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What's Wrong with Leadership Training, Anyway?

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Two great books – Zengler’s “The Extraordinary Leader” and Collins’ “Good to Great” - give us a consistent picture of the successful organizational leader. Powerful as Zengler’s and Collins’ insights are, they are part of a tradition of focusing on leadership that may skew our view of organizational reality. This could cause problems for us in the 21st century.

The day-to-day work of organizations involves processing transactions, producing goods, and providing services. Clearly, some individuals must lead and manage these activities. Others must administer and account for them. However, organizational leaders very seldom actually make things, or deliver services, or account for these activities personally. Working professionals, not leaders, do the real day-to-day work.

Executive leaders do negotiate large deals. As a result, they may be involved in sales work. Sales between large organizations are complex deals. Even so, the sales work done by executives is only a small part of all the sales work that gets done. Once again, most of this sales work is done by working professionals.

Leadership work is important. However, regardless of its immense impact, on a volume basis, it is a very small percentage of the total work that is done in organizations. Inspiring and training the working professionals who do this work to be “better” leaders may not help them very much as they strive to become better doers.

At the end of the 20th century, the majority of these working professionals were baby boomers. In the 1st twenty years of the 21st century, most of working baby boomers will be replaced by their children (X-Gener) and their grandchildren (Y-Gener). Some X and Y Gener will become leaders. The vast majority of them will not. They will be doers, and stay doers during most of their working careers. They will work with others in teams to produce the goods and the services that are valued by their organization’s customers.

Employee surveys among the baby boomers, and the research on the X and Y Generations, clearly show that their view of the world is very different from that of organizational leaders. Most baby boomers, and their offspring, want to do a good job. They want to work in a respectful environment that is not highly politicized. They want to be recognized for their contributions. They want to be reasonably rewarded financially. They want the ability to balance their work and personal lives. They do not want to become leaders. They do not have the complex mix of personal values, personality dynamics, career experience, and professional development that characterizes organizational leaders.

There are clear differences between baby boomers and the X and Y Gener. The X and Y generations want a greater degree of control over their personal and working futures than baby boomers. They don’t just want it, but actually believe they need it. They have experienced the ups and downs of the financial markets,

and their impact on the personal net worth of the baby boomers as they were growing up. They have felt the consequences of the corporate mergers and downsizings on their families. They have seen the large corporate financial scandals. They don't fully believe that government bureaucracies will be effective in their regulation of these large corporations. Many of them respond to current political rhetoric by not voting, a behavior that undermines democracy. Their mental model of society tells them that they live in a more volatile time than the baby boomers.

X and Y Generations demand more personal control over the dynamics of their lives than baby boomers. They will balance the demands of work with the time needed for the rest of their lives. They will demand more immediate control over the financial details of their incomes. They do not believe that corporate or government pensions will meet their retirement needs. They are not likely to be loyal to a corporation or institution. They see themselves as free agents in their employment relationships. Actual contracts have more motivational impact on them than the psychological contracts that placed organizations or institutions in a semi-paternalistic role for many baby boomers.

Leadership training that is based on the premise that everyone should strive to be "organizational leader-like" is not likely to be effective with X and Y-Gen working professionals. They will want and need training that gives them effective interpersonal skills and consistent technical upgrading.

Such training must lead to actual behavior change on-the-job on the part of everyone in the workplace. It cannot simply explain, exhort, and hope, like much leadership training does today. Instead, like sport skill training, it must break complex interpersonal skills into learnable component behaviors that can be developed into more complex real playing ability over time. We can all learn how to play golf at some level, and even improve our golf skills from time to time, even though few of us will ever rival Tiger Woods. X and Y Generations will take a very similar approach to key interpersonal skills.

Teamwork/collaboration, developing others, communicating effectively, leading change, and the other competencies listed in Zengler's leadership model are complex composite competencies. They are composed of many different smaller behavioral competencies. Effective interpersonal skill training works at the level of these component behaviors. It allows individuals to change their behavior one piece at a time. It leads to immediate incremental positive improvement when people go back-to-the-job. Over time, and through practice, these smaller competencies come together to allow people to exhibit the more complex competencies. Incremental success is the key factor in developing solid personal confidence in the new abilities in both sports and at work.

New performance standards will have to support this type of interpersonal skill training. Respectful, non-politicized workplaces are the hope of most X and Y

Generations. Nevertheless, organizations cannot deliver them unless every manager, not just the top percentiles who are leaders, demonstrates effective communication skills in their working relationships with subordinates and peers. HR professionals and organizational leaders will not be able to accept that some managers do not, and will never, have these skills. Employee surveys done in the time of the baby boomers show that many organizations did accept this in many of their managers.

In the 21st century, HR professionals will have to set minimum effective levels for core interpersonal competencies. They will have to find ways to ensure that everyone who manages others, or leads others in teams, achieves these minimum standards. Otherwise, X and Y Gen staff will move to working environments that do achieve such managerial performance levels.

The mindset among HR professionals and trainers will have to change. Instead of training leaders, they will have to focus on bringing everyone to a certain level of interpersonal and teamwork competency. Just as there are superstars in sport, some people will go far beyond these basic performance levels. But everyone can learn to be interpersonally capable in a way that increases collaboration and teamwork among the working professionals who do the majority of the work in organizations.

Organizations that do not deal effectively with the working professionals and managers who do not acquire and demonstrate these basic levels of interpersonal skill may find themselves with fewer and fewer interpersonally competent people. The dynamics of the “war for talent” will allow the working professionals with these skills to move to an organization that has succeeded in making sure that everyone “gets and does” it.

Organizations will still need to groom a certain number of individuals to become organizational leaders. HR professionals will need to be very capable of identifying the complex personal dynamics that lead some individuals to want to, and to actually succeed at, becoming organizational leaders. These individuals will need appropriate career experiences that span an extended number of years. Organizations will have to make job progression investments in such individuals, even when there is a significant chance that some of them will leave the organization. Mentoring and truly effective coaching will play a much larger role in the career development of organizational leaders than training. In fact, the ability to mentor and to coach their own replacements will be one of the distinguishing competencies of the 21st century organizational leader.

About WCI and WCI Press

WCI Press is the publishing imprint of WCI (**W**orkplace **C**ompetence **I**nternational Limited – www.wcilltd.com). For many years, we worked as organizational improvement consultants. With the change of the century, and the expansion of the Internet, we started to publish some of our professional development material on the Internet. We also started **WCI Press**. Its mission is to publish personal and professional development material on paper and on the web. One of our first Web publications was the material used in our late 1990's workshop on competency based HR management. (See <http://www.wcilltd.com/wci%20press/WCIPresstoppage.htm>.)

As our own experience with this form of “soft” publishing grew, we realized that nature of our business had changed forever. More and more experience and expertise would be available free on the Internet to dedicated professionals. We are proud to be part of this change. But we also realized that we needed to change our own business model in response.

We have also become publishers with a mission. We are dedicated to helping working professionals become more and more capable in their chosen endeavors. Our publications are, and will be, focused on increasing the skills of working professionals. The **Competency Styles™** work books (www.competencystyles.com) address one-on-one and teamwork skills.

We start from the premise that a motivated adult is capable of self-growth. Our publications are designed to be resources for motivated adult working professionals. But we know that HR professionals, HR trainers, college and university adult educators, mediators, group facilitators, counselors, personal performance coaches and business coaches add a great deal to the growth experience of working professionals. Therefore, we support our workbooks with Facilitator Kits and facilitator materials that allow these personal and professional development professionals to incorporate the workbooks into their training, consulting and coaching activities.

About Roelf Woldring

Roelf is a former IT senior executive and senior organizational change consultant. In 2003, Roelf founded WCI Press. His graduate work was in psychology of the workplace. Roelf writes on software development, organizational change, and personal / professional development.

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