Leadership Development and Futures Thinking

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The claim that leadership development programs don’t work because they do not address the overlooking context, decoupling reflection from real work, understanding mind-sets, and failing to measure results, are made by Pierre Gurdjian, Thomas Halbeisen and Kevin Lane from McKinsey (mickinsey.com 14 March 2018).

<https://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/leadership/why-leadership-development-programs-fail>

Their reasons:

**Overlooking Context**

“Too many training initiatives we come across rest on the assumption that one size fits all and that the same group of skills or style of leadership is appropriate regardless of strategy, organizational culture, or CEO mandate. In the earliest stages of planning a leadership initiative, companies should ask themselves a simple question: what, precisely, is this program for?”

**Decoupling reflection from real work**

“The ability to push training participants to reflect, while also giving them real work experiences to apply new approaches and hone their skills, is a valuable combination in emerging markets. There, the gap between urgent “must do” projects and the availability of capable leaders presents an enormous challenge. In such environments, companies should strive to make every major business project a leadership-development opportunity as well, and to integrate leadership-development components into the projects themselves.”

**Underestimating mind-sets**

“Identifying some of the deepest, “below the surface” thoughts, feelings, assumptions, and beliefs is usually a precondition of behavioral change—one too often shirked in development programs. Promoting the virtues of delegation and empowerment, for example, is fine in theory, but successful adoption is unlikely if the program participants have a clear “controlling” mind-set (*I can’t lose my grip on the business; I’m personally accountable and only I should make the decisions*). It’s true that some personality traits (such as extroversion or introversion) are difficult to shift, but people can change the way they see the world and their values.”

**Failing to measure results** “Too often, any evaluation of leadership development begins and ends with participant feedback; the danger here is that trainers learn to game the system and deliver a syllabus that is more pleasing than challenging to participants. Yet targets can be set and their achievement monitored. Just as in any business-performance program, once that assessment is complete, leaders can learn from successes and failures over time and make the necessary adjustments.”

**How our Futures Thinking and Strategy Development programs’ addresses these concerns as presented in the program workbook.**

**Overlooking Context.** The approach we will take includes anticipating the future by scanning the future and questioning assumptions at every level: the mission, the goals, the product, core competencies, and to make it participatory by including others since non-inclusion of one variable can change outcomes in unanticipated ways. Strategic foresight seeks to disturb the very anchors put into place. It does not wish to be the next management theory but rather continue to challenge the assumptions we all make on the nature of how reality is.

**Decoupling refection from real work.** The business case for futures theory and methodologies is that the futures tools and methodologies not only are challenging conventional business assumptions but they are also challenging the worldviews, myths and metaphors that created these assumptions in the first place. This allows new thinking to emerge which holds tremendous potential for forward thinking executives to significantly increase their innovation to co-evolve a desired emerging future as it occurs in the here-and-now as the ‘new’ strategy.

**Underestimating mind-sets.** This is covered by Causal layered Analysis developed by Sohail Inayatullah. CLA can be used in a variety of ways.

**First,** it can be used to unpack a particular issue, to understand it all four levels.

**Second,** it can be used to map contesting views of the future. Different stakeholders and their worldviews are identified and their respective policy solutions are analysed.

**Third,** it can be used to deconstruct a particular future (along the four levels) and then reconstruct it, thereby creating an alternative future. The alternative future can be the preferred future, where the person or organisation wishes to move toward.

**Fourth,** it can be used to unpack one’s own litany, system of selves, dominant worldview and contending narratives. Once an inner map is created then an alternative preferred life story can be created.

**Fifth,** it can be used in the incasting phase of scenarios, to deepen them. This allows a robust comparison of the litanies, systems, worldview and myths of each narrative.

**Sixth,** it can also be used in the implementation process to ensure that the strategies are both deep and broad. CLA is used to as an evaluative tool to analyse the suggested litany (indicators), systemic, worldview-cultural and narrative/ story changes.

**Failing to measure result.** The test of good/bad scenarios is did the work produce the client’s needs? 1/3rd of the work is in producing scenarios and at least 2/3rd is in understanding what they are for and how they can be used. This is how the results are measured. Th3 2/3rd to 4/5th is the work upfront which is very important. The timeframe for scenarios depends on the purpose you have given for yourself or for someone, as the client is always an individual not an organisation. The outcomes sought are to help individuals to focus on their own actions to support them to take responsibility for innovation and creation by becoming more comfortable with taking some risk and to provide relevant data that identifies issues or trends that may not have been considered. Then as a group, going forward collectively to think about and map out what happens today versus what you want in the future, and how you might work better together to build a work environment supportive of change and innovation.

Clarifying scenarios are about their future context and how to use this context to inform what to do in the present. They are about sense making, value judgement, and learning to enhance our instrumental judgement to reveal what could happen so as a clear set of decision points can be constructed. Scenarios are inviting you, as part of your job, to get to places of alternative thinking and to see the world as less narrow. Facts are always in the past and knowledge theory is usually evidence and fact based. However for effective strategic foresight work taking something for a fact is a lazy persons way of thinking.