

## Article by: Richard C. Huseman, Ph.D.

Richard Huseman is a consultant, executive coach and professional speaker. He builds upon his years of university experience in business schools (having served as a professor, department head and dean).

Dick has authored 13 books and written more than 100 articles and professional papers for journals and for national and international professional meetings. In addition, Dick draws on his years of experience as an independent board director where he has served on audit committees and chaired compensation and human capital committees.

Dick was the founding editor of the Corporate Knowledge Center at the University of Southern California and served as Global Manager for Executive Knowledge and Leadership Development for Mobil Oil.



### the issue:

Do the leadership development opportunities provided by most organizations actually make leaders more effective?

## The Role of Coaching In Leadership Development

For the last 30 years, much of my professional life has been focused on leadership development. Early in my career, I developed and directed a two-week leadership program for 15 years. As dean of a business school, we crafted an Executive MBA program with a major emphasis on leadership. Also, throughout the 30-year period, I served as a faculty speaker at a number of leadership development programs at major universities throughout the United States and in several foreign countries.

**My thinking evolved.** All of this exposure to leadership development has caused my thinking about leadership development to evolve. I now question whether the focus of many of those programs was and continues to be appropriate. It is now my belief that much of what passes for leadership development today is a waste of time, or at least, not the best use of a leader's time and an organization's money.

**Let me explain.** You are a leader (be it a new supervisor, a mid-level manager or a senior-level executive). You are tapped by your organization to attend a leadership development training program. It could be a half-day, full-day, weekend or perhaps a two week-long event. During the program, you are subjected to a parade of speakers (like me) who offer advice, guidance and

techniques to transform you into a better leader when you return to your job.

When you complete the program, you are usually given a chance to offer your feedback on the program. The questions focus on how effective the speakers were, whether you liked the facility, and what you thought of the food. In fact, most of these program evaluation forms are more focused on evaluating the coordination of the program rather than whether you, as a leader, learned anything that might improve your skills once you are back on the job.

**What does this mean?** Well, in my opinion, it means that the speakers have an opportunity to receive feedback on how they can improve – likewise, the program coordinators and even the cooks improve, if they take the feedback to heart. But, the leader is still left without any real way to evaluate whether or not the program helped them grow in their roles. With traditional leadership training programs, you, as a leader, don't have the opportunity to get feedback about whether the program actually made you a better leader. While many participating leaders may give lip service to how much they learned during a program, there is never any real proof that this is true.



## What do leaders say is most important to their development?

Stretch assignments and anonymous direct feedback contribute far more to the growth and development of leaders than most traditional development methods.

I don't know about you, but, to me, this doesn't seem to be a very effective approach to leadership development. After years of observing leadership development programs and talking to hundreds of successful leaders about what contributed to the development of their leadership skills, my thinking has evolved to this – leaders grow and develop primarily through two major sources:

- **Stretch assignments, and**
- **By receiving honest, anonymous feedback on their leadership from those they work with.**

### HOW LEADERS REALLY DEVELOP

**Stretch Assignments:** A few years ago, I served as Global Manager for Executive Knowledge for Mobil Oil. In that role, I conducted a leadership development audit where I interviewed the top 30 leaders at Mobil. One of my questions to them during the audit was, "As you look back on your career, what contributed most to your development as a leader?" There were many answers:

- "My first assignment at world headquarters."
- "My first international assignment."
- "Heading up a major project to help turn-around a troubled division."

Almost all of the answers pointed to some type of "stretch assignment." Stretch assignments are those challenging assignments a leader is offered that push them beyond their current skill and or experience levels. They "force" a leader to learn new skills that they have not utilized in the past. At first, most leaders are anxious about new stretch assignments. But, somehow most of them succeed and, in the process, become better leaders.

About this same time, I ran across a study done by the McKinsey & Company called "Winning the War for Talent." Their findings confirmed my theory. They asked the top 200 executives at 77 large U.S.-based companies, "What is most important to your development as a leader?" The top three responses in terms of importance to leadership development were:

## Coaching at Alegent Health



Scott Wooten  
Chief Financial Officer  
Alegent Health Systems  
Omaha, Nebraska

I am a believer in coaching for leadership development. Prior to becoming CFO at Alegent, I worked with an executive coach (Dick Huseman). The organization I was with prior to Alegent offered me an opportunity to work with Dick as a coach and I accepted right away. I wanted to play at the top of my game and figured if Tiger Woods and other world-class athletes use coaches, I should, too.

As part of my employment contract at Alegent, I negotiated to continue my coaching work with Dick as I took on the challenges of my new role as CFO. After I had settled into the job for a time, I came to realize that there were several other leaders on my finance team who could really benefit from coaching as part of their leadership development. Working together, we came up with an agreement that would have Dick and his team coach 30 of my finance team leaders over a six-month period. The coaching sessions would help with each individual leader's development and also grow the team across the board.

My team's development needs were so varied that traditional leadership development programs wouldn't do the job. With Dick's coaching, I knew that each leader was going to get what he or she needed to be a stronger and more effective member of our Alegent Finance Team. The online survey and feedback that Dick and his team provided was invaluable, especially to a group of finance people who are really driven by data. The coaching wasn't just talk: it was a very focused approach to making all of us more effective at what we do as leaders with our individual teams and with one another.

I was so impressed with what was happening with the coaching that I introduced Dick to the hospital administrators in our system. Two of these administrators jumped on the coaching bandwagon right away: Lakeside Hospital and Mercy Hospital. Both of these hospitals had patient satisfaction ranked in the 95th-plus percentile at the time the coaching started. While both Lakeside and Mercy earned these extremely high levels of patient satisfaction, they are two totally different hospitals, but both received high value from the coaching. (continued) =>

## Coaching at Alegant Health (cont.)

Lakeside Hospital is our newest hospital. As one of most technologically integrated hospitals in the world today, Lakeside is an 80-plus bed acute care facility that has earned a total of 156 National Excellence in Healthcare Patient Perception awards. When Dick and his team began coaching 24 of Lakeside's leaders, it wasn't to "fix" anything. It was to keep the leadership team at Lakeside focused on continuing to improve and playing at the "top of their game."

Mercy Hospital's origins go back to 1887 and, today, it is a 284-bed acute care facility. Mercy has also earned numerous patient satisfaction and clinical performance awards. Shortly, before inviting Dick and his coaching team to work with 25 of their leaders, Mercy had achieved Magnet status (the "ultimate" benchmark for consumers to measure the quality of nursing care they receive).

In both cases, the 49 hospital leaders were engaged in coaching to help those facing new and challenging roles (stretch assignments) and those who needed to be able to continue their leadership development in the high-stress environment typical of most hospitals.

Not only was the coaching well-received by the leaders involved, but Lakeside and Mercy's administrators learned (as I did) that the use of coaching amongst a broad group of leaders in an organization can uncover hidden issues and challenges that we were initially unaware of. In my case, I was able to address several issues raised during the coaching that benefited our entire organization almost immediately. In addition, the feedback from the coaching sessions has been helpful in our succession planning process.

Recently, I invited Dick and his coaches back to do another round of coaching for our finance leaders over a period of six months. Once again, we made use of Dick's online survey and our results this time around were far improved. We could see how far we had come since we initially started the coaching and were all that more engaged to keep developing further as leaders.

As someone who has worked with an executive coach for the past five years and has had the opportunity to see what coaching has meant to some 86 leaders at Alegant Health Systems, I strongly support coaching as a delivery system for leadership development, especially for healthcare leaders. ✂



- Special project assignments
- The way jobs are structured
- Speed of job rotation/advancement

Again, the top three response categories fall under the umbrella of stretch assignments. Leaders find stretch assignments "very important or absolutely essential" to their growth and development as leaders.

It should be pointed out that while most organizations do a relatively good job in providing stretch assignments to their developing leaders, there have been a few occasions when I have run across leaders who were offered stretch assignments and then left stranded... some even derailed. While stretch assignments can be excellent development tools, they can go sour if leaders are not given enough support to help them meet the challenges they face.

**Feedback From Team Members, Peers and Supervisors:** The second effective means of leadership development is, in my opinion, offering leaders anonymous feedback from those they work with as to their leadership effectiveness. It is the feedback that leaders receive about their performance and effectiveness as a leader that has one of the more profound effects on their future development as a leader.

Why is this? Your own self-perception of how effective you are as the leader of your team (and others you work with) is important. However, self-perception can only go so far. If you have a false or distorted sense of your effectiveness with your team, how will you ever know this without feedback? It is only when you know the perceptions of others that you move beyond self-perception to **self-awareness** – a more complete and accurate understanding of how your behavior and actions are perceived by those you would lead. When it comes to work relationships, you can only be as effective as **others** perceive you to be. As such, anonymous feedback from direct reports, peers and supervisors is critical to a leader's development and growth.



## Executive & Performance Coaching

For more information about executive and development coaching programs, please contact Richard Huseman at [rhuseman@richardchuseman.com](mailto:rhuseman@richardchuseman.com) or [www.richardchuseman.com](http://www.richardchuseman.com).



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### COACHING AS THE PREMIER APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

In the evolution of my professional career, I moved away from conducting leadership development training programs. Occasionally, I will take on a keynote or motivational speaking engagement but, I no longer accept offers to provide traditional leadership development training to a group of leaders sitting in a room. I feel it is a waste of my client's money and the participant's time. Instead, I focus on my work as a coach, which I believe is the best delivery system for leadership development.

#### The Coaching Process:

- I. **Data Gathering:** As a coach, one of the first things I do is gather feedback on how the leader I am coaching is perceived by those he or she works with. I conduct an online leadership assessment survey completed by their direct reports. I often do phone interviews with several of their peers and supervisors. I do all I can to get a solid, objective picture of how effective the leader I am working with really is in their job, as perceived by those they work with.
- II. **Self-Assessments:** At the same time, I have the leader complete several self-assessment instruments so that they can gain insight into their own self-perception of their leadership approach. For example, leaders assess their major strength(s) as communicators, their willingness to take risk, whether they are convergent or divergent thinkers, etc.
- III. **Building Self-Awareness:** I combine the two: aligning the client's self-perceptions with the feedback from others he or she works with to achieve self-awareness of current strengths, and perceived opportunities for leadership development.
- IV. **Coaching Action Plan:** It is from this foundation of self-awareness that I then coach clients to construct a strong Coaching Action Plan to respond to the feedback they receive that will enhance their leadership skill and effectiveness.
- V. **Continuing Coaching:** Once a Coaching Action Plan is in place, I offer the leaders feedback, feedback, and more feedback on their progress in order to keep them on track to meet their development goals. I don't know who said it first but feedback really is the breakfast of champions.
- VI. **Coaching for Stretch Assignments:** For those leaders who are either in or taking on stretch assignments, I offer them support and guidance (based on the same foundation of feedback) as they work through the challenges they are facing – helping to ensure their successful completion of the assignment and their continued development.

It is interesting to note that in the same McKinsey & Company study mentioned earlier, another of the leadership development approaches that leaders identified as being "very important to their development" was "coaching and feedback." But, critically, McKinsey also noted that organizations usually do a relatively poor job in providing this type of leadership development to their leaders.

#### FINAL NOTE

When it comes to leadership development, I now increasingly question the notion that gathering large groups of leaders in a room and parading a group of speakers in front of them as an effective means of leadership development (though, it can still be a good approach to launch a new initiative, promote alignment, or create excitement among the entire leadership team). It is my strong conviction that, when it comes to helping leaders grow and develop, stretch assignments coupled with one-on-one coaching and feedback offers the greatest potential. A coach can help leaders in tough stretch assignments and also increase their self-awareness and enhance their leadership skills through the feedback they receive from those who work with them. ✕