?*

Characteristics of developmental challenge	Description	Examples
<i>Unfamiliar responsibilities</i>	Handle novel responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major change in one’s role/position
<i>Creating change</i>	Create and facilitate change in the way business is conducted or in an employee’s behavior, or fix a preexisting problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage a new product launch or acquisition • Manage subordinate performance problems • Deal with inherited morale problems in a group
<i>High levels of responsibility</i>	Lead initiatives that are highly important to the organization and entail multiple functions, groups, or products/services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure financing for a key acquisition • Negotiate with a large customer • Assume responsibility for a nationwide initiative
<i>Working across boundaries</i>	Influence/manage people or processes for which one has no direct authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convince upper management to support a proposal • Manage key interactions with an important labor union
<i>Managing diversity</i>	Lead people from different cultures, gender, or racial or ethnic backgrounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead a team dispersed across several continents • Lead a team with extensive gender and racial diversity

Note: The table is drawn from DeRue & Wellman, 2009.

One can readily imagine how sustained and focused discussion along these lines might generate even greater specificity concerning the distinctive elements of challenge inherent to a particular characteristic of a particular assignment. If this specification process were performed jointly by a few well qualified people, a rich and concrete description would soon emerge. If the same group were evaluating multiple assignments of this sort, the comparative analysis would likely enhance the quality of their judgments, helping them better calibrate the level of challenge within and across assignments using a five-point scale (1=low, 5=high).²

Another implication of this curvilinear phenomenon concerns the need to match the readiness of the leader for the assignment. Framing this as a question, we might ask, “What are the specific leadership skills and the appropriate levels of competency that a leader would need to have in these skill areas in order for us to justify assigning him or her to this project?” DeRue and Wellman (2009) focused on four such skill areas: cognitive, interpersonal, business, and strategic.

² For calibration purposes, note that when DeRue & Wellman used this model, they found that on average it was when the level of challenge approached 4 (actually 3.8) that returns began to diminish.

This is a rather standard skill grouping that has been used in other business leadership research (Mumford et al, 2007), and it reflects a predominantly instrumental focus (i.e., specific areas of skill and behavior that aim to produce a particular business outcome). Assessing the person-assignment fit based on these requirements could very well take the form of a group discussion similar to that described for the appraisal of challenge. Such a panel might consider the prior experience and demonstrated skills of the individuals, identify readiness gaps and their implications for risk, and target potential sources of support that would mitigate risk and bolster learning. All of this would help guide a realistic appraisal of skill-based readiness and fit.

In addition to appraising leader readiness and fit based on specific instrumental skills required by the assignment, other experts argue the need to consider the more fundamental characteristics of the person. In particular, they cite robust research on the role of personality, motivation, and the underlying dynamics of adult development in leader performance and development.³

This literature calls attention to the importance of more deeply rooted tendencies, many of which are acquired early in life and operate outside the zone of our conscious awareness. While these tendencies may be long-standing and stable, they are not unchangeable. A properly trained professional can help the individual leader access and examine these intrapersonal factors and appraise their relevance to his or her readiness to optimize development in a stretch assignment.⁴ Table 2 below is offered as a tool for guiding a more holistic appraisal of person-assignment fit, one that includes both skill-based and personality-based competencies.

Table 2. *The Domain Model of Competencies*

Domain	Definition and sample competencies
<i>Intrapersonal</i>	Internalized structures that underlie regularities in behavior (cognitive ability and style; temperament, emotional stability, and resilience; motivational narrative and purposive strivings; adaptive flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity; values and norms; self-concept, self-esteem, and self-awareness)
<i>Interpersonal</i>	Social skill in role-taking and building and maintaining relationships (attunement to others and organizational dynamics; social confidence and presence; verbal and nonverbal communications; approachability, and capacity to disarm and win over others; ability to deal with conflict and resolve differences)
<i>Business</i>	Managerial and organizational skills (resource allocation, operational analysis, planning and budgeting, coordination and oversight of ongoing operations, and functional/industry knowledge; formulating strategy, setting priorities, decision-making, and general business acumen)
<i>Leadership</i>	Influence and team-building skills (providing direction, support, and normative standards for performance and conduct; communicating a compelling vision; caring about, developing, and challenging direct reports; hiring and staffing strategically; motivating others; building effective teams; managing diversity)

Note: Modified version of table proposed by Hogan and Kaiser, 2005.

³ See Hogan & Kaiser (2005) and McCormick & Burch (2008) on the role of personality, and see McAdams (2001) and McKnight & Kashdan (2009) on developmental and motivational dynamics.

⁴ For more on leveraging the psychodynamic determinants of behavior and change see Kilburg (2004).

Hogan and Kaiser (2005) refer to their four-dimensional model, which I have presented in modified form in table 2, as a domain model of competencies. For the present purposes, I suggest that we use the term competencies to include both the traditional skill groupings as well as the less instrumental human factors such as personality and motivation insofar as they affect our ability to learn, grow and perform as a leader. It is very likely that these intrapersonal factors in combination with those in the interpersonal domain will affect the ability of developing leaders to obtain, process, and use available feedback to generate the effects illustrated in figure 1.

Note: It is realistic for many organizations to pursue a stretch-assignment strategy without extensive external support, especially when they have well-qualified internal resources to guide and support management throughout the process. However, it is advisable for organizations without such expert internal resources to seek outside assistance to: (1) help management with the one-time design of a process that will best serve their needs and match their culture; (2) facilitate a thoughtful pilot implementation of the process, especially those aspects of it that call for appraisal of behavioral competencies in the person-assignment match; and (3) provide assessment and time-limited coaching of leaders on the intrapersonal and interpersonal variables of readiness.

Organizational Readiness and Leader Development

In their model of accelerated leader development, Avolio and Hannah (2008) argue for the critical role of organizational climate. They suggest that senior leaders individually and collectively play a central role in shaping this climate as a context for development. Leaders model behaviors and a style of leadership, which spreads throughout the organization, serving to promote or inhibit the developmental strivings and progress of others. The climate they recommend as normatively ideal emphasizes people's strengths, their positive potential for development, and a mindset that treats critical feedback as helpful data to inform learning and growth.

Few would argue with the valuable role of such positive climate factors for accelerating leader development. Unfortunately, in difficult business cycles like the one we currently face, the tyranny of the urgent often prevails, squeezing out attention to climate variables whose effects are less obviously and immediately tied to business imperatives.

Recent McKinsey surveys (2008 & 2009) on talent management and supervisor engagement are quite pertinent here. They focus on the availability of support that a developing leader might expect from his or her supervisor or superiors,⁵ and they provide a sobering picture. Responses from a sample of well-respected firms verify what many of us who consult to organizations already know, i.e., that there is generally a dearth of supervisor involvement in development. In most organizations today supervisors are feeling more stretched than ever, and even those with the motivation and good intentions of providing more mentoring and support just don't get around to it.

⁵ It is widely accepted that guided reflection upon one's experience in a competent helping relationship deepens insight and learning and accelerates transformation of insights into action. Much of what we currently know in this regard derives from research in the clinical setting, e.g., Fosha (2001 & 2004).

How are we to interpret these data? Respondents to the McKinsey surveys typically include the same people who are responsible for creating conditions that support leader development. And based on their responses, we can reasonably assume they recognize the need to improve these conditions. So, what prevents them from doing so? What should we realistically expect from management, and what should we expect from the supervisors of those in a stretch assignment?

Some would say that this phenomenon, i.e., the *apparent* inability of management to provide support for development, suggests the need for individual leaders to be “more accountable for their own development,” a phrase that seems to be gaining currency in recent years. But what does that really mean beyond admonishing people to be more self-directing? And how realistic and effective have such exhortations been?

Others might emphasize the importance of linking leader development more directly to business imperatives. But how do you do that without overemphasizing the purely task-oriented elements of learning and without ratcheting up performance pressures to a level that suppresses learning? Also, how does the motivated “champion” help management connect the dots between leader development and business sustainability?

We will address these questions in more detail in the next section, but for now, suffice it to say that the primary responsibility of management, in the opinion of many, is to create conditions favorable for leader development. This implies providing the structure and resources needed to give each developing leader a realistic chance to learn, grow, and succeed, even where that means minimal and selective supervisor involvement. Mere rhetoric about personal accountability is not enough!

Making Stretch Assignments Work

We have discussed some of the important variables involved in making stretch assignments work: 1) identifying assignments with a sufficient amount of challenge to stimulate motivation and learning, while not presenting so much challenge that the developing leader is overwhelmed and the business imperatives are put in jeopardy; 2) thoughtfully assessing the specific competencies required to do the work, the readiness of the developing leader to meet these requirements, and the opportunities for the leader to learn and grow from the assignment; and 3) reinforcing the role and duty of management to create organizational conditions that ensure each developing leader has a realistic chance to succeed.

The tools that have been provided in tables 1 and 2 and the guidance for how these might be used will go a long way toward ensuring thoughtfulness in the appraisal of challenge and person-assignment match. This, in turn, will contribute to more prudent judgments and decision-making regarding the risks and benefits of placing important company work in the hands of developing leaders. Beyond these tools and guidance on process, I would like to discuss three areas of readiness that merit special attention: 1) establishing the role of management; 2) preparing developing leaders for participation; and 3) providing a supportive structure for leaders in stretch-assignments.

Establishing the role of management

What follows are several specific recommendations for how to create a climate conducive to development in a difficult business cycle. Each taken individually will not be enough to quell the tyranny of the urgent; they must be used in combination. While an individual champion may be able to get the attention of a few key leaders, it is essential to create a critical mass of management support. This implies building a consensus among members of the leadership team.

1. Define leadership and organizational development as a governance matter. All stakeholders have an interest in the company's sustainability, and sustainability is promoted by generative leadership, i.e., leadership that concerns itself with the greater good of the enterprise and developing the next generations of leadership.
2. Link developmental assignments to company strategy. Those who play a role in specifying stretch assignments must be insistent about defining their strategic significance and business impact. Assignments focused on burning short-term issues must be understood for their strategic implications if they are to be justified.
3. Use structure to ensure follow-through. The implementation and oversight of assignments must be designed to include review points. Accountabilities for developing leaders, key stakeholders, and sponsoring executives must be specified, and their contributions need to be noticed, shaped by feedback, and rewarded.
4. Bolster leaders' developmental focus. There is a natural bias for action and results in most organizations. As a motivator, this too is a curvilinear phenomenon that can produce diminishing returns, so it needs to be offset by creating opportunities for critical reflection and perspective taking ("metacognition"⁶). This may require structured peer group discussions and access to external resources.⁷
5. Leverage the dynamics of reciprocal influence between leaders and followers.⁸ Stretch-assignment leaders (as followers) can have a positive impact on their supervisors who also struggle to sustain focus on development amidst the rush of daily tasks. Relationships between stretch leaders and their followers can also produce mutually reinforcing effects on developmental focus.

Finally, it is worth noting that this aspect of management's role serves a very important normative function. Indeed, all that we are discussing under the heading of creating conditions to support leader development (organizational readiness) is essentially normative in its aims and impact. When they deliberate upon and take action on these matters, they are performing a governance duty. In doing so, management puts their credibility at stake. Consciousness of the consequential nature of this governance role highlights the need to give special attention to these matters.

⁶ Metacognition – the second-order thinking about one's self, one's situation, and one's alternative ways of responding to adaptive challenges – is singled out as a readiness factor by Avolio & Hannah (2008).

⁷ Drawing upon peer groups and external resources can lessen demand on supervisors to play this role.

⁸ For more on the reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers see Howell & Shamir (2005) and Avolio & Hannah (2008).

Preparing developing leaders for participation

Assuming a committed management and organizational support and a well-reasoned design for implementing stretch assignments, we may turn our focus to the question of how best to ensure the readiness of the developing leader for a stretch assignment. In light of growing expectations that individuals take greater personal responsibility for their own development, this factor is more critical than ever.

Let me preface my recommendations in this area with a brief discussion of a variable that vexes many executives when appraising leaders, something they often refer to as the “x-factor.”⁹ In mathematics, of course, an x-factor is an unknown quantity. In the world of human behavior and talent management, however, an x-factor designates an ostensibly indefinable quality of a person. Some may claim that they intuit the presence of some positive and compelling quality in a person which leads them to hire or promote that person. Others may express frustration that they are unable to assess this x-factor until it is too late. In any case, what makes this quality indefinable is the inability to discern it and characterize it verbally and with specificity.

Of course, what is indiscernible to one person may not be indiscernible to another, and what is indefinable for one may not be so for another. This is unarguably the case when we consider fields such as finance, technology, or medicine. We frequently defer to the expertise and trained eye of a professional in these areas when seeking to assess risks and make prudent decisions on consequential matters. Unfortunately, people often stop short of recognizing their limitations when it comes to discerning the less obvious, underlying psychological characteristics of human personality. The same people who would readily seek the advice of experts in financial matters are much more ready to “go with their gut” when making decisions¹⁰ about whom to hire or promote or when weighing the readiness of a person for a stretch assignment.

The fact is it is neither necessary nor prudent to take such risks because there are well-trained professionals¹¹ who can help management reduce or virtually eliminate the zone of opacity commonly referred to as the x-factor.¹² Okay, you might say “I can see how that is relevant to hiring and promotion decisions, which are by their very nature less reversible, but why would I go to the bother of involving a psychologist in preparing a candidate for a stretch assignment?” There are at least three good reasons.

First, the same blind spots that can “derail”¹³ a newly hired or promoted executive – at great expense to the organization – can also impair the ability of a leader to perform optimally and take full advantage of a stretch assignment. Second, in-depth self-examination and realistic self-awareness are widely regarded as critical mediating

⁹ McCormick and Burch (2008) called my attention to the self-limiting implications of this expression.

¹⁰ It is said that true experts, unlike nonexperts, “know when they don’t know.” Kahneman & Klein (2009).

¹¹ See Berglas (2002) and Wasylyshyn (2003) for a further discussion of these qualifications.

¹² See McCormick and Burch (2008) for a very good description of how personality-based variables in leader development can be unnecessarily relegated to the status of x-factors.

¹³ Derailers are behavioral issues (e.g., arrogance or inability to deal with conflict) that lead to failure among new hires within the first 12 to 24 months of hire.

variables in development.¹⁴ Consciousness of our personality tendencies, purposive motivations, and developmental strivings empower us to better regulate our emotions, cope with stress, recognize our limitations, open ourselves to learning, and adapt to change. Third, individuals are unlikely to obtain this depth of insight and the ability to use it without the support and guidance of a highly competent expert and without the emotional safety and confidentiality of a trusting professional relationship.¹⁵

While illuminating the x-factor of candidates being considered for key jobs or stretch assignments is of obvious value in management's decision making, insight into these deeper regions of self for one's own benefit as a developing leader has an even more lasting value. While some leaders will welcome this experience and others will approach it with trepidation, we do know that after pursuing such a coaching process with a highly qualified professional, leaders report positive results (Wasylyshyn, 2003).

What is it they value, and how does it work? I have summarized below four basic steps which characterize the key elements of the process and the gains derived from each:

1. Deepen self-awareness. Through focused dialogue and selected use of experiential and standardized assessment methods, leaders examine their personality and the associated internal structures that define who they are, what they value, and how they are motivated, as well as their fundamental tendencies in thought, feeling, and action.
2. Integration of insight and action tendencies. Using dialogue, experiential exercises, and in-session practice, leaders apply self-insights to real-world situations and challenges they face in their leadership role, all for the purpose of recognizing opportunities for further adaptive (authentic & effective) growth and development.
3. Create a holistic development plan. After defining two or three near-term goals for development (6-12 months), leaders target situations presenting increasing levels of challenge and experiment with strategies, which require them to shape their adaptive responses (thought/feeling/action) in ways that realize goals for growth.
4. Review progress and internalize change. Beginning with centered-reflection on their subjective experience of stretch, leaders examine areas of felt success and areas of felt frustration, and with this in mind, they identify sources of stakeholder feedback and strategies for validating impressions of success and problem-solving frustrations.

Why is it helpful? Gaining deeper insight into the underlying dynamics that shape one's intellectual, emotional, and social functioning is very empowering. Bringing these aspects of self into conscious awareness makes them available for critical examination. Often leaders find opportunities to more fully integrate their interests, abilities, and experiences. Just as often, they discover opportunities to overcome self-limiting habits or assumptions from earlier points in their life and career. As a result, they emerge from the experience with greater maturity, authenticity, and confidence, which enhance their judgment and strengthen their bonds with those they lead and with those they follow.

¹⁴ E.g., see Lord & Hall (2005), Kilburg (2004), and Boyatzis & McKee (2005).

¹⁵ Psychologists themselves seek these same qualities when they need help (Norcross & Bike, 2009).

Supportive structure for developing leaders

One way of supporting leaders deployed to stretch assignments is to provide them with a peer group with whom they can periodically reflect upon their experience for purposes of a) gaining perspective, b) obtaining feedback, and c) problem-solving issues that are causing them frustration. There may even be pre-planned learning modules that have cross-cutting relevance to all assignments and leaders, such as topics that relate to dimensions of challenge (table 1) and dimensions of competency (table 2). Reading material and faculty can be brought in to address these topics. However, the essential goal is to get the leaders interacting about these matters in an environment of high trust, candor, and mutual support.

One way of meeting this need is by employing a strategy commonly known as action learning. Classical action learning as practiced by companies like General Electric and Citibank has tended to have a task-oriented bias, and its learning modules often emphasize the acquisition and application of “hard” (instrumental) skills.¹⁶ While such programs can be very valuable, the approach I recommend for supporting developing leaders in stretch assignments, encourages more balanced attention to the “soft” (behavioral) and “hard” (instrumental) aspects of leadership and leader development.

In any case, action learning implies a thoughtfully designed learning experience, which aims to ensure a high degree of relevance to the participant’s operating environment and personal development goals. Even though structured and designed with care, action learning must leave room for spontaneous experimentation and adaptive course corrections. Moreover, the balance between considerations of efficiency and learning must be skewed in favor of learning. This means that stretch assignments should be chosen whose outcomes are important and worthy of special attention but are not so urgent that they induce time pressures, which might compromise learning.

While this is not the occasion to go into design details, it is important to note that action learning programs can vary a good deal in their design. Depending upon company size and developmental goals, programs may be company-specific or may include developing leaders from multiple companies. Regardless of design, however, such programs have the advantage of providing high-quality support without putting unrealistic demands on the developing leader’s supervisor or executive sponsors. Moreover, they generally offer economies of scale when drawing upon outside resources (e.g., faculty, workshops, etc.), and they explicitly ensure relevance of development activities to business priorities.

Conclusion

We began by noting the popularity of stretch assignments as a means of developing leaders. Along the way, we observed that there is a curvilinear relationship between the level of challenge in a stretch assignment and the skill development a leader obtains from the experience. This led to an examination of how organizations can best optimize the

¹⁶ See *Action learning: how the world’s top companies are re-creating their leaders and themselves* (1998) by Dotlich and Noel (1998) for a good overview of classical action learning.

value of stretch assignments with an eye toward safeguarding key business outcomes while also maximizing leader development.

Practical tools for implementing stretch assignments (tables 1 and 2) were presented and guidance for how to use them was provided, along with advice to management on their role in creating an organizational climate of readiness for development. All of these recommendations are directly responsive to the recognized need to do more to support developing leaders than simply admonishing them to be responsible for their own development. There is a role for everyone in making stretch assignments work and there is benefit for all when they succeed.

We gave special attention to and practical advice for how to better prepare individual leaders to be more ready and self-directing as they undertake stretch assignments. This involved raising their consciousness of their de facto tendencies as a person and ways to increase their adaptive potential to deal with new leadership challenges. These are the kinds of developmental gains that can carry forward, enabling leaders to become truly more responsible for their development. We also highlighted a structured method for leveraging peer support, which enhances learning and performance without placing unrealistic demands on supervisors and executive sponsors. I believe these ideas and suggestions collectively offer organizations a realistic starting point.

To be sure, these recommendations are not without cost, but most businesses are already spending significant sums of money on leadership development,¹⁷ so perhaps the critical question is, “Are they getting a good return from their expenditures?” Answering that question for any particular enterprise, of course, requires a case-specific assessment. As a general principle, however, it seems reasonable to expect that organizations whose approach to leader development is grounded in sound research, proven models, and practical experience are more likely to achieve good returns. And I believe the advice offered in this paper meets that test.

¹⁷ Bersin & Associates, publisher of *The Corporate Learning Factbook*, estimates that 30% of total annual spending on training and development, or approximately \$17BB, goes to leadership development.

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