

# Leaders as Teachers: Experience and Emerging Talent

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Before the Industrial Revolution, apprentices developed expertise in a trade at the feet of the master craftsmen. In today's multi-layered organization, this direct learner-teacher connection is rare. Unfortunately, the current structure leaves a gap between the tremendous wealth of expertise at the top levels of companies and the majority of the trainable workforce whose immediate superiors, the middle managers, may lack the experience and teachable viewpoints of senior executives. That's why some companies are now reviving the role of

and souls into the preparation of lessons learn a great deal and gain new perspectives.

- Leaders gain much-desired visibility and the opportunity to send their message directly to the workforce. When students learn from one of their own, rather than an impersonal training organization, it fosters close working relationships and teamwork.
- Many leaders truly enjoy teaching. It gives them the opportunity to give something back and unlock the value of their personal experiences.

• **Executive speaker series** are large-scale presentations to several hundred learners, covering such topics as key challenges and goals for the year. Q&A with the audience is essential.

• **Advanced leadership programs** feature a number of senior executives who take turns over a period of four to six months, teaching the ropes to a few dozen emerging leaders.

• **Brown-bag lunch chats** are informal, regularly scheduled sessions between a senior executive and 10 to 15 learners.

## Successful implementation

the master craftsman by having senior executives share their lessons learned with a new generation of junior executives. However, if this "leader as teacher" model is to be successful, two barriers must be overcome: Most senior executives are simply too busy to teach, and teaching has become a lost art among leaders after decades of abdicating the task.

Leaders-as-teachers programs are growing in popularity at companies like GE, Time Warner, Dell and Capital One. Their programs have demonstrated outcomes that exceed the actual learning, benefiting the leader-teachers as much as the learners:

- Students gain tremendous confidence as they interact with their leaders. They realize that senior leaders are not only approachable, but also have made mistakes that they can learn from.
- Leaders have the opportunity to connect with emerging talent and keep their finger on the pulse of the organization. This gives them unfiltered insights into the company and allows them to tap into the innovation and creativity of the lower levels.
- Teaching requires knowing. Executives who pour their hearts

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Leaders-as-teachers programs also benefit the company as a whole. They ensure the leaders' successes and failures are captured and used effectively. An atmosphere of mutual respect and trust throughout the ranks emerges, aligning the organization around critical leadership values and behaviors.

In every organization, senior leaders have multiple demands on their time and don't always gravitate naturally toward a teaching role. Creating a successful leaders-as-teachers environment requires two conditions. First, leaders must be encouraged and supported to carve out time for the classroom. The teaching experience must be valued and endorsed by the highest levels of the organization. Second, leaders are not likely to find time for teaching or become skillful unless they are provided with a forum that makes teaching a regularly scheduled commitment. Leading-edge companies have had success with four types of programs:

• **Leadership workshops** are presentations by senior leaders to 60 to 80 associates in four-hour intensive sessions. Topics might include strategy, leading change, decision-making and other skills.

Presentations have the greatest impact when they combine experiential and personal insights into the leader's career with the Socratic technique of asking questions that challenge learners to develop their own answers.

Successful implementation of a leaders-as-teachers program requires sponsorship and support from the top of the organization, a well-conceived plan, commitments from teachers and learners, and consistent execution. Once the first three are in place, the last is not complex. Then, only the teacher must be prepared.

Any organization should expect its leaders to give something back: the benefits of knowledge they gained on their way to the top. ♦