

PART FIVE

Deliberately Building Leadership Cultures

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Throughout this series we have explored a simple but powerful progression.

- Trust is built through our lived experience of one another.
- Trust creates influence.
- Influence creates psychological safety.
- Psychological safety allows intrinsic motivation to emerge.
- Intrinsic motivation enables teams to become something far greater than a collection of talented individuals.

That naturally raises the next question, ***“Who builds the leaders who are capable of creating that environment consistently?”***

Every organisation wants great leadership, but very few organisations deliberately build it.

That may be one of the greatest contradictions in modern business.

We spend years developing people as accountants, engineers, technicians, chemists, lawyers, artisans and salespeople. We invest heavily in functional competence because organisations depend upon technical excellence. Then, one day, someone performs exceptionally well and is promoted into leadership. Almost overnight, their accountability changes. Yet very few people ever explain to them what has actually changed.

One of the most useful frameworks for understanding this transition is Ram Charan's Leadership Pipeline. The central insight is remarkably simple. As people progress through an organisation, success is no longer defined by what they personally achieve. It becomes increasingly defined by what they enable other people to achieve.

A first-line leader is no longer primarily accountable for doing the work. They are accountable for creating an environment in which others can do the work exceptionally well.

As leaders move higher through the organisation, that responsibility expands even further. The leader of leaders is no longer measured simply by the performance of a department; they should increasingly be measured by the quality of the leaders they develop.

At executive level, leadership becomes something different again. The executive's responsibility is not merely to lead people; It is to deliberately build an organisation in which great leadership becomes normal.

That is a profound shift in thinking.

Throughout this series we have argued that leaders deliberately shape the lived experience of the people they lead.

At organisational level, organisations deliberately shape the environment in which leaders create that lived experience.

Leadership therefore becomes an organisational capability rather than simply an individual capability.

This idea has occupied much of my own thinking over the past decade. During my doctoral research at the University of Johannesburg, I explored how organisations intentionally develop leadership brands and, more importantly, leadership cultures. Since then, working with organisations across multiple industries, I have become increasingly convinced that leadership excellence is rarely the product of exceptional individuals alone. ***It is the product of organisations that intentionally create the conditions in which exceptional leadership can flourish.***

One of the most powerful ways we have found of achieving this is through the deliberate creation of internal leadership academies.

Years ago, while serving as an executive, we established a year-long leadership college within the organisation. Leaders from different functions, backgrounds and levels learned together, challenged one another, reflected together and, most importantly, developed a common language for leadership.

Something remarkable happened.

The technical learning was valuable and the relationships that developed were invaluable.

People began solving problems across departmental boundaries, trust extended beyond reporting lines.

Leaders stopped thinking only about their own departments and began thinking about the organisation as a whole.

Since establishing the Trust-Based Leadership Academy, we have seen the same pattern repeated in many organisations.

When leaders learn together, they begin to think together and when they think together, they begin to lead consistently. Over time, consistency becomes culture.

Leadership culture, however, is never created by training alone. Training may ignite it, but the organisation must sustain it.

Every organisational system either strengthens the desired leadership culture or quietly undermines it. Recruitment, onboarding, succession planning, performance management, leadership development, recognition, reward systems, promotion, policies, communication.

Every one of these systems sends a message about what leadership really looks like inside the organisation.

This is where Human Resources plays a uniquely strategic role. HR does not own leadership. Leadership belongs to every leader, but HR designs many of the systems that either reinforce or erode the leadership culture an organisation is trying to build.

When those systems consistently reinforce one another, leadership becomes easier.

When they work against one another, even outstanding leaders struggle.

Over the years I have also observed another challenge.

Senior executives often possess a compelling vision for the organisation. Front-line employees are usually willing to contribute. Yet somewhere in the middle, momentum is lost.

The reason is surprisingly simple.

Employees do not experience the organisation directly; they experience their immediate leader.

For most people, their leader is the organisation.

If that leader creates trust, they experience a trusting organisation. If that leader creates fear, they experience a fearful organisation.

A beautifully written set of corporate values means very little, if the lived experience of employees, tells a different story.

Culture is experienced one leader at a time.

That observation should cause every executive team to pause.

Creating a leadership culture is not achieved by launching another set of values or publishing another strategy document, it is achieved by deliberately developing leaders who consistently create the lived experience those values promise.

That is why I believe leadership development should never be viewed as an event, it is an organisational discipline. It requires deliberate investment, deliberate reflection, deliberate practice, and deliberate reinforcement through every organisational system.

Great organisations are not distinguished simply by their products, their technology or even their strategy. They are distinguished by the quality of leadership that people experience every single day.

Perhaps that is the greatest sustainable competitive advantage an organisation can build, not because great leaders are born, but because great organisations deliberately develop them.

In the final article in this series, I will reflect on some of my personal experiences that I believe support our passion for Trust based leadership.

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