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Grooming for All

How many of us say we are committed to developing the next generation of leaders, yet how many of us don't have the time or funds to help them grow? When we are working with talented staff with leadership potential, do we actively support them with concrete plans, engaging learning opportunities, and consistent follow-up?

If your answer to the last question is no, unfortunately, you are not alone. Although there are still robust leadership programs inside some healthcare organizations, most are operating with organization-wide budget constraints and fewer financial resources. So how do we groom talented leaders so they are prepared to take the reins? How do we keep leadership development an *actionable* priority, even in these difficult times?

GROOMING DONE RIGHT

Not long ago, Lisa, an outstanding nurse leader, contacted our team regarding one of her organization's finest middle managers. Lisa described Belinda as a true star who was a bit rough around the edges. She was interested in executive coaching that would groom Belinda for senior leadership in this complex and highly regarded organization.

Although Lisa was appropriately cost conscious, she wanted Belinda to have a full complement of aids to promote her leadership growth. In concert with Lisa and Belinda's immediate boss, the coach worked out a program that included regular coaching sessions; periodic sessions with Belinda and her peers, superiors, and/or direct reports; and occasional "shadow" coaching to observe Belinda in action. They also agreed on supplemental reading and assessments that would provide Belinda with 360° feedback and a measure of her emotional intelligence.

From the beginning of the engagement, Belinda's talents and potential were on full display. So was her attitude. She eagerly devoured the coaching sessions, the reading, and the between-session assignments. After each session, she shared her learning with her immediate boss. She thoughtfully absorbed the results of both assessments, including the portions that were not comfortable to hear. Belinda and the coach regularly discussed her progress with her immediate supervisor and Lisa.

Throughout her coaching, Belinda chronicled her insights and her questions. She ended her coaching with a good understanding of her accomplishments, her remaining learning edges, and the path to sustain and expand her capacity as a leader.

GROOMING FOR THE REST OF US

You may be thinking that this is a nice story, but it's unrealistic for you and your organization. You can't make this kind of investment, particularly now. If this is the case for you, what is there to learn from Lisa's ideal approach? What reasonable steps can you take, even with real limits on your time and money?

To recognize these steps, let's move away from the specifics of Belinda's program so we can see less costly options.

1. *We need to be the mentors and role models we would want to have.* Throughout her coaching, Belinda talked about how much she admired Lisa. For Belinda, Lisa embodied the best qualities of leadership. Belinda was learning every day just by watching her. We need to remember that the next generation of leaders is always watching us. Never underestimate the fact that you and all of us are on display all the time. We need to be the leaders that the next generation wants to emulate.
2. *Recognize talent.* Belinda benefited significantly from Lisa's mentorship. Even though she was well above Belinda in the organization's hierarchy, Lisa recognized her talent and intentionally sought to develop her. Consider who you know that has potential and make it a priority to do whatever you can do to mentor and support them. Enlist the involvement of their immediate supervisors and others who can contribute to their growth.
3. *Tell these individuals what you see in them.* Lisa met regularly with Belinda before, during, and after her coaching program. She also provided clear and actionable feedback. Although most of Lisa's comments were positive, some targeted areas of needed growth. These consistently candid reflections showed Belinda that Lisa saw her fully and added to the credibility of Lisa's comments.

4. *Give talented individuals growth-producing resources inside or outside your organization, even if they are limited.* In addition to providing her with an executive coach and a rigorous, customized learning program, Lisa encouraged Belinda to sign up for inexpensive in-house classes that would complement her coaching and deepen her repertoire of skills.
5. *Promote the use of high-quality assessment tools.* Well-chosen assessments can have a significant impact on a leader. Identify trained facilitators inside or outside your organization to maximize the value of these assessments. Appropriately debriefed assessments help leaders better understand their strengths and how they impact others. They also reveal blind spots the leaders might not see otherwise. One caution: when assessments are used in this context, the same assessments should not be used in performance reviews.
6. *When you identify leaders with potential, consider how closely and how frequently you can engage with them as they grow.* In addition to Lisa's consistent involvement, Belinda's boss made it a regular practice to ask her what was happening in her coaching. This practice had many benefits, including helping Belinda stay accountable.
7. *If you're not able to follow up with talented managers yourself, find others who can.* Perhaps these are your own direct reports, or they may be coaches or mentors inside or outside the organization. Wherever these resources are housed, their presence lets your mentees know that you care and that you are actively investing in their ability to excel.

During her coaching, Belinda frequently said that she felt supported by her organization and her superiors. The fact that Belinda's immediate boss and Lisa were consistently willing to devote their time and money to her growth spoke volumes to her. She understood that the organization could not do this for every leader, and she did not want to squander any aspect of her good fortune.

Your protégés will also recognize your commitment to them. No matter how few fiscal resources you provide, they will still feel your support if you initiate and sustain nurturing actions that fit your circumstances. These may be the most important steps any of us can take to engage and inspire those who will follow in our footsteps.

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