Beyond 'One-Size-Fits-All' Leadership Development

Key Concept

Different methods are suited to the learning needs of different leaders. There are unique challenges faced by leaders in different situations and at different stages of development, and as such, and a 'one-size-fits-all' type of methodology may not always be the best strategy for leadership development practitioners.

Idea Summary

The authors propose that different leadership development learning methods should be adopted according to the varying needs and issues faced by leaders at different levels and stages of their lives.

They note that there are no definitive 'best strategies' for developing leaders, but that there has been an increasing recognition that leadership development must incorporate a constellation of practices in order to be effective.

They propose a classification of leadership development methods built on the following dimensions:

- Locus of learning (i.e. out-of-context and in-context learning methods); and
- What one learns (i.e. role, self-in-role and self learning methods).

In terms of the locus of learning, the focus on customised executive education programs is on in-context methods; but, the authors note, this has been balanced in recent years with recognition of the need of open enrolment programs that bring together participants from different functions, organizations, industries and cultures. This is important and helps participants take a step back from the daily reality of the corporate world and gain perspective, as well as renewal.

Business Application
Throughout their paper, the authors explore three aspects of a leader’s evolution, which may suggest different development needs and advance propositions about which learning methods, or what combination of methods, are best suited to the different stages:

1. **The level of leadership:** in the transition from novice to middle to senior leadership levels, *in-context* role methods, such as job-shadowing, may be useful. However, an understanding of the concepts related to new duties will also need to be acquired; therefore *out-of-context* learning, such as classroom learning is also critical.

2. **The life-cycle stage of the leader:** the authors highlight existing research suggesting a strong link between adult development processes (such as changes in motives and priorities) and work life. They suggest *in-context*, *self-in-role* learning methods, such as job assignments/rotation for early adulthood managers focused on achieving and delivering. During the midlife stage, they suggest methods emphasizing real-life learning, such as simulations and outdoor challenges. Finally, in late adulthood, methods that target the utilization and distribution of the relevant knowledge and experience of those leaders is likely to be the most effective.

3. **The role-cycle stage:** development needs also differ according to role stages. *In-context* methods, such as mentoring and 360 feedback are useful in transitional stages. *Out-of-context methods* that help to make sense of changes through social comparisons with peers are also beneficial. However, during stable stages, *self-in-role* methods, such as outdoor challenges are valuable.

To conclude, the authors stress that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to leadership interventions will not be as successful and have less of a long-term impact those methods that take into account the different learning needs of different leaders. Instead of simply cutting and pasting from other interventions, methods should be in sync with both job demands and individual needs at particular time and place.

**Further Reading**


**Further Relevant Resources**

Laura Guillén’s profile at INSEAD
Herminia Ibarra’s profile at INSEAD
INSEAD Executive Education profile at IEDP

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