Article Summary 3: *Crucibles of Leadership Development* by Robert J. Thomas

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Summary

In the 2008 Sloan Management Review article *Crucibles of Leadership Development*, author Robert J. Thomas begins with a firm statement that experience supersedes formal training for individuals learning to lead. Although formal training is helpful, there is no substitute for learning from experience. A select few organizations – including Boeing, General Electric, and Toyota – have programs that leverage experiential learning, but they are exceptions. Most organizations provide little instruction on how to learn from experience.

Thomas (2008) notes that organizations are missing the chance to develop leaders by integrating their crucible experiences, which he frames as a “…kind of superconcentrated form of leadership development.” Thomas (2008) describes how outstanding performers have a “personal learning strategy,” which allows them to engage challenging situations and distill valuable lessons from crucible experiences about what is necessary to be an effective leader. Crucibles come in unlimited shapes – on and off the job – and some can be intentionally arranged, managed and leveraged to help develop leaders.

Looking outside of traditional corporations, Thomas draws on the Mormons and the Hells Angels as two organizations who use an activity as a crucible experience to help develop leaders. Both the Mormons and the Hells Angels share numerous similarities that include being durable, multinational entities and engaging in selective recruitment, “yet neither suffers from a weak leadership gene pool” (Thomas, 2008). In the Mormon Church, the missionary experience is the most apparent crucible, while in the Hells Angels, the crucible is the organization of a motorcycle “run” that stretches hundreds of miles. Mission work in the form of teaching, service, and conversion is a period of trial from which a sense of identity is developed or altered. In the Hells Angels, successfully organizing a run demands imagination, negotiation skills, and
attention to history. Both of these crucibles are instigated by the respective organization and contribute to experiential leadership development (Thomas, 2008).

Both the Mormons and the Hells Angels meet after events to distill valuable lessons from their respective crucible experiences. Both the Mormons and the Hells Angels provide key lessons about leader development that can benefit business organizations. Both groups show it is possible to engineer a core activity to serve as training ground for leaders. They both provide extensive preparation before sending would-be leaders into the world; they provide technical skills, but also intangibles like how to spot oncoming trouble and how to preserve one’s identity. Both groups provide a framework of support while individuals are entrenched within a crucible. Lastly, both invest in crucibles to incubate a new generation of leadership, which allows the organization to sustain itself and even expand. These groups teach us that with a willingness to take risks in the area of leader development, crucible experiences can be effectively engineered and distilled to help organizations develop effective leaders.

**Discussion**

The concept of crucibles as mechanisms for experiential leadership development can be directly applied in organizations. First, organizations can create or transform one of their core activities to serve a practice field or training ground for their leaders, however they must be open to this type of experimentation and recognize the value it can yield. Organizations can work to ensure that a support structure exists for members who are in the midst of a crucible. By making commitments to their developing leaders as individuals, senior leaders and supervisors demonstrate that their role is not merely a job but an authentic commitment the mission of the organization.
A general strategy has been outlined for organizations in this article through the Mormons and the Hells Angels, who both have very visible crucibles. It is important for organizations to note that crucibles do not have to be publicly visible, but the organization must invest in crucible events by experimenting in the area of leadership development. Organizations can build, conduct, and distill crucible experiences from new or existing core activities to help develop effective leaders. Some organizations may already have environments that instigate crucible experiences, but it is also important to mine those experiences for their developmental value. When individuals endure these crucible experiences, it important to make sure that lessons are captured by debriefing afterwards. For organizations seeking to apply the concepts discussed here, the key is to complement formal training with crucible experiences built, supported, and mined by the organization.
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