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The right stuff

By Robert J. Thomas and Warren Bennis

Experience and the wisdom it brings are critical to the development of good leaders. But these qualities can be hard to come by. Here are things that organizations can do to capture and distill the essence of experience and accelerate the evolution of next-generation leaders.

Want to grab the attention of CEOs? Don't ask them about things like "the company vision"—chances are they could tell you about that in their sleep. Ask them about what really stirs their spirits as leaders: Ask them about succession.

It's natural enough, particularly as they approach retirement, for executives to focus on legacy and longevity—their own as well as their organizations'. But in today's economy, it's especially critical for leaders to concern themselves with future leadership. The Internet and communication technology will continue to reshape the way people live and work, with significant implications for what organizations ask of (and offer to) their leaders. Also, CEO tenure is getting shorter and shorter, so even if CEOs are not thinking about succession, their boards of directors are.

What, then, should current leaders do about cultivating the next generation of leaders—and the one after that?

For answers, we turned to the source. As part of a broader study, we interviewed two generations of accomplished men and women—members of the first group were over 70 years of age and members of the second were under 33—drawn from business, the professions, government, academia, the military and nonprofit organizations.

Organizational flattening is leaving fewer opportunities to learn to lead in traditional ways.

The over-70 group is noteworthy for its members' ability to renew themselves and their organizations over a lifetime. Members of the under-33 group collectively serve as a kind of proxy for the hopes and aspirations of the next generation of leaders, offering glimpses of what that generation knows, doesn't know and needs to learn. (For a complete list of study participants, see box, below).

Experience versus wisdom

Veteran leaders like Robert Crandall, former CEO of American Airlines, and Frances Hesselbein, former head of the Girl Scouts of America and currently CEO of the Drucker Foundation, were adamant that people who aspire to leadership positions need more than expertise—they need experience. Neither they nor the other senior leaders openly disparaged professional schools. In fact, most applauded the powerful analytical skills the schools teach. But they didn't put much stock in the proposition that business schools—or management development programs—could teach next-generation leaders how to lead for a lifetime.

Interestingly, most of the under-33 leaders—many of whom attended prestigious business schools—agreed. Young leaders like Elizabeth Kao at Ford or Jeff Wilke at Amazon.com, both graduates of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's dual management and engineering graduate program, underscored the importance of learning leadership on the job.

Similarly, entrepreneurs like EarthLink founder Sky Dayton, eGroups CEO Michael Klein, and Dan's Chocolates founder Dan Cunningham, as well as social activists like Wendy Kopp of Teach For America and Lorig Charkoudian of Baltimore's Community Mediation Program, all said they thirsted for experiences that would make them become better leaders faster.

It's not quite that simple, of course, as our interviewees readily acknowledged. For one thing, leadership experience is hard to get—even harder, perhaps, than it was a generation ago. Organizational flattening is leaving fewer layers, fewer clear promotional ladders and fewer opportunities to learn

About the research

As part of a broader study, the authors interviewed two generations of accomplished men and women (see story). Members of the first group were over 70 years of age, and members of the second were under 33. The two groups of leaders were asked the same set of questions. Interviews averaged two hours in length. Their work will be published by Harvard Business School Press in 2002 as a book entitled *Geeks & Geezers as Leaders*.

Under 33 years of age

Lorig Charkoudian (founder, Community Mediation Program)
Steve Chen (cofounder, Embark.com)
Tara Church (founder, Tree Musketeers)
Ian Clarke (founder, Freenet)
Dan Cunningham (founder, Dan's Chocolates)
Sky Dayton (founder, EarthLink; cofounder, eCompanies)
Harlan Hugh (cofounder, chief technology officer, TheBrain.com)
Elizabeth Kao (brand manager, Ford)
Geoff Keighley (editor-in-chief, *GameSlice*)

Michael Klein (president and CEO, eGroups)
Wendy Kopp (founder, Teach For America)
Lingyun Shao (sergeant, US Army Reserves)
Brian Morris (chairman, Legacy Unlimited)
Young Shin (cofounder, Embark.com)
Bridget Smith (master's student, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University)
Brian Sullivan (CEO, Rolling Oaks Enterprises)
Jeff Wilke (senior vice president of operations, Amazon.com)

to lead in traditional ways. What's more, the aging US workforce—or, more accurately, baby boomers hanging on to their jobs longer—means more competition for the leadership slots available.

And while within this group there was universal reverence for experience, there was also general agreement that what matters even more is learning how to extract genuine wisdom from experience. Indeed, it was remarkable that many of these 41 men and women often took very different lessons about life and very different orientations toward leadership from the daunting experiences they shared with contemporaries.

For example, some 75- to 80-year-olds came out of the Great Depression chastened by their parents' sense of loss and insecurity. But interviewees Walter Sondheim of the Greater Baltimore Committee, a nonprofit economic development organization, and Wall Street veteran Muriel Siebert endured the same circumstances, yet emerged as risk takers and energetic leaders.

Likewise, while some 30-year-olds are already retreating from the oscillating fortunes of the Internet economy, the young leaders we interviewed are absorbing the lessons they've learned from bankruptcy and moving on to new ventures (indeed, a few are already on their third or fourth startup).

Crucibles for leadership

Two questions emerged from these discussions about experience. First, as traditional opportunities to gain leadership experience dwindle, is it possible for organizations to create such opportunities? And second, is there a discernible process or competence through which leaders actually learn to lead?

Answers to these questions can be found in an exploration of how accomplished leaders evolve over time.

We believe that the ability to extract wisdom and insight from experience is most often acquired in a distinctive milieu—what we call a crucible. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines a crucible as “a place, time

Leaders demonstrated a remarkable capacity not only to survive tough experiences but to extract profound insights from them.

Over 70 years of age

Warren Bennis (professor of business administration, University of Southern California)

John Brademas (president emeritus, New York University)

Jack Coleman (former president, Haverford College)

Robert Crandall (former chairman, president and CEO, American Airlines)

Father Robert Drinan, SJ (professor of law, Georgetown University Law Center)

Bob Galvin (former chairman, president and CEO, Motorola)

John Gardner (founder, Common Cause)

Frank Gehry (architect)

Don Gevirtz (former chairman and CEO, Foothill Group)

Edwin Guthman (press secretary for Robert F. Kennedy; former national editor, *The Los Angeles Times*; former editor, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*)

Sidney Harman (founder and chairman, Harman International)

Frances Hesselbein (CEO, Drucker Foundation)

Dee Hock (founder and CEO emeritus, Visa International)

Nathaniel R. Jones (judge, US Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit)

Arthur Levitt (former chairman, US Securities and Exchange Commission)

Elizabeth McCormack (vice chairman of the board, MacArthur Foundation; associate, Rockefeller Family & Associates)

Bill Porter (founder, E-Trade)

Ned Regan (former comptroller, New York State)

Richard Riordan (mayor, Los Angeles)

Muriel Siebert (founder, Muriel Siebert & Co.)

Paolo Soleri (architect and urban visionary)

Walter Sondheim (senior advisor, Greater Baltimore Committee)

Mike Wallace (coeditor, *60 Minutes*; correspondent, CBS News)

John Wooden (former basketball coach, University of California at Los Angeles)



or situation characterized by the confluence of powerful intellectual, social, economic or political forces; a severe test of patience or belief; a vessel for melting material at high temperature.” Blending these three definitions, we use “crucible” to refer to an intense, meaningful and often transformational experience. Based on our interviews, we identified four major types of crucibles.

Mentoring relationships

Mentors have long exerted dramatic influence on those they mentor, of course, particularly on young people. But two critical elements appeared in virtually every mentoring relationship described in our interviews. First, protégés attracted mentors; there was something compelling about them that made them approachable and interesting. Second, mentors were recruitable; they were open to caring for a particular protégé and willing to share valuable insight without any expectations of reward for their efforts.

A case in point from our interview subjects is Judge Nathaniel R. Jones of the US Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit and the author of many important opinions in the field of civil rights law.

Jones describes a crucial time in his adolescence in Youngstown, Ohio, when he “could have gone a very different way.” A local lawyer took him behind the scenes for a first-hand look at the nascent civil rights movement of the 1950s. A witness to history in the making, Jones saw activists create strategy, heard them reflect on their experiences and watched them debate their roles in the African-American community. For his part, Jones provided his mentor with the challenge to rescue an intelligent young man who was falling through the cracks of that city’s educational system.

Enforced reflection

This crucible has at its core an opportunity for both exploration and reflection. College has the potential to be such a crucible, particularly as it affords a young person the time and space to explore other possible selves and lifestyles. The same can be said for more regimented settings that emphasize introspection, like yoga retreats, martial arts training and seminars.

Other examples of enforced reflection include variations on what sociologist Erving Goffman calls “total institutions,” such as military boot camp: They fully envelop participants, teach them how to react in uncertain and stressful situations, and develop their self-confidence. Through these crucibles, individuals learn preparedness—a kind of preternatural alertness to the subtle signals that surround them—and a willingness to experiment in the interest of survival and, by extension, knowledge of the world around them.

Mike Wallace, who became a leader in the CBS news organization and the journalistic community through the pioneering program *60 Minutes*, told us that active duty during World War II fundamentally altered the way he thought about himself and his potential.

Insertion into foreign territory

Most people find themselves operating in foreign, sometimes hostile, territory at some point in their lives. However, the leaders we interviewed demonstrated a remarkable capacity not only to survive those tough experiences but to extract profound insights from them.

For example, Muriel Siebert talked about her alienation as a female analyst on Wall Street in the 1950s and 1960s. Despite assiduous research

and network building, she could not work her way into the brokerage side of the business or stake a claim to commissions even when she was directly responsible for sales. Rather than acquiesce and accept the role thrust upon her and other women, she ventured into even more unfamiliar territory, founded her own brokerage firm and became the first woman to own a seat on the New York Stock Exchange.

Others might be overwhelmed by the newness, the confusion, the deluge of sensations encountered in foreign territory. But these leaders embraced the disorientation and wove it into their own experiential tapestry. More important, they continued to seek out new foreign territories, whether a new geography, culture, business, organizational role or idea.

Disruption and loss

Personal loss, particularly of an associate, has the capacity to destabilize. But as Jeff Wilke, senior vice president of operations at Amazon.com, told us, loss can also allow leaders to understand their organizations in a fundamentally new—and more comprehensive—way.

Before joining the online bookseller, Wilke had been the plant manager at an industrial facility where a machine operator was killed on the job. Wilke was confronted with the very tender fabric of human life that sometimes gets lost when leading “by the numbers.” According to Wilke, “It’s a transformational experience . . . to realize that in the end it’s all these lives that are all wrapped up together. And every so often an event happens that isn’t just about whether we made the quarter.”

In other instances, loss of a parent (particularly when it requires a per-

son to take on family responsibility or live independently at an early age), loss of a sibling or close friend (which often occurs during wartime), bankruptcy, or failure in an important assignment or undertaking (including a run for public office) can stimulate a search for greater understanding of self, of relationships and of larger webs of affiliation. All these events carry the potential to catalyze a search for meaning and develop a far keener ability to extract insights from experience.

To be sure, life- and career-altering experiences like many of the crucibles cited above cannot be crafted. Few of us will ever find ourselves in a situation like Mike Wallace did—a young communications officer directing submarine traffic in the heat of battle. But there are things that organizations and their leaders can do to capture and distill the essence of experience and, hence, accelerate the evolution of next-generation leaders.

One caveat, however: Given the ephemeral nature of experience, there are no guarantees in this area. Growing a leader is somewhat akin to stimulating innovation: You can assemble all the ingredients and corollary processes, but you cannot force it to occur.

Making it personal

With that in mind, CEOs need to seriously consider the following.

Mentoring has become a popular term, but if our observations are any guide, most mentoring today is not like that experienced by the leaders we interviewed. To function as a crucible, mentoring has to be carried out by people who care, working with people who want to be cared about.

To be effective, mentoring must be a very personal experience. Mentors

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need to convey insight clearly, simply and in their own voices, not in the way they imagine a leadership development curriculum would sound. Mentors also need to spot crucible opportunities, then enhance them for their protégés or direct their protégés toward them.

Likewise, protégés need to be alert to both the opportunities and the limits provided by the mentoring crucible. They need to appreciate the extraordinary responsibility that mentors undertake (as well as their potential vulnerability) when they care enough to take part in the relationship.

According to our interviews, the most effective mentors did not portray themselves as flawless, no matter how consummate their skills. In fact, many were willing to reveal some of their own weaknesses, fears and uncertainties to their protégés.

In our study, we also had the opportunity to observe examples of cross-generational learning—conversations between older and younger leaders. Amazing things sometimes occurred. For example, in one conversation we saw an older leader turn from storyteller to active listener. Not only did he demonstrate sensitivity to his protégé's need to tell his own story, but he also elicited further stories that enabled the pair to explore a topic as peers.

On another occasion Bob Galvin, former CEO of Motorola, and his grandson, Rolling Oaks Enterprises CEO Brian Sullivan, talked about the latter's early experiences in public speaking. Sullivan then listened with fascination as his grandfather revealed his own rationale for putting oneself into situations that test poise and equilibrium.

Cross-generational learning of this sort may be commonplace in family

settings, but it's unclear how often it takes place in business or government organizations. As companies face the departure of large numbers of knowledgeable, skilled and often wise senior employees (leaders and otherwise), there ought to be real concern about how those vital assets will be transferred to the next generation—or if they will be passed along at all.

For these conversations to be effective, senior participants need to become effective storytellers themselves, realizing that vital knowledge is found less often in databases than in stories. Listeners, in turn, need to coax meaningful stories from their seniors. They need to exercise patience with those who are not yet the best storytellers.

Learning about learning

We conclude from our interviews that while aspects of leadership can be learned, the most important ones are not likely to be acquired through the use of conventional leadership development tools and techniques. However, we also believe that it would be a mistake to eliminate classroom training, job rotation, performance assessment and the like.

What's missing in conventional techniques is what's at the heart of the leadership crucible: the ability to extract wisdom from experience. To that end, we suggest that explicit attention to "learning about learning" needs to be layered onto conventional leadership development. There are several ways that can be accomplished.

Create more leadership opportunities and make them part of an explicit learning trajectory. For example, more and more organizations are moving to project-based work (often organizing teams for a limited time

and with clear performance objectives). Only a small number of those firms are using projects as an opportunity to develop leadership “practice fields” in which a larger number of people are given the chance to test their hands at leading under non-fatal circumstances.

Use efforts to unlock value from existing products and knowledge as opportunities for managers to practice being leaders. For example, three of our colleagues have described a process of “fast venturing” as one way for firms to get undervalued innovations to market. They explicitly identified the lack of leaders as an obstacle to fast venturing (see “Fast companies,” *Outlook*, June 2000). Under this scenario, companies could launch new ventures and leadership crucibles simultaneously.

Link what has been discovered about differences in adult learning styles to the creation of leadership crucibles. As our interviews revealed, different people learn and grow under different circumstances. Rather than assume that one style of learning (and teaching) fits all aspiring leaders, organizations and their current leaders need to fit leading and learning opportunities to their next generation.

As the tenure of the average CEO grows shorter, it might be tempting to suggest that a current CEO concentrate exclusively on the present and do little about next-generation leaders—and even less about the generation after that. However, when successful senior executives look back at the defining experiences in their careers—the crucibles through which they learned to lead—it ought to be abundantly clear that the future is not entirely a product of chance. In each and every instance there were people who intervened to

guide, shape or redirect the evolution of every leader.

The choice is up to every CEO. In the words of Amazon.com’s Wilke, a CEO can “stand on the sidelines and watch it happen or step into the middle of it and make something happen.” Stepping into the middle requires the current CEO to look well beyond the immediate question of his or her successor and into the future circumstances, aspirations and motivations of the next generation of leaders. ■

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