Chapter 17

Catalytic Converters: How Exceptional Bosses Develop Leaders

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In the opening chapter of this book the case was made that experience is at the heart of leadership development. To say that experience is at the heart is not to say that experience in and of itself is sufficient to develop leadership talent. As the chapters of this book have shown, all experiences are not created equal, nor are they equally relevant to the business, nor are they available for everyone, nor is it automatic that the lessons they offer will be learned. While one possible conclusion from the research reported in *Lessons of Experience* (McCall, Lombardo & Morrison, 1988) and *Developing Global Executives* (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002) is that “whoever controls who gets what job controls development,” logic dictates that “who controls what happens on the job” is just as important. One of the most important factors in what happens in a job experience, and therefore what is learned from it, is the immediate boss. In a sense, the boss can be a catalyst that converts experience into learning.

Research on leadership development documents the importance to learning of timely and accurate feedback (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), coaching and mentoring (Allen, Finkelstein, & Poteet, 2009; Hollenbeck, 2002), job challenge (McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994), after action review (Ellis & Davidi, 2005; Ellis, Mendel, & Nir, 2006), learning orientation (DeRue & Wellman, 2009) and openness to learning (Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney,1997), and other factors, but strangely enough has little to say directly about a primary instigator (or inhibitor) of such things—the boss. And while many (or even most) bosses may themselves be mediocre leaders, they still impact the experiences of those who report to them. More importantly, we know that the very good and the very bad ones can have a profound impact on the development of leadership talent (McCall et al., 1988). Bad bosses can be an experience in and of themselves and by their nature teach lessons about how to survive and what not to do.  With the possible exception of truly extraordinary bosses, most “good” bosses do not teach a particular lesson, but they do serve in numerous ways as catalysts to learning (e.g., by providing experiences, by giving feedback, and by making it OK to experiment).  Our focus is not on “boss as experience” but on “boss as catalyst.”  We want to explore exactly how and why these exceptional bosses have the impact that they do, and what if anything can be done to increase the positive impact of bosses on the development of leadership talent.

To explore these issues we took the simplest approach—we asked exceptional bosses how they thought about development and what they did to develop talent. We also asked selected people they had developed for their perspective on what their bosses did that helped them develop as leaders. Five prominent multinational organizations, four U.S.- and one India-based, each identified 10 senior managers (the vast majority within 2-3 reporting layers of the CEO) they considered among their very best developers of talent based on input from HR and senior leaders as well as available metrics (360 feedback, leader surveys, number of high-potentials nurtured and passed along). For each of them, at least one person he or she had developed was also identified (we called them protégés), yielding a sample of about a hundred people we interviewed.

 We asked the developers questions ranging from their philosophy and motivation to how they chose whom to develop to concrete examples of actions they took. In the protégé interviews, we asked about the specific boss identified as a developer as well as other bosses and factors that had influenced their development over the course of their careers. We begin this chapter by looking at the variety of ways these bosses influenced the development of their protégés.

**GOOD BOSSES AND DEVELOPMENTAL EXPERIENCES**

 Often the objective of an exercise like this is to catalog everything that people do, thereby generating a list of “best practices” to guide bosses in developing leaders (e.g., Axelrod & Coyle, 2011). But the bosses we talked to, while all identified as the best developers of talent, varied considerably in their leader development philosophy, motivation, and practices. Some provided opportunities for growth, some made connections with mentors or senior management, some provided career guidance, some worked to correct flaws or build specific skills, and some focused on setting high standards and holding people accountable. Some did two or three of these things. Almost no one did them all. In other words, there is no simple “to do” list for developing talent, but rather a variety of approaches, each of which is valuable in its own way. As tempting as it is to make generalizations like “all great developers of talent give candid, timely feedback,” it simply is not the case that all of them do. There were perhaps just two things that all of these developers had in common. First, developing leaders was a priority for them personally. Almost every great talent developer indicated that they had come to this realization as a youth or early in their career. They could point to specific incidents and experiences that shaped them—a role model parent who was frequently called upon for coaching and advice, a teacher in school, a coach on a sports team, a manager who took a keen personal interest in them early in their career, an experience they had when they themselves became frontline managers for the first time. Second, they all provided a lot of leeway for their protégés to figure out how to meet their leadership challenges, to take risks and make mistakes, and to learn through trial and error; none of our great talent developers was a micromanager. So instead of a bullet list of practices, we look at the different ways exceptional talent developers go about this work.

**Providing Opportunities for Growth**

*He took a couple of big risks with me, first recruiting me to move into a marketing role, and then, even more daringly, tapped me to be the product manager based in Singapore. What made this assignment unconventional and controversial was that I was responsible for sales and I had no sales background or experience. In addition I was going to a location where I didn’t have much of a safety net—my manager was not down the hall and there was no one around who could really guide me or act as a sounding board. To top it off, a month after I moved to Singapore he was tapped to take on a new role. But to his credit, he continued to be available to me when I had questions. He was a classic leader with big shoulders who gives you a lot of space but is there for you to ensure that you don’t drive off a cliff.*

 At first glance it looks like this boss was throwing his protégé to the wolves, testing him to see if he had the “right stuff.” Indeed many of our developers enticed (or sometimes forced) their talented people to take on bigger or unconventional assignments, understanding that people learn the most when they are stretched and that staying with what you know is not the path to leadership. But unlike selection-oriented managers, who use challenging assignments as a test, these bosses had various strategies for seeing to it that the protégé was successful. In the example above, notice that this boss was careful about sequencing (“first recruiting me to move into a marketing role”), kept an eye on what was happening (“is there for you to ensure you don’t drive off a cliff”), and did not desert the protégé when he was promoted (“he continued to be available to me”).

 Other bosses when giving their people challenging assignments or tasks gave a clear account of how the assignment would stretch the protégé and what the protégé could expect (or should attempt) to learn, set very clear expectations and held the protégé accountable, scheduled regular one-on-one sessions to monitor progress and provide opportunities for discussion, gave guidance and/or useful feedback, or made sure that the protégé had coaching or mentoring or other kinds of support.

 Often these developmental assignments violated norms or traditional career paths and the protégé was not fully qualified for the position, so the boss was taking a risk not only with the protégé but with his own standing. In many cases the boss provided “air cover” for the protégé or kept the assignment low profile so that mistakes along the learning curve would not prove fatal. Clearly bosses did not want their protégés to fail and carefully weighed the possibilities before throwing them in and did what they could to ensure success, often behind the scenes and without the protégé even being aware.

**Providing Exposure to Senior Executives; Making Connections and Opening Doors**

*Two skills my boss helped me build were executive communications and business insight. When my skip-level manager, who was a Senior Vice President, visited my district, the feedback from him was that I was too casual. I was stunned by the feedback because I always prided myself on being well prepared. My boss told me, “This feedback is a gift.” This helped me accept the feedback and then reflect on what happened. I finally went to my boss and told her I needed help presenting in situations like that and demonstrating business insight. She told me how she had learned to handle situations like this 10+ years ago and the process she followed in similar situations. We practiced 10 times for an upcoming business review, where she offered to give me another opportunity to make a positive impression. Every practice session, she would critique me–I felt like I was back in grade school and getting assignments from my teacher marked in a red pen. But when the moment came, I was well prepared.*

Whether with senior executives, customers, technical gurus, or some other significant group, some of the developmental bosses were focused on exposing their protégés to the “right” people. Most often the point was to build valuable relationships, that essential glue that holds organizations together. From a developmental perspective, these contacts could be gatekeepers who provided access to certain jobs, coaches or mentors who could provide guidance in ways the boss could not, or more simply people who would be helpful in achieving business objectives.

 In some cases the objective was to get the protégé known or showcased so that more opportunities would be available. When this was the goal, sometimes a boss just made sure that senior executives were aware of a person’s accomplishments without actually engineering a personal appearance. Less frequently bosses tried to overcome a tarnished image of the protégé among senior management, or tempered senior managers’ expectations when they seemed to overestimate a person’s readiness.

 Like challenging assignments, exposing a protégé to powerful people could put both boss and protégé at risk, so making these connections was not done lightly. As in the example opening this section, some bosses would see to it that the protégé was fully prepared for the meeting, by having rehearsals, providing insight into the preferences of the audience, or reviewing materials beforehand. One example stands out:

*Mechanically he was really good, but he was weak managing up and influencing senior leaders. My mission was to teach him how to influence this company to go for a breakthrough. I helped him on strategy, positioning and influence by putting him into situations where he had to influence senior leaders. I didn’t throw him into the fire, but coached him along the way and did a good debrief after each encounter. I take risks that others won’t take. He needed $350 million for a business idea and rather than do it for him I told him to invite the CEO here and convince him to support the idea!*

Sometimes the protégé was on his/her own, but the boss briefed the senior executives that the person was just learning and even coached them on how to respond to the protégé’s presentation. “If I’m asking someone to present to senior leaders for the first time I might send the leaders a note ahead of time explaining that the person is inexperienced and I may ‘coach the boss.’ They [the protégé] may never know until later that we did that.”

 Bosses can play a critical role in making connections that will benefit their protégés’ future development, both in building protégés’ skills in presenting to and understanding executives and in helping them build their network.

**Developing Skills and Mitigating Flaws**

 Many of the bosses we interviewed played a traditional coaching role, using their own expertise (or drafting others with the needed expertise) to help their protégés develop needed skills or, conversely, to better manage their flaws. Given the seniority of the group, their collective knowledge and experience spanned an enormous territory and allowed for coaching on a vast array of skills.

Sometimes the focus of the coaching was on new skills the protégé needed to develop. Examples include:

* How to be a strong decision maker and present a point of view
* How to collaborate and make a matrix work
* How to create a business plan

In other instances, the boss coached the protégé to repair bad behaviors and relationships that threatened to derail the protégé’s career, such as:

* Driving for results in a way that burned out staff, hurt morale and created a lot of baggage
* “Her people skills were atrocious”
* “He is a micromanager and his team is frustrated but won’t tell him”
* “He was very smart, technically brilliant, but he had a chip on his shoulder—he was brusque with his peers and they hated him”
* Confusing personal chemistry/”un-likability” with performance issues
* Trying to do too much themselves instead of figuring out how to get stuff done through others

The list of topics goes on (and on and on) but the boss’s expertise was not sufficient to create change; the boss had to deliver feedback, offer suggestions and guidance, and stick with it long enough to see the results. The story told us by one managing director captures the challenge of coaching to mitigate a flaw:

*One of my employees was curious why, in spite of delivering good results, he was never promoted or given a bigger job. I discovered that he was always looking for opportunities to show off. He took pride in publicly getting recognized for his personal accomplishments. I gave him some direct feedback on this and told him he needed to show more humility. In addition, I told him he needed to think more about the legacy he was leaving—not just what he himself was achieving, but how he was setting the organization up for future success. I met with him regularly, at least monthly and often weekly. He came to trust me and took my advice to heart, and we had more open conversations. He had the will to change, and was open to receiving strong feedback. He changed his behavior and senior leaders noticed. He was promoted.*

Notice in this example that the boss began by doing his homework to understand the issue. He then gave direct feedback to the protégé (along with specific examples not included in the quote above) and framed it in a larger business context (his “legacy”). He engaged the protégé regularly, building trust, and over time succeeded in changing the behavior. It’s worth noting that in our interview with the protégé he commented, “My boss consistently gave me direct, honest feedback. It’s not always happy feedback, but it’s valuable. The focus is always on what I should do to improve myself and my business. It hurts a little bit, but I start thinking after a few hours about the truth of what he is saying and look for ways to improve.”

 Sometimes a boss’s good intentions misfire. In an effort to make a protégé successful, rather than coaching this boss surrounded him with “people who could fill his deficits” and “made sure he kept at least one such person.” Later, when the protégé was promoted to run a different division under a different boss, he lost his cover and quickly derailed.

**Inspiring; Raising the Bar; Demanding Excellence**

 According to Walter Isaacson (2011), Steve Jobs’s biographer, Jobs was particularly gifted in inspiring and driving people beyond what they thought was possible. One result of pursuing the “insanely great” is the development of innovative products like the Mac, iPod, iPad, and iPhone. But another possible result is personal development, as individuals venture into new territory and learn, if nothing else, that they can do it. “He had the most impact on me,” his protégé said, “because he set a high bar of excellence and had a clear vision of what he wanted the organization to do.”

That sentiment was echoed by a protégé in a different company whose boss (and champion) quickly intervened when the protégé tried to set a low bar for his organization after he was moved into a very challenging new assignment:

*We missed plan the 1st quarter I was there, which was OK because I was new and just getting settled. We seemed well on our way to hitting our numbers in the 2nd quarter. In fact, I was so sure we had hit our Q2 numbers that I had promised my boss and had done a webcast to my entire organization just before the end of the quarter thanking them for their great work. But sales collapsed during the last 2 weeks of the quarter and we came up just short. Right after that, I submitted a pretty conservative forecast for Q3 because I didn’t want to disappoint my boss and the organization again. Usually at this point, my boss would schedule a phone call with me to sign off on the numbers—this was typically a formality–but instead my Finance Director and I got summoned to company headquarters to meet with my boss. He took a strip out of me about 4 inches wide. He told me that he hadn’t sent me to this job just to explain bad results–there were 100 other people he could have chosen for the job who could have done that just fine–he sent me to the job to deliver. Not only did he expect us to achieve our original objectives for Q3, he also expected us to deliver the $1M we had missed during Q2. It was very stressful and scary. My boss didn’t tell me how I should get these results, he just told me to deliver. At this point, we were almost halfway thru Q3, so we were running out of time. I did the only thing I could think about doing–I went back and lit fires under people! I told people what I expected, and I stayed after them to deliver, just like my boss was doing to me. We not only made our Q3 numbers plus the $1M shortfall from Q2, we also beat our target by $1M. In the 4 years since then, I have never missed my quarterly results. After that talk from my boss, I just refuse to let that happen. It really clarified for me that my job was to get results, no matter what it took. I know I now have a bit of a reputation as a hard ass, which is so counter to how I see myself or how people like my wife see me. But it’s because I am so determined to produce results.*

So it was with many of the bosses we interviewed. Their central focus was improving the performance of the team, or the business, or the organization, and doing so by inspiring or driving people forward. “He forced me to overcome my shyness and take the stage,” said one protégé describing a boss who literally forced him to go on stage to speak to groups. “She valued me and encouraged me to be myself,” said another protégé, “she saw things in me that I didn’t.” Yet another said about his boss, “She was hands off and trusting. She held me accountable but had faith in me.” Seeming to sum it up, a protégé observed, “She always finds something in people and pushes them.”

One boss described his role this way:

*My role is to challenge the employees to operate beyond their comfort zone, to have a dream, and make that dream a reality…. You have to invest first in building credibility, a sense that we’re in this together, that I will support you and you will support me…. Once you have credibility you have the right to ask more from people, to ask them to achieve the dream. You don’t tell them the way; you help them figure it out. You support them. And you’re always asking them to do more and helping to show them the way to their dream.*

From the other side it looked the same. That boss’s protégé described it this way:

*He continually raised the bar. He constantly challenged me to look at new ways of growing the business and supported me when I came up with creative ideas.*

 “He inspired more than taught,” is the bottom line for bosses who develop leaders this way.

**Watch Me, Listen to Me**

 If you’ve ever had a chance to watch a master practice a craft, you know you can learn a lot simply by paying attention. By watching how their bosses went about doing business, many protégés learned valuable lessons. It makes sense that anyone in a leadership role is an example because they are watched by their people and conclusions are drawn about what they do—for better or for worse. It surprised us a bit, though, to hear that setting the example and leading by example was, for some bosses (especially senior executives), a conscious developmental strategy. As one boss put it:

*I learned that it is incredibly important to lead by example. Every time I go into a room with my directs or with a large group from my organization I am very thoughtful about how I present myself and the behavior I model. I know that people will be paying attention and will imitate me. If I come across as unstructured or undisciplined, if they don’t sense that I care and am passionate and paying attention, they will think it’s okay to be that way. You can do this and be genuine; you shouldn’t pretend to be someone else. As a leader you are always on.*

Many of the executives were aware that they were always on and tried to be consistent in a variety of ways that supported development (for instance, taking the time to really listen to what their people have to say). They made a special effort to recognize both outstanding performance and growth, they modeled giving credit, they spent time on activities that developed others, and some even expected their highest performers to build the team rather than “score points.” One was adamant about “getting rid of bullies” because, he said, people won’t think you are serious if you let them remain. Another reinforced the point by saying “you have to deal with performance issues—they are obvious to everyone.”

 Many bosses combined role modeling with teaching in developing their protégés. For example, in an effort to get people to take more risks one boss not only takes risks himself but “tells stories about things I screwed up.” When people do take a risk and fail, the boss “provides air cover” by absorbing the business loss and/or taking steps to prevent the mistake from destroying the person’s reputation. Others make sure to explain why they make the decisions they make, aren’t afraid to go into the trenches, don’t make people feel stupid for asking questions, follow up and deliver on promises… and on and on, modeling what they believe is important for leaders to do. One protégé described learning how to facilitate a meeting from an exceptional boss: “She was a master at running meetings—she framed issues, got everyone involved, listened, asked questions. It caused people to think better over time.”

Some executives took role modeling and teaching a step further by inviting their protégés to shadow them as they attended business reviews or traveled to field locations. The executives took advantage of the intense time together to teach and educate their protégés about the business, company culture, and how to have a successful career. The protégés benefited by gaining a much broader perspective on both the business and what it takes to be a successful executive. One protégé recalled what a rich learning experience this was:

*He hired me into my first International role. He would take me on trips with him. He’d coach me along the way on what was going to happen. He’d have me sit right next to him at key meetings. He’d provide color commentary during the meetings. “That was a mistake. Watch what our CEO is going to do next.” And as we were leaving sites and traveling to the next location, he would sit next to me on the plane and debrief with me. He was constantly teaching, especially about context issues that were beyond where I was in my career at the time.*

**Offering Career Advice and Guidance**

Talented people who get results also get many opportunities. Deciding which ones to take or to seek out can be a challenge, and some bosses play an important role by offering career advice. “He had an offer to take a position in HR and wanted to know if he should go. I had him talk to the right people who could help him decide. He got a temporary position and liked it, so I helped him become permanent.” In another case a protégé was torn between two career opportunities, so the boss arranged for her to take temporary assignments on projects, one in each of the domains of interest.

 Giving career advice, particularly when it involves crossing organizational boundaries or consideration of future leadership roles, requires extensive knowledge of both the organization and the person. One vice president might have summarized all of the interviews with executives who emphasize this aspect of development when he said:

*The most critical thing is to get to know everyone who works directly for you as an individual. Each has a different personal situation, different family situation, a spouse with different needs and expectations. You can’t limit yourself to job talk; you have to get to know the people, their personal situations, and their career expectations. Then I can give guidance based on my 31 years of experience in the company regarding what is and is not realistic.*

What this executive highlights is that giving meaningful career advice requires understanding people’s situations well beyond the job. His experience has taught him that mobility, a key to making career moves, is deeply impacted by the family situation. If a person accepts relocation despite family concerns, unhappiness in the family can lead to work problems (especially in international assignments).

 This executive was exemplary too in his knowledge of the company. In those 31 years he had moved between functions and geographies, typically staying in a role no more than a couple of years. He began in finance, shifted to logistics, moved into sales and marketing supporting Italy initially and then the entire European Union. He moved to the U.S. for four years in global roles where he was responsible for Latin America and Asia, was promoted to director in Norway, and from there went to Brussels as he took over as leader of a large business unit operating in twelve European countries. After that and two years leading marketing for Western Europe, he was promoted to Vice President for Central and Eastern Europe. He has tremendous insights into how the organization works, how careers unfold, and which jobs offer the best career development vs. which jobs are career dead-ends. Needless to say, many bosses have neither sufficient knowledge of their people nor of their organization to offer meaningful career guidance beyond the immediate circumstances.

 In structuring the chapter around these six foci we’ve made things appear more segmented than they actually are. The executives we talked with, boss and protégé alike, confirmed that developmentally robust bosses come with various combinations of these perspectives. For example, one boss might be a role model and provide challenging assignments while another might provide career guidance and make connections.

Further, the approach can shift over time and with protégés of differing maturity. Some bosses, for example, dramatically increased their time spent developing talent later in their careers, while others were always attuned to it but did not have the experience and exposure to do more sophisticated interventions until later in their careers. Some bosses also made it clear that the maturity of their protégés affected how they approached development, with skills/flaws coaching more likely for younger protégés and challenging assignments with autonomy and accountability for the more experienced ones.

**EXCEPTIONAL BOSSES IN ACTION**

In our interviews, we were interested not just in what great bosses did to develop their protégés, but also in how they approached the relationship and how they leveraged formal HR tools and processes.

**The Boss-Protégé Relationship**

While it is clear that to develop someone effectively you must know them pretty well—their strengths and weaknesses, aspirations, prior experience—the bosses we studied varied considerably in the degree of closeness they developed with their protégés.

In many instances, bosses and protégés became personally close. Relationships were variously described as uncle, brother, mother lion, parent, with whatever connotation those kinds of relationships inspire. Some were friends but did not socialize outside of work. In several instances, they became so close that their families would get together regularly outside of work. But even in these instances, several protégés commented that they were subordinate to their boss at work. One protégé who was close friends and a bridge partner with her boss outside of work summarized it well: “I know my place. She’s an Executive Vice President and I’m not.”

Many other bosses maintained a professional distance between themselves and their subordinates. One protégé commented, “I would not use any family terms to describe my relationship with my boss. He definitely does not act like an uncle or big brother. He is the boss. He is very comfortable with hierarchy.”

But whether the relationship was very close or professionally distant or somewhere in between, we were struck by the consistency with which protégés used certain terms to describe their bosses: Respects me, trusts me, trustworthy, genuine, authentic, transparent, candid, cares about me, clear about expectations, available. In other words, while differences in style, motivation, approach, and closeness abound, there is a common core that makes the development relationship work. From the bosses’ perspectives their commitment was rarely driven by self-interest. It was the right thing to do, or part of the job, or necessary to make the team or the business successful. Because protégés understood that the motivation of their bosses was not purely self-serving, they were more open to negative and sometimes harsh feedback and the coaching or guidance that accompanied it.

**The Added Value of Formal HR Processes**

Perhaps one of our most surprising findings was how seldom these folks referred to the human resource practices aimed at talent development, including annual performance reviews, succession planning, high-potential identification, and training programs.

Each of the five companies that participated in the study has a formal performance review process that includes documentation of formal development goals. This was almost never mentioned by either the bosses or the protégés unless we explicitly asked about it during the interview. Virtually all bosses and protégés said they complied and submitted formal development goals, but these typically reflected work that the boss and protégé were already doing together, and neither had any qualms about abandoning these formal development goals if job conditions changed. One boss commented, “I generally take a pretty organic approach to development. I think about assignments that will be both challenging and interesting and motivating for the employee. But I don’t worry a lot about formally documenting development goals.” A protégé added, “We did not set formal development goals. It was more trial by fire. As long as I kept figuring out how to get the job done, he kept betting on me.”

Similarly, we heard very few direct references to succession planning or high-potential identification, except that many bosses and protégés commented that there were several critical assignments and job experiences that people needed over the course of their careers to advance into senior leadership roles, and this was something that either they explicitly discussed together or it was something they both knew and so guided the development work they did together (e.g., special assignments and projects, introductions provided to senior executives, coaching). Training was mentioned very rarely, except in one participating company, where many protégés with engineering degrees said they were encouraged by their boss to obtain an MBA, and this had been a valuable part of their development.

Development is deeply embedded in the culture of these organizations, and processes, systems and programs have evolved to support it. Perhaps the reason that so few executives and protégés mentioned formal HR processes is because they are so embedded and taken for granted. But more likely it’s because these exceptional bosses tend to see development as something that happens in real time, day to day, as events unfold. To wait for an annual review or to restrict a developmental conversation to whatever is on the competency list would not cross their minds. Indeed, some of the executives even felt that the formal review system worked against development because it determined promotions and raises and therefore led people to avoid taking risks or assignments that might hurt their ratings! “He had my back” takes on even more meaning in that environment.

**IN THE LARGER CONTEXT**

This study was focused on bosses viewed as exceptional developers of leadership talent and the leaders they had developed. But some of the questions asked of the protégés took a larger perspective and explored other bosses in their careers. Not surprisingly they came in all shapes and sizes. There were bosses who were essentially mediocre but who contributed to their development in a relatively minor way. And there were memorable bad bosses who contributed in negative ways by micromanaging, yelling at people, making people feel stupid, lying, etc. There was even one protégé who reported having two “crazy” bosses, one who was “good crazy” and included her and gave her exposure, and one who was downright mean, a “stress monkey,” who taught her how not to treat people. But as significant as each boss might have been, what struck us was how important it was to have a contrast—other bosses against which to compare the exceptional one. There is some truth to the notion that it’s only when we’ve been exposed to a variety of good and bad that we can recognize the extraordinary.

The larger picture also highlights differences among the five organizations based on their talent strategy. In some of the organizations, the talent strategy is to hire large numbers of college graduates, invest heavily in their development, and promote the best from within, with the expectation that the vast majority of executives will be individuals who have spent almost their entire career with the organization. In these organizations, where talent development was an organizational imperative, many protégés reported that they had worked for two or more exceptional talent developers over the course of their careers—although interestingly, even in these organizations, almost every protégé also had the experience of working for a very bad manager. Bosses reported little to no conflict between achieving business objectives and developing talent, rather they saw the two goals as tightly linked. There was virtually no resistance to sending people across organizational boundaries for job assignments, and solid cooperation among executives in creating developmental opportunities. Executives in these organizations know each other well and could readily talk about talent as well as share it. Typically the executives had held a wide variety of positions themselves, so they knew what assignments were potentially most powerful developmentally and why. Several executives reported that they had managed the same protégé two or more times over their careers, and had continued to track and influence the protégé’s progress over time. These are not trivial advantages if the goal is to develop leadership talent through experience, though it carries with it the disadvantage of individuals being pigeon-holed by senior managers (perhaps based on an early event that no longer defines the person). Almost every executive could identify an occasion when they had bet on the wrong protégé, and their solution was typically to restore the protégé to a smaller-scale role within the organization where the protégé could contribute effectively. One boss told us, “We have a culture of trying to save everybody. A person may be great but in a job exceeding his readiness. We work hard not to do that, so I try to temper the expectations of senior leadership that often wants to move people too fast. One person I put in a job with a lot of corporate visibility, followed by a larger organization to polish that. Their development took two steps instead of putting both together.” Another reported, “I give people a second chance. For example, one of my directs was in trouble in a plant and I was ready to fire him. Instead I found a spot for him in a different plant, and it worked out. When there is a problem, we deal with it.” While there were few direct, tangible rewards for bosses who developed talent—even in the organizations we studied where development was embedded in the culture–bosses still made development a priority, they knew it was expected of them, and they spoke of the indirect rewards of better business performance and a network of close relationships.

In other organizations, internal talent development and promotion from within were lower priorities than hiring the best possible person for the job, regardless of whether this was an insider or outsider, and there was a strong belief that significant external hiring–even into senior level positions–helps bring fresh perspectives to the business and supports a culture of innovation. Talent development often took a back seat to other considerations in staffing management and leadership positions, so not surprisingly it was rare for protégés to report that they had worked for more than one exceptional talent developer, and they seemed extremely grateful for the opportunity and the benefits they had derived when they worked for a great boss. Fewer of our great talent developer bosses in these organizations helped their protégés plot our their career or identify a developmentally useful next job assignment, perhaps because the boss himself had spent her entire career in a single business unit or function and had limited connections to senior executives in other parts of the business. If they happened to place a protégé in a stretch assignment that was beyond the protégé’s competence, their most typical solution was to exit the protégé from the company. One boss based in a European country where it’s hard to terminate employees told us, “I was very optimistic about one employee I promoted, but I have now started having conversations with him about whether our company is the right place for him. In general, I try to be very thoughtful when I make the decision about whether to exit someone or move them out of the company. But you can’t just replant someone if you can’t identify a job where you’re very confident they can be successful. You have to test the waters—are there others in the company who know them well and are interested in hiring them.”

One might imagine the differing outcomes if equally talented managers were to spend their careers in the two different environments. It suggests that if an organization is serious about developing leadership talent, it must be serious about whom it promotes into leadership roles.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Over the past several years, there has been renewed interest in leadership development circles in how to engage leaders more effectively in building the next generation of leaders. This follows on the heels of the War for Talent research, showing that talent mindset is key to leadership development inside organizations (Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod, 2001), and books by very effective CEOs who attributed much of their success to deep, personal investments in leadership development (Bossidy & Charan, 2002; Lafley, 2011; Welch, 2003). As a result many organizations, including those participating in our study, have committed to the principle of “leaders building leaders” and have tried various approaches. Books and articles have been written suggesting that the secret is to turn all leaders into teachers (Tichy, 1997; Tichy & Cardwell, 2004) or to teach leaders the 5 steps to developing the people who work for them. It would make life easier for leadership development professionals if there were a simple, single solution. But our interviews demonstrate that this is not the case. There are a variety of different ways that executives who are great talent developers approach leadership development. Each of these approaches has strengths and limitations. Each helps contribute in important ways to the development of emerging leaders. So what should a leadership development professional do to grow more great talent developers inside her organization?

First, begin nurturing great talent developers early in their career. As noted, most of the great talent developers interviewed indicated that their passion for this activity resulted from something that happened to them early in life or early in their career. Most commonly, a boss made a special investment in them that they were determined to pay forward, or they learned in a first management experience that the best way to get work done was by empowering and developing the people working for them. What might happen if eagle-eyed bosses and HR professionals were on the lookout for early career high-potentials who were learning first-hand about the power and benefit of talent development? With a little prompting and coaching, we suspect that many more of these individuals could be turned into great talent developers.

Second, don’t over invest in trying to incent bosses to become great talent developers. None of the bosses we interviewed indicated they invested in people in order to earn a bigger bonus or because they saw it as a way to get promoted (although they did not say they would object to it). Rather, they became great talent developers because helping and developing others is a strong personal value and/or because they believe that developing others is the only sustainable way to achieve outstanding business results as a leader. For example, one female executive we interviewed, who is currently a vice president in charge of a major product line, studied chemical engineering in college and, at 21, began her managerial career in charge of 54 men at a manufacturing plant. She succeeded there, and went on to achieve outstanding results in a succession of extremely challenging jobs. Despite all of her personal sacrifices and the sterling bottom-line results she has delivered, she confessed that “What makes me proudest in my 22 years with the company is the capability I have developed in others.”

Another executive said, “I’ve had people invest in me—at least four or five spent a significant amount of time on my development. I have an obligation to pay that back.” He went on to say, “I want to make this company as good as it can be. If I don’t develop and train and coach, it won’t be the best it can be.” Another senior executive noted in a similar vein that talent development is simply a business imperative: “People will only stay with a company if you’re making them more valuable faster than any other company.”

Companies that value people and development create the conditions for great talent developers and motivated protégés to flourish. But we have no evidence from our interviews that incentives directed solely at development of talent were necessary to motivate these exceptional talent developers. That said, we believe that to promote and reward managers who do not develop their people sends a message that works against embedding development in the culture. Perhaps the lesson here is that developing leadership talent should be an expectation and as such a sine qua non for progressing in the managerial ranks. Incentives might better serve the business attached to the outcome of effective talent development: improved performance. What they need most are resources (such as an adequate budget) and especially support (such as top management commitment and clarity, freedom to give people developmental opportunities and tolerate their mistakes, support for cross-boundary moves) that help them in their efforts to develop others. Surprisingly, perhaps, was that systems and processes intended to help development, things such as performance ratings and succession planning, sometimes got in the way by inhibiting risk taking or by branding people in ways that worked against them.

Third, recognize that it’s valuable for different leaders to take different approaches to developing their employees. Every organization can benefit from a mix of performance coaches, career coaches, role models, and task masters who continually elevate performance expectations. Resist the temptation to train all leaders and managers in a single step-by-step approach to developing their people. Instead, encourage each leader to find her “development voice”—that is, an approach (or combination of approaches) that they feel comfortable, confident and expert at using. Expose them to the six approaches described here, as well as others that leaders have successfully adopted inside the organization. Encourage leaders employing similar approaches to share best practices and build their expertise. We suspect that differences in approach may be related to leader temperament and style, but we are optimistic that leaders can build their expertise in their preferred approaches through training and deliberate practice.

Fourth, insofar as possible, match emerging leaders with talent developers whose approach can best aid their development. Is there a high-potential who could benefit from a higher-level perspective on the business and from learning more about how executives manage themselves? Assign her to a boss who is a great role model and teacher. Is there a high-potential who has spent most of his career in a single organizational silo and has limited exposure to corporate-level politics and executives across the company? Match him to a boss who understands how to get things done across organizational boundaries and excels at exposing his team members to key leaders in different parts of the business. Different bosses are catalysts for differenttypes of development, just as different job experiences teach different leadership lessons. So matching a high-potential employee to the right boss might be almost as potent developmentally as matching that employee to the right job assignment.

Fifth, organizations need to examine their talent strategy to determine how successfully they can lean on “leaders building leaders” to provide them with a deep leadership talent bench. In general, organizations focused on development and promotion from within will have a larger supply of great talent developers and plentiful good talent developers, and these individuals will have more knowledge and tools at their disposal to help develop their protégés. For example, they typically will have a more complete network of executive contacts across the organization and thus be better able to make connections for their protégés. They typically will have a wider range of job experiences insider the organization so will be better able to offer their protégés more complete guidance on career possibilities. The consequences for “failure” tend to be less severe in organizations that depend almost exclusively on promotion from within–demotion or lateral reassignment with the possibility of eventual rehabilitation versus termination–so they can encourage their protégés to take more risks. This is not to say that bosses can only be great talent developers in organizations with a promote-from-within talent strategy; that is far from the truth. But we did find that protégés in organizations that make a significant percentage of external hires into mid-level and senior positions typically had a narrower range of job experiences (e.g., all within one function and/or one business unit and/or one geography), had more questions about how to grow their career outside the business unit and function where they were working, and were a bit more anxious about their careers because they had seen so many colleagues crash and burn. These organizations should consider how they provide exposure to alternative career paths to their high-potentials (e.g., include a module on career management in their formal high-potential development programs, run internal career fairs to help high-potentials learn about jobs and career opportunities in different parts of the organization) and also how they can encourage these individuals to take the career risks that we know are required in order to become a competent broad business leader.

Finally, don’t expect that investment in formal HR programs and processes such as competency models and formal career development conversations will yield significant growth in the number of great talent developers. The bosses we interviewed paid little to no attention to these. We are not asserting that formal HR career development processes have no value. We know from research that organizations with good people processes outperform those that don’t on a wide array of organizational effectiveness metrics (Huselid, Becker & Beatty, 2011). But we suspect the primary value of “process and program” investments is that they make mediocre and average managers somewhat more effective at talent development by giving them a language to use, a discipline to follow, and a process that they must comply with. However, if the organization’s goal is to increase the number of truly outstanding talent developers, the organization would do better to identify those with potential to be great talent developers, help them find their “development voice” and adopt a talent strategy centered on development, as described above.

**EPILOGUE**

*"Before you become a leader, success is all about growing yourself. After you become a leader, success is all about growing others.”*

*—Jack Welch*

We went into these interviews suspecting that the immediate boss could determine whether and what a protégé learns from experience; it is hardly surprising that these suspicions were confirmed by both our boss and protégé interviews. There were, however, some surprises. First, we had not expected to find the rich variety of approaches that exceptional bosses take in developing the people who work for them, and the unique contributions each approach makes to leadership development.

Second, while we expected bosses to have a significant role in the development of their protégés, we knew that other factors play important catalytic roles as well. So it was surprising to hear from protégés just how valuable their exceptional bosses were to their development. In an informal survey at the conclusion of our protégé interviews, the protégés overwhelmingly rated their special bosses significantly higher than “any other factor that influenced your development.” These bosses made a lasting difference in the lives of their protégés, and to the future leadership of their organizations.

Last but not least, we were struck by the integrity, selflessness, and outstanding personal values of the people we interviewed. We live in an age where newspapers and the internet are filled with stories of corporate and individual greed, so it is easy to become cynical about the values of corporate leaders. The kinds of bosses we interviewed are often the unsung heroes in the corporate world who invest in the development of others because they care passionately about people, are passionately committed to helping their organizations achieve great results, and believe these two passions are simply sides of the same coin. Often they receive no special recognition or rewards for their work, but they develop others anyway because they believe it’s the right thing to do. In many organizations bosses such as these are underappreciated and underutilized resources when it comes to developing leadership talent. The wise corporation will find them, recognize them, and support their efforts by creating a fertile context for growth.

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