

IS LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT HELPING INDIVIDUALS UNDERSTAND THEIR POTENTIAL?

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For years, if not decades Chief People Management Officers / Chief Human Resource Officers / HR Managers / Talent Management Managers have been advocating leadership assessment as the best way to help employees understand their strengths and areas for improvement and to make strategic decisions on career advancement and succession. So, have they been able to make any tangible inroads and impact on leadership development and succession management within their organizations?

The answer is as usual: it depends! On what?

1. Top Management commitment to capability development. HR owns the responsibility to put in place the best available methodologies / tools / processes. However, the most important job for HR is to “sell” and ensure their counterparts at the top of the organization (i.e. CEO, COO, CFO, Operational Managers) understand and fully support efforts to build employees’ capability and grow them towards fully contributing to the business and advancing their careers. If top management only pays lip service to capability development, not even the most effective tools and methodologies will make any difference or impact on how employees’ careers are managed.

2. Organizational values, culture and leadership competencies play center stage in leadership assessment. Before deciding what knowledge / skills / behaviours are being assessed, the contextual elements must be identified, as no assessment can be effective without this. At the end of the day, leadership capability means very different things depending on the type of organization the individuals work at. The organization expects the individuals to behave in certain ways and demonstrate certain behaviours which are unique to the organization. Leadership effectiveness is all about alignment between these organizational elements and the individual’s values and aspirations. If no consideration is given to context, leadership assessment becomes an exercise where what matters is a set of generic knowledge, skills and behaviours that may have nothing to do with what is essential for organizational success.

3. Clarity around what is being assessed. The market is flooded with assessment tools more than ever before. Every provider advocates that their tools are reliable, backed by countless years of research, statistically valid, and the claims go on and on and on. However, is there clarity around what should be assessed in the first place and what is the best way of doing it? Let us never forget that the assessment tool, is just that, a tool. What is most critical is to clearly articulate what behaviours / skills should be assessed, only then will selecting the tool become an easy job. Otherwise, those evaluating the different alternative tools will have a very difficult job in figuring out what is the right mix of tools, and will most likely end up buying more than is needed, just so they don’t lose out on that very important piece of information that each tool claims to provide.

4. Understanding of how the assessment results will be used. Many of the assessment tools currently available are automated and administered online. They are offered with off-the-shelf reports that are immediately churned upon the employee completing the assessment activity. If organizations use a variety of tools, then most likely they will end up with a variety of independent reports that will undoubtedly provide a myriad of information that in many cases may not be very useful or may even be confusing and complex to understand and explain. So, it is at this stage when knowing what is being

assessed becomes critical, as this should dictate how the results should be compiled and presented. Knowing how to prioritize the information and understanding that not every single piece of information needs to be documented, reported and explained will make the difference between an effective report and a really bad and confusing one.

5. Being committed to sharing the information with employees. Why invest so much money on assessment methodologies and consultants, if you don't share the results with the relevant employees? Gone are the days when things were done and kept secret in a dark room for HR to decide how best to use the collected information, and at times for the information to be left totally unattended as a result of the multiple commitments and assignments given to HR. Now more than ever, the information needs to be shared with the employees being assessed, so that they improve their self-awareness and are able to take control of their own capability development.

6. Dealing with the employees' reaction to the results. As expected, not everyone will take the assessment results in the same way. In general, there are 3 expected reactions: a) employees will accept the results as a reflection of who they are. This generally is reflective of individuals who are self-aware. b) employees will be surprised by the results as they were expecting a more negative picture. This generally is reflective of individuals who are self-critical and generally have high expectations of themselves, never believing they are good enough. c) employees will not accept the results as they expected a more positive picture of themselves. This generally is reflective of individuals who have a high view of themselves and may not be self-aware of their blind spots / areas for improvement. Anyone communicating the assessment results must expect at least these 3 reactions and must be prepared to address the questions that may come about by each of these type of individuals. Ultimately, what matters is to ensure every employee reaches understanding, acceptance and ideally becomes committed to take relevant actions towards enhancing their leadership effectiveness.

7. Taking relevant development action is a shared responsibility. There are at least 3 parties who should be held accountable for what is done with the assessment results, namely the employee, his/her supervisor and the HR team responsible for capability development. The employee is responsible for fully understanding the evaluation results and seek opportunities within his / her role to leverage on his/her strengths and close identified capability gaps. The supervisor is responsible for coaching / guiding the employee and for identifying possible assignments / projects that could be given to the employee in order to provide an opportunity to either contribute their strengths or improve their areas for development. The HR team managing capability development for the organization is responsible for identifying possible learning events or interventions (i.e. rotations, identifying a buddy, training events etc.) that can be deployed for more than one of the individuals participating in the assessment exercise.

8. Follow up on interventions and continuous talent development discussions. Undertaking talent assessment is not the end but to the contrary, is just the beginning of the capability development roadmap. A talent panel comprised by some of the top leadership members of the organization should be formed so that this panel is able to regularly discuss the progress made by the individuals being monitored through the assessment methodology, and even to surface additional individuals who should be considered within the talent pool. It is important to note, that there may be a need to form several talent panels in order to ensure employees at all levels within the organization can be monitored and supported in their progression. Having talent panels should not be limited to individuals being considered for top level roles, but it should be done for talent across the entire organization.



9. Use of technology to make the process more efficient. Undertaking leadership assessments is no longer a tedious and time-consuming exercise that takes months from start to finish. With the introduction of technology and online tools, the entire leadership assessment process can be deployed in a fraction of the time it used to take just a few years ago. Technology however must always be considered as an enabler and not as the driver of the effort. Technology must support the deployment of the exercise, and make it more efficient. However, for the effort to be effective, it is essential to ensure that the HR team uses the time adequately to analyze the results and to enhance the individuals' understanding of what the information gathered means to them as professionals and as leaders within their function and organization.

10. So, what if some of the employees are happy where they are, and don't want to progress further?

It is important to consider that not every employee wants to be promoted and take on more responsibility. Not everyone has ambitions to become a head of a function, or a unit or a department. Some employees are contented with where they are and just want to continue doing what they are doing, and become better at what they do, or deepen their knowledge and understanding of the specific area they work on. There is nothing wrong with this aspiration, and we as HR leaders or business leaders need to understand this. We need to learn to manage employees who express this desire. We must understand what are the implications which should be clearly communicated to these individuals, so they are aware and are able to internalize them as the consequence of them making this choice. Just for reference purposes, some of the implications of staying in the same job for prolonged periods of time relate to limited or lower salary increments, limited ability to acquire or develop new knowledge or skills apart from those needed to do the current job, and reduced opportunities to perform other tasks /roles that will ultimately enrich the individual and enable a possible growth within the organization.

Organizations and in particular talent management practitioners who consider the above-mentioned matters in a disciplined and consistent manner, have higher chances of succeeding at managing capability development and succession management in an effective manner.

For more information, or if you would like support in putting in place an effective leadership assessment infrastructure to improve capability development and succession management please contact me at: claudia@thread-advisory.com