

Four Keys to Developing Future Leaders

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In today's fast-paced business landscape, the development of future leaders is a critical aspect of your success. Companies have to think beyond merely creating efficient managers; they must invest in the development of individuals who will navigate complexity, embrace change, and inspire those around them.

In 2019 the American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC) published a "best practices" report based on 13 member-firms that had successfully navigated succession planning. One of the key findings in the report was the timing of developing future leaders and what development activities had the most significant impact. This article is based on the results of that study. The examples given are from my own experience.

Key #1: Starting Early

The first key to developing future leaders is to initiate the process early. Most organizations agree that the groundwork for effective leadership development should begin at least 10 years before a leadership transition. Starting early ensures that potential leaders receive ample time to acquire the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience for leadership roles.

Key #2: Strategic Development Assignments

Strategic development assignments are often the cornerstone of leadership development. These assignments range from



"business topics" like project work, client service, and business development, to "people topics" such as team management and leadership skills.

High-performing organizations consistently employ strategic assignments, especially for mid-career professionals, starting around seven to 10 years before they are expected to enter senior executive positions. Some companies even use these assignments earlier in the careers of high-potential employees. The assignments are meant to challenge individuals and equip them with the skills necessary for leadership roles.

Example: One fruitful technique is the use of job rotations so that individuals have a better understanding of the business as a whole. This can mean having a site supervisor "come inside" and work in business development for a year, or having that supervisor rotate among private and public projects so that they get different owner perspectives. One client, a state DOT,

had both shoreline and mountainous projects and realized (too late) that they didn't have experienced personnel that they could move among projects, because building on sand is entirely different than building on granite.

Key #3: A Mix of Internal and External Training


The third key to effective leadership development is a blend of internal and external training. Internal training programs are used to teach and reinforce how the business is run and the values and goals the company aims to achieve. These can be taught by current executives, internal subject matter experts, or outside consultants who are asked to tailor their content to align with the company's expected outcomes. External training is essential for gaining broader business perspectives such as financial topics or the potential impact of AI, and honing personal aspects of leadership, such as emotional intelligence and communication skills. External programs might include graduate degree programs, short-term leadership development offerings such as from the Center for Creative Leadership, or even a local chamber offering. And don't forget the many online and in-person offerings from [CMAA](#) that are "external" but industry-specific.

Key #4: Developing Leadership at All Levels

The final key to nurturing future leaders is to instill a culture of leadership development at all organizational levels. Leadership development should start early in an employee's career and remain a continuous part of organizational life. Some organizations stress that leadership development never stops, even after a new CEO takes charge; the next generation of leaders should be on the agenda from day one. Organizations that truly value leadership development integrate it into their culture, using it as a common language and value system that guides decision-making and actions throughout the organization.

Example: A large multi-national firm had seven organizational values they lived by. The values were introduced during orientation, posters listing the values hung everywhere, and they were reviewed by managers during every morning

meeting. Anyone who worked for that organization could explain what each of the values meant and looked like in practice.

To cultivate future leaders, organizations must adopt a multifaceted approach: Starting early, using strategic development assignments, combining internal and external training, and fostering leadership at all levels. By embracing these principles, companies can navigate complexity, proactively adapt to change, and have a new generation of leaders in the pipeline to ensure the firm's long-term success. 



About the Author

Dr. Nanette Miner is a leadership development and workplace-learning strategy consultant. Through her firm, [The Training Doctor](#), she has revolutionized the way that individuals are prepared for leadership roles in their organizations. Rather than a chosen few, her process is aimed at ensuring everyone in the company has the skills and business acumen of a leader. This approach ensures both immediate and long-term return-on-investment (ROI) for an organization.

She has written articles for Chief Learning Office magazine, Forbes, and MBA World and is a frequent guest on workplace training and career podcasts and talk radio such as Inc. Radio and America's Workforce Radio.

Nanette regularly speaks at industry conferences and corporate learning events on how to integrate leadership capabilities throughout an organization. An author of eight books, her most recent is Future-Proofing Your Organization.

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