Experience-centric leadership development process:
challenges and way forward for organisations in India

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Abstract: Various academic scholars from leadership development discipline have found that experience-centric approach, compared to formal education and training-based approach is more effective for grooming organisational leaders. The world of academe offers plenty of insights on experience-centric leadership development process. In spite of such rich insights, business organisations have stuck to formal training and education-based approach for grooming leaders. This paper has briefly discussed key findings of ‘Lessons of Experience, India’ (LOEI) study, which offers insights on how leaders in India learn to lead. The author in this paper has proffered a few suggestions to organisations that might help organisations to effectively deal with the challenges an organisation may encounter, while leveraging on the job assignments for leadership development. He has also proposed a few pointers for creating a learning ecosystem that synergistically blends both education and training-based formal and experience-centric informal approaches to groom effective organisational leaders.

Keywords: leadership development; experience-centric leadership development; developmental experiences in India; learning to lead; talent development; grooming organisational leaders.


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1 Introduction

Despite huge investments to develop leadership capability (O’Leonard, 2014), organisations are found to be facing the brunt of leadership crisis (Hou, 2010; Shyamsunder et al., 2011). In recent times, organisational leaders have invariably
acknowledged that developing internal leadership capability has been their biggest challenge (van Velsor et al., 2013).

Leadership crunch is being more acutely experienced by organisations in emerging countries including India, as they strive to grow fast in a hyper-competitive business environment. These economies offer relatively more opportunities to organisations for growth compared to developed economies.

Though leadership development has all along been a priority for business organisations, yet the widely prevalent formal training and education-based competency building approach has not been as effective as it should be (Carroll et al., 2008; Probert and Turnbull, 2011; McCall, 2010a; van Velsor et al., 2013) for grooming organisational leaders.

McCall (2004, p.127) has found, “the role played by training and other formal programs is relatively modest in comparison to other kinds of experiences”. McCall (2004, p.127; 2010a, p.3) has further pointed out that the primary source of learning to lead is experience. Leaders learn to lead primarily from ‘challenging assignments, good and bad relationships, and adverse experiences at work and in one’s personal life’ [van Velsor et al., (2013), p.456]. Wilson and Hoole (2011, p.7) have noted that, “to produce more leaders… the locus of development must shift from the classroom to the workplace”.

In spite of such telling insight, organisations have rarely deployed experience-centric approach for grooming leaders. Most of them are stuck primarily with formal training and education-based approach. This paper intends to close the gap between the worlds of scholarship and practice by discussing the opportunities, challenges and way forward for organisations to put the insights on experience-centric leadership development process, available in the world of academe, in practice.

1.1 Organisation of the paper

This paper is organised into five broad sections. The first section primarily focuses on how experience-centric leadership development process has been gaining growing academic interest. In spite of acknowledged ‘developmental’ potency of on the job assignment, organisations seem to be unwilling to embrace experience centric approach and are stuck to formal education and training approach to leadership development.

The second section elaborates why developmental experiences are powerful in terms of helping executives learn leadership lessons. Developmental experiences nudge executives to experiment and explore new ways of dealing with novel situations and reflect on the learning.

The third section presents the findings of ‘Lessons of Experience, India’ (LOEI) study that provide insights into how leaders in India learn to lead. This section presents the key developmental experiences in Indian organisational context and lessons learned thereof.

The author in the fourth section describes the challenges an organisation may face, while making a shift from formal education and training-based approach to experience-centric approach of grooming leaders.

The fifth section of the paper is devoted to how organisations must create an ecosystem that facilitates learning from experience. The author in this section discusses various aspects of the learning ecosystem.

The concluding section summarises the core arguments of the paper.
2 Setting the context

2.1 Growing academic interest in experience-centric leadership development process

Formal education and training-based approach to leadership development has been found to be inadequate to groom organisational leaders. Academic scholars have been urging organisations to leverage the potency of developmental experience for grooming leaders that should supplement formal training and education programs, which are in practice to groom leaders. This section elaborates it further.

Organisations generally assume leadership as a set of behavioural attributes. Hence, they focus on developing pre-identified behavioural attributes (competencies) through various interventions (McCall, 2009). Organisations primarily rely on formal training interventions to make organisational leaders inculcate pre-defined leadership behaviour well documented in their leadership competency frameworks (Carroll et al., 2008). This process of grooming leaders is simple, generic, abstract and a-contextual, which is based on the premise that a leader with specific behavioural attributes will be effective irrespective of context. Consequently, formal off-the-job interventions, such as coursework and training are popular in organisations (London and Mone, 1999).

The above-mentioned approach offers a few key advantages to organisations such as having a common patois and an integrated system of people practices centred on a set of attributes. However, relying on a set of pre-defined competencies (behavioural attributes) may be ineffective as they are identified on the criteria that have helped the organisation to succeed in the past. These criteria may not be relevant in the future (Carroll et al., 2008). Hence, organisations in all likelihood may miss out on the skills and competencies that they may need to succeed in the future (Carroll et al., 2008). Generic behavioural attributes may be of limited help to organisations, as the effectiveness of leadership is influenced and constrained by the context. Formal education and training-based approach may not effectively leverage the variability of employees’ experience, relationships, and learning agility that impact the development process significantly (McCall, 2010a).

Further, this approach is restrictive as it facilitates grooming of ‘specific’ kind of leaders, thereby limiting the diversity. Finally, this approach ignores implicit, but more salient cultural and psychological processes of learning and development (Probert and Turnbull, 2011).

Leadership development process is a highly complex, long-term, emergent and invisible phenomenon (Conger, 1993), which prepares individuals and collectives to engage effectively in ‘leading and following’ interactions (DeRue and Meyer, 2014), leadership roles and processes (McCauley et al., 1998).

Socio-cultural context has been found to have significant influence on both learning process and outcome(s) (Wilson and Yip, 2010). Leadership development process, hence, is context-specific. Various scholars (e.g., Sinha, 1995; Lam et al., 2012) have established that societal culture impacts leadership effectiveness and shapes leadership style. van Velsor et al. (2013, p.471) have aptly pointed out, “though leadership development system may be similar across organizations, the impacts of those systems on leaders appear to differ across cultures to some extent”.

Leadership, as a process equips people with right qualities to work together, solve problems and leverage their collective wisdom to face challenges (Hooijberg et al.,
Hence, the leadership development process can be more effective, if one leverages ‘experiences’ one encounters in workplaces (Gunter and Ribbins, 2002). On the whole, ‘experience makes a much better foundation for development than do competency models’ [McCall, (2010a), p.8].

“On-the-job experience should be the driving force in development and not just an option among equals that include training, mentoring, rotational programs, coaching and development programs of various types.” [McCall, (2010a), p.7]

Academic interest in experience-centric learning and leadership development has gained momentum since late eighties as competency focussed approach was found to be deficient in imbibing effective leadership behaviour (Hays and Abernathy, 1980; Revans, 1986).

Executives going through the experiences, which are embedded in the context, would develop leadership competencies, specific to the organisational contexts. Leaders with context-specific competencies, are in likelihood would be more effective compared to a leader with generic leadership competencies.

3 What makes (on-the-job assignments) experiences developmental?

Developmental experiences help executives experiment, explore and reflect on the learning. Organisations need to leverage this subtle potency of experiences to groom leaders. This section dwells on what makes experiences so developmental.

Individuals going through developmental experiences are forced to:

a acquire and use skills they may not have
b withstand the stress of achieving the desired outcomes, possibly in a new situation
c demonstrate necessary relational competences to confront inter-personal or other conflicts (McCall, 1994).

Lombardo and McCall (1983, p.55) found that leaders develop their leadership qualities when they deal with adversity and mistakes, observe role models, and are exposed to variety of experiences. Scholars (McCauley et al., 1994; Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984) have identified factors like novelty, unexpected nature; challenge, responsibility, high stakes, complexity, pressure, and a sense of choice (control) that characterise developmental experience. Assignments that are non-routine and uniquely different from what one is used to, provide immense opportunities for developing leadership qualities (DeRue and Wellman, 2009; McCall et al., 1988; McCauley et al., 1994; van Velsor et al., 2010).

Developmental experiences encourage individuals to experiment new ways of dealing with the situation and reflect on the learning. The process of continual reflection and experimentation provides greater developmental opportunities compared to formal learning (Day, 2001).

3.1 Learning from experience through reflection

Just going through an experience without reflecting about possible learning rarely leads to personal development. Reflection helps an individual to derive meaning from any
Experience-centric leadership development process

experience. Ligon and Hunter (2010, p.28) have rightly argued, ‘experiences, in and of themselves, do not promote effective leadership as much as the meaning that individuals infer from such events’ (Italics in original). Individuals may infer different personal meanings from same or similar experiences, and therefore, learn different lessons.

Hence, Ligon and Hunter (2010) have emphasised on ‘structured reflection process’ (p.28), which facilitates “transfer of lessons learned from experiences into day-to-day leadership activities” [Ligon and Hunter, (2010), p.28, Italics added]. Not all individuals can naturally reflect without guidance. The ability to reflect also varies from person to person (Metcalfe and Shimamura, 1994). Individuals need to be encouraged to reflect and introspect in a systematic manner.

4 How do leaders in India really learn to lead?

This section presents the findings of a study conducted jointly by Tata Management Training Centre (TMTC) and the Centre for Creative Leadership (CCL) to uncover how leaders in India learn to lead. This section also elaborates on the implication of these findings for the grooming of organisational leaders in India. Challenging assignments and role modelling were found to be two significant developmental that facilitated the learning of key leadership lessons.

For this study, 71 organisational leaders from eight different Indian conglomerates across industry sectors were interviewed. Each interviewee was asked to think of at least three significant experiences that have influenced her or him to become a leader she or he has become. The follow up question was what she or he learned from each of these experiences. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Each of the five members of the project team coded each transcript independently for events (experiences) and lessons using a codebook, which was developed from scratch.

Organisational leaders mentioned of 24 distinct developmental experiences (excluding coursework and training), which facilitated learning of 29 unique leadership lessons.

4.1 Significant developmental experiences in Indian context

The 24 developmental experiences (excluding coursework and training) can be clustered in four distinct categories:

a assignment (work context)
b hardship
c other people including role models
d other events that include personal experiences, early life experiences.

The top five frequently mentioned developmental experiences were:

a role model in organisational context (11%)
b new initiative (10%)
c fix it/turnaround (8%)
The top five frequently mentioned developmental experiences in terms of percentage of lessons learned from each developmental experience were:
a. role model in organisational context (10%)
b. new initiative (10%)
c. fix it/turnaround (8%)
d. early life experience (7%)
e. early job-related experience (7%).

New initiative was found to be the most intense developmental experience in Indian context (2.95), followed by early life experience (2.80), role model in organisational context (2.73), fix it/turnaround (2.42) and lateral/cross functional move (2.20). Five most significant developmental experiences are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Five significant developmental experiences in Indian context

| New initiatives: | Experiences related to starting something from the scratch by seizing the opportunities available. It includes any green field projects, introducing new products, processes or system. |
| Early life experiences: | Experiences one has gone through during early phase of life outside the work context (e.g., in schools and colleges). |
| Role models: | Colleagues observe and emulate people, who they acknowledge as their role models. In the process, they learn significant leadership lessons. |
| Fix it/turnaround assignments: | The person is made responsible for assignments that fix problems or turnaround a situation. |
| Lateral/cross-functional moves: | Progression between functions, lines of business or departments. It may also entail changes in responsibilities within the existing position, role or function. |

In different socio-cultural contexts, “event categories are weighed differently, new event types emerge and other event types are absent” [Wilson and Yip, (2010), p.52]. This study also revealed four developmental experiences unique to Indian context, namely:
a. being empowered and trusted
b. working with non-Indian multinationals
c. rural assignments
d. dealing with labour unions.
4.2 Lessons learned from developmental experiences

The 29 lessons, which can be clustered into three distinct categories:

a lessons related to self-awareness and understanding
b lessons related to developing, nurturing and managing relationship
c lessons related to gaining business and organisational insights.

The top 10 leadership lessons in terms of frequency of mention by the executives were:

a becoming confident (9%)
b becoming aware of self (7%)
c understanding life goals (6%)
d execution and operational savvy (6%)
e managing and motivating subordinates (6%)
f management and leadership (5%)
g technical aspects of running a business (5%)
h innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship (5%)
i how to gain information for problem solving and decision-making situations (4%)
j developing subordinates (4%).

Five most frequently learned lessons as mentioned by organisational leaders are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Five most frequently learned lessons in Indian context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Becoming confident:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing belief in oneself, becoming self-reliant, or/and developing can-do attitude.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Becoming aware of self:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining self-knowledge about one’s own talent, competencies, weaknesses, emotional needs, and values. It also includes developing an understanding of one’s influence on others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Understanding life goals:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realisation of one’s deepest urge, need and life goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Developing operation and execution savviness:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to get work done through others, giving attention to operational details and the needs of the people with whom they work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Managing and motivating subordinates:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to manage and motivate others by making decisions, setting goals, empowering subordinates, building a team, and recognising and rewarding effort.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 lists out frequently learned lessons from each of significant (powerful) experiences in Indian context.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key events</th>
<th>Frequently learned lessons in Indian context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fix it/turnaround assignments</td>
<td>Executing effectively, innovation, creativity and risk taking; building a team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in job scope</td>
<td>Managing and motivating subordinates; understanding technical aspects of running business; execution and operational savvy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New initiative (starting something from scratch)</td>
<td>Becoming confident; innovation, creativity and risk taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosses and superiors (role modelling)</td>
<td>Managing and motivating subordinates; becoming confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal experience</td>
<td>Becoming aware of self, becoming confident, valuing integrity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Lessons of Experience, India Study

4.3 Implications for developing leaders in Indian organisations

Challenging assignments and role modelling were found to be the most powerful learning experiences as they together constituted around fifty per cent of the total instances of developmental experiences and facilitated the learning of more than 65% of the leadership lessons. Less than three per cent of the leadership lessons were learned from coursework and training. These findings are consistent with Wright’s (2010) findings that challenging assignments are rated higher than job rotations for leader development in Asian countries.

Secondly, as reporting managers and other significant superiors are acknowledged as role models, they should mentor and coach their junior colleagues. This finding is consistent with Smith’s (2010) advocacy for mentoring as talent development tool for executives with high potential in Asian organisations.

Thirdly, Indian leaders were found to learn leadership from their personal experiences. Hence, the interaction between the mentor/coach and the protégé may provide a psychologically safe platform to build on personal experiences to make the protégé aware of self and gain confidence.

Given these key findings, it is desirable that organisations in India should “provide their managers with many tracks of experience to run on, and that managers must take the initiative to select and run on tracks that are most suitable for their own development” [Wilson and Hoole, (2011), p.5].

5 Organisational challenges in implementing experience-centric leadership development process

McCall (2010a) has passionately advocated for experience-driven leadership development process. Ligon and Hunter (2010, p.28) have, however, cautioned organisations that “simply relying on experience alone to develop leaders is a costly gamble”.

McCauley et al. (2010) have judiciously argued that leadership development system should be a portfolio of challenging assignments, coaching and mentoring and classroom-based course work. Organisations desirous of embracing experience-centric approach to groom leader should be ready to deal with a few challenges they may encounter on the way. The challenges emanate from:

a. limited/partial understanding of how leaders actually learn from the experience
b. how to identify (target) challenging assignment that addresses developmental needs of the executive
c. how to prepare executives emotionally and cognitively to learn desired lessons from the targeted experience
d. how to balance performance expectations from and developmental needs of an executive
e. how to imbibe leadership lessons one may learn from developmental experiences such as personal crisis, mistakes or early life experience that cannot be simulated for developmental purposes.

The following section elaborates each of these challenges.

5.1 Challenges for organisations

The first set of challenges as faced by organisations is about the lack of or limited understanding about how leaders actually learn from experience. Hezlett (2010, p.56) has argued, 

“More knowledge is needed to confidently predict when and what a particular person will specifically learn from a specific experience. Without this knowledge practitioners’ ability to help organizations develop talent by methodically assigning experiences to leaders is limited.”

Given the complexity of work experience, “learning from such experience is unlikely to be a straightforward endeavor, especially ‘in the wild’ (on the job in organizational context), where there are compelling demands on individual cognitive and socio-emotional resources” [Day, (2010), p.41].

The second set of challenges is related to how to select challenging assignments. Experience-driven learning process ambiguous as “certain experiences matter more than others because of the challenges they present and different kinds of experiences teach different lessons” [McCall, (2010a), p.4]. No specific learning objective can be associated with any experience with certainty.

McCall (2004) has pointed out that “people do not automatically learn from experience. The learner may come away with nothing, the wrong lessons or only some of what they might have learned” (p.128). He further emphasised, “different individuals benefit differentially from the same experience depending on prior experience, what they already know, their own learning style and whether the context around the experience promote learning” (2004, p.128).

Without guidance and focus, neither the learner nor the organisation could be confident of what could possibly be learned from an experience. “Unless the assignments
are chosen carefully to build an individual’s ability, it can be a very inefficient and incomplete approach to development” [McCall, (2010a), p.8].

The third set of challenges is about learner’s readiness to learn. An executive’s ability and openness to learn something from an experience varies because of variations in the cognitive capability, learning orientation, ability to reflect and dealing with ambiguities. Weick (1993) has found that individuals who tend to be cautious and sceptical with low confidence tend to give up curiosity as it may make them anxious and heighten their insecurities. On the other hand, the overconfident individuals may not be eager enough to learn as they tend to believe that they already know what there is to know. When individuals face extremely challenging assignments, the probability of learning from assignment takes a dip (Boud et al., 1985; Sweller, 1994; DeRue and Wellman, 2009). Hence, identifying appropriate stretch assignment for an executive with specific developmental needs is salient.

The fourth set of challenges is related to balancing both performance expectations from and developmental needs of the executive. Organisations rarely give primacy to employees’ development over organisational performance (Ericsson, 2009). Focusing on employee development only without due attention to organisational performance may potentially affect business results (Bunderson and Sutcliffe, 2003). Hence, organisations need to find ways to balance both employee development and organisational performance.

Finally, not all developmental experiences such as mistakes, personal crisis, early life experiences, and personal experiences can be simulated in an organisational context. By implications, organisations need to develop some other means to make individuals learn from people, who have gone through such experiences.

6 Way forward: implementing experience-centric leadership development process

Organisations desirous of going ahead with experience-based leadership development process must craft an ecosystem that effectively addresses the challenges mentioned in the previous section. This section discusses the way forward for organisations intending to leverage ‘developmental experiences’ for grooming leaders. The ecosystem must focus on:

a identifying assignment in a targeted manner, in spite of limited understanding of how a learner actually learns from an experience

b preparing executives emotionally and cognitively to learn the desired lessons from the assigned experience
c guiding and supporting the learner to experiment, explore new ways of doing things and reflect on learning, if any
d provisioning for psychologically safe environment that tolerates genuine mistakes, provides access to genuine and timely feedback and opportunities for guided reflection and introspection through mentorship and coaching.
Organisations should take the leap of faith and embrace experience-centric leadership development process as what is known is enough. In response to Hezlett’s (2010) apprehension, McCall (2010b) responded by arguing:

What is known so far about experience is adequate to provide a reasonable understanding to develop experience-centric leadership development process by “bolstering certain areas to make the edifice more complete and usable.” (p.62)

As the elements that make experiences ‘developmental’ are known, experiences can be manoeuvred to enrich suitably depending on the developmental needs of an executive (McCall, 2009). Once an organisation decides to leverage experiences for grooming leaders, due attention should be given to:

a identifying executives with potential and learning orientation
b selecting targeted developmental experiences
c tracking developmental progress through regular developmental discussions
d providing support to executives to experiment, explore and reflect on learning by crafting an appropriate learning ecosystem.

Education and formal training programs have their utility. Hence, such formal interventions should be blended with developmental experiences for maximising the opportunities for development.

6.1 Identifying executives with potential and learning orientation

Learning from experience is significantly enhanced when individuals take the responsibility of their own learning and development proactively (DeRue and Wellman, 2009; Dragoni et al., 2009). The personal attributes that influence the learning process and outcomes are

a learning orientation (Bunker and Webb, 1992; McCall, 1994), learning agility (Lombardo and Eichinger, 2000), ability to learn and learning style (Ohlott, 2004)
b inclination to reflect, and introspect (Daudelin, 1996)
c openness to others’ viewpoints, perspectives, criticisms and seeking feedback proactively (Bunker and Webb, 1992; McCall, 1994)
d positive and proactive attitude toward problems and opportunities like viewing mistakes and failures as opportunities for learning (Dechant, 1990)
e orientation toward mindful engagement (DeRue and Ashford, 2010).

Besides, timing of assigning developmental experience to executives is critical to learning from experience. Individuals tend to be more receptive to feedback and open to experimentation and learning when they are transitioning from one role to another role (Ashford et al., 2007). The probability of executive acquiring new skills is high during this phase, which should be considered while identifying an executive.
Organisations employ various assessment tools and performance data to identify executives with potential and ensure their readiness to learn from experience. These identified executives should be guided to be cognitively and emotionally ready to learn from experience.

6.2 Selecting targeted developmental experiences

In an ideal scenario, organisations should leverage real time on the job assignments for grooming leaders. There are plenty of real time experiences available in organisations, which are fraught with complexity, challenge and ambiguity, and hence, pregnant with developmental opportunities.

Alternatively, organisations may opt to link key organisational challenges to developmental experiences in a systematic manner. The top management team with learning leaders may jointly identify leadership challenges embedded in strategic initiatives undertaken by organisations. They may draft in talented budding executives with leadership potential to take up these assignments, with mentoring and coaching support from senior leaders. They should guide these executives to reflect on their learning.

The third alternative is action-learning projects (Revans, 1986). If an action-learning project is treated as learning platform by an organisation, it may bring meaningful challenges for an individual. However, it ceases to be learning experience, if the executive undertaking it is under stress to primarily solve the problem in a time-bound manner. The executive is not offered any legroom to experiment, reflect and learn. If organisations do not tolerate genuine mistakes committed by executives while experimenting, they may not explore and experiment. If they learn something from the assignment without due experimentation, exploration and reflection, it may primarily be incidental or accidental.

Along with any or some of above-mentioned alternatives, organisational leaders may like to refer to the findings of systematic studies conducted to uncover how leaders learn from experience. LOEI study may be of use to organisational leaders in India to select the experience (refer Table 3) that offers maximum opportunities to learn desired lesson(s) in Indian context.

Executives may also proactively seek out challenging assignments and other experiences that might “maximize the opportunity to learn specific skills” [van Velsor et al., (2013), p.472]. Leadership map (Yost and Plunkett, 2010b) may be of help to identify and self-assign experiences for developing desired leadership qualities, while keeping one’s readiness for the experience in mind. The leadership map presented in table IV below is an adapted version of leadership map originally proposed by Yost and Plunkett (2010a) and is based on the findings of LOEI study.

This map should guide executives to identify appropriate developmental experience(s), and relationships, keeping the qualities they desire to develop in Indian context. The column under learning capabilities mentions a few attributes, which is useful to evaluate one’s readiness to learn from experience(s).
Table 4  Leadership map for Indian context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key experiences</th>
<th>Leadership competencies (qualities)</th>
<th>Key relationships/other people</th>
<th>Learning capabilities (individual readiness)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Fix it/turnaround</td>
<td>• Demonstrating confidence</td>
<td>• Bosses</td>
<td>• Cognitive capability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increase in job scope</td>
<td>• Being aware of self</td>
<td>• Various key stakeholders</td>
<td>• Openness to feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• New initiative</td>
<td>• Understanding life goals</td>
<td>• Role models</td>
<td>• Reflective capability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(starting from scratch)</td>
<td>• Developing subordinates</td>
<td>• Elders in the society and family</td>
<td>• Comfort with ambiguity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lateral/</td>
<td>• Managing and motivating subordinates</td>
<td>• Significant others</td>
<td>• Emotional resilience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cross-functional move</td>
<td>• Gaining information</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Open to experiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Early job experiences</td>
<td>• Being execution and operational savvy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dealing with labour unions*</td>
<td>• Understanding technical aspects of running a business</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Rural assignments*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Being empowered</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and trusted*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Working with</td>
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<tr>
<td>non-Indian</td>
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<tr>
<td>MNCs*</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: *Unique experiences in Indian context.

Source: Lessons of Experience, India study

6.3 Tracking developmental progress though regular developmental discussions

Individual development plan (IDP) is prepared for each executive keeping executive’s developmental and organisation’s strategic needs in consideration. Developmental needs are identified using various assessment tools and feedback on the executive’s performance. IDPs of executives include what skills they need to develop and list of all probable developmental avenues including job assignments, other people, and in-class training that may offer opportunities to develop these skills. Organisational leaders must take each executive into confidence while preparing IDP. This is done through talent review meetings and face-to-face discussions with the executive, which provide avenues to understand her or his potentials, aspirations and areas of development.

Each IDP should be specific, focusing on the executive’s

a long-term career plan

b skills she or he may need in future

c potential.
Both the executive and her or his reporting should be held accountable achieving the developmental goals [Yost and Plunkett, (2010a), p.22].

For the experience-centric leadership development process to succeed, IDP must be pivoted around challenging assignments. Assignments should be at the ‘core’ of any IDP. The IDPs must be audited and the developmental progress should be appropriately tracked with pre-defined milestones and timelines. Periodic developmental discussions provide opportunities to track progress. It also offers opportunities to the executives to seek feedback, guidance and support.

Performance assessment and developmental discussions should be conducted independently. While the former is evaluative in nature, the latter is developmental and facilitative in approach.

6.4 Providing support to executives: crafting a learning ecosystem

Safe and optimal learning environment is characterised by the availability of timely and genuine feedback on developmental progress (DeRue and Wellman, 2009; Ericsson, 2009). Secondly, individuals should be encouraged and provided opportunities to reflect and introspect on learning from experience. Thirdly, coaching along with timely feedback can enhance the probability that the learner will learn desired lessons [McCall, (2010a), p.5]. Fourthly, organisations need to provide adequate allowances for genuine mistakes, one may commit while experimenting with new set of skills and behaviour or applying new insights on the job. Finally, the reward system must be designed to reward both learning and performance.

An ecosystem that provides psychologically safe learning environment with opportunity to reflect and introspect on learning; access to timely feedback on learning and progress; and availability of mentors and coaches for support and guidance is conducive for experience-centric leadership development process.

Guided reflection and introspection help executives learn desired lessons from experiences (Shamir and Eilam, 2005). ‘Guided question technique’ (Shamir and Eilam, 2005) and ‘guided introspection’ [Ligon and Hunter, (2010), p.29] are two useful tools available to the mentors and performance coaches for encouraging executives to reflect and introspect. Guided questioning technique relies on simple question such as what, if anything, have you learned from an experience?. It creates awareness and draws attention of executives toward learning.

Performance coaches and mentors should provide support and guide executives by ensuring genuine and relevant feedback available in a timely manner (Day, 2010). Periodic assessment through 360-degree assessment process provides relevant insights for feedback and guidance. It helps to track progress in specific development dimension as well as developmental progress over time (McCall, 2010a).

Further, timely, genuine and relevant feedback helps an individual becoming aware of self, confident, mitigating anxiety and effectively coping with the stress of challenging assignments. As a result of all these, executives focus on learning effectively without unduly being concerned and anxious about performance (DeRue and Wellman, 2009).

Coaching, mentoring and educational programs should be used to supplement on-the-job development ‘in real time as job experiences unfold’ [McCall, (2010a), p.4]. The roles of performance coaches and mentors are highly salient for making experience-centric leadership development process effective. They provide support to the executives by providing relevant feedback regularly; encouraging them to reflect and
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introspect on learning. Senior leaders who are about to retire should coach and mentor younger employees in their development plans [Yost and Plunkett, (2010a), p.22].

Reward system should be designed in such a manner that it should reward both learning and performance (Conger and Fulmer, 2003). The reward system (Yost and Plunkett, 2010a) should have following desirable elements that promote experience-driven learning and development:

a. executives who achieve performance goals and develop subordinates are promoted
b. executives who succeed in challenging assignments are compensated and rewarded appropriately
c. employees with leadership potential are assigned challenging assignments.

6.5 Blending education and formal training programs with developmental experiences

Even though educational and training programs are considered relatively less developmental in comparison to on the job assignments, they should not be dumped. Education and training programs are ‘deliberate practices’ (Day, 2010) with specific learning outcomes.

Hence, they are useful for:

a. providing experiences that individuals cannot get otherwise such as mistakes, hardships, personal experiences, and personal crises and so on
b. helping participants to get better sense of experiences and learning (Ligon and Hunter, 2010; Jackson and Lindsay, 2010).

Facilitators generally offer support and guidance in this process. Educational program along with other developmental interventions can be an effective approach to groom leaders. For instance, specific coursework prior to assuming leadership role could be a significant catalyst for accelerated leadership development (Avolio and Hannah, 2008).

“Work environment can seem like the lab experience without the guiding theoretical material. Without this guidance, the work lab may be experienced as a fairly random and trial-and-error situation.” [Jackson and Lindsay, (2010), p.49]

7 Summary of arguments and conclusions

The readers, after going through the paper, might have realised that experience-centric leadership development process is more effective compared to formal training and education-based approach for grooming leaders. The author has discussed the key finding of LOEI study that provides key insights on how leaders in India learn to lead. Challenging assignments and role modelling were found to be significant developmental experiences that facilitated learning key leadership lessons. The author has urged organisations in India to leverage these key findings to craft an ecosystem that provides opportunities and support to learn leadership from experiences, without dumping formal
education and training programs. To conclude, the author has offered a few pointers for creating a learning ecosystem that synergistically blends both education and training-based formal and experience-centric informal approaches to groom effective organisational leaders.

References


Notes

1 Percent of total number of events calculated using the formula occurrences of this event/total occurrences of events.

2 It means 10% of total lessons mentioned by executives are learnt from their role models in organisational context.

3 Intensity of the event – calculated using the formula occurrences of lessons/no. of lessons learnt from that particular event. Higher the intensity, greater the probability of learning leadership lessons.