

Leadersynth™ July 2010 Edition

Create Sustainable Growth in Leaders by Rattling their Core **Bruce E. Roselle, PhD LP**

Growing and sustaining leadership competence is a critical need for your organization. A recent survey by ASTD indicated that leadership/executive level skills were the most critical gap across 10 categories of potential gaps organizations anticipate in the near future. Identifying and nurturing high potential individuals who can move into leadership roles is a core strategy for meeting this need, along with providing development opportunities for your current group of key leaders. But, how do you create leader growth in a way that it is sustainable?

In **The Leadership Pipeline** (2001), the authors suggest that at least six major transitions occur in the leadership progression from individual contributor to CEO level, and that each stage requires qualitatively different approaches. They suggest that, to build effective leaders at all levels, organizations must identify high potential leaders early on, provide them with growth assignments, give them constructive and frequent feedback, and support them with coaching and mentoring.

We agree. However, we believe that sustainable growth occurs through an important paradox. The lasting changes in leader effectiveness at various stages in the leadership pipeline are those that rattle or reorganize leaders to their very core, and at the same time, remain consistent with that core.

Allow me to explain. At the foundation of every leader is a unique pattern of personality characteristics and abilities. We can assess these using standard personality inventories, as well as tests for strengths, motivated abilities, cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence, etc. At RLSI, we do this all the time on the front end of coaching engagements to help individual leaders and ourselves understand who they are at the core. Moreover, we ask what energizes them and assess how their thinking patterns either support or get in the way of effective leadership. We use all this information to help us determine who they are at the core.

To be sustainable, growth must occur within the context of this core for each leader in your organization. At the same time, true growth seldom occurs unless events rattle the basis upon which leaders think and respond, or circumstances force them to reorganize internally with each new stage in the leadership pipeline. Psychologist Jean Piaget called this “accommodation” and contrasted it with “assimilation,” in which we simply incorporate new thoughts, ideas, perspectives, etc. into the mental framework we already have.

In accommodation, however, we recognize the need to reorganize our internal framework in order to take into account our new experiences. For most people, heading off to college for the first time is a clear example of needing to accommodate to a whole new existence that we had not imagined previously. Other major life events like marriage, death of a close loved one, or the birth of children similarly cause most people to accommodate in order to take into account dramatically different circumstances.

Joe Folkman (**The Power of Feedback**, 2006) makes the case that genuine change in behavior requires changing core beliefs. Not who we are at the core, but how we think about things and make sense of circumstances. Folkman emphasizes that lasting behavioral changes are those that feel natural and consistent with our core character and personal style. These two principles form the basis for this seeming **paradox**:

- To shift our approach and show evidence of true growth, we must accommodate to new circumstances and demands by changing some of our core beliefs, which then shifts our behaviors; however,
- To sustain this growth, we must stay within the boundaries of our core personality, abilities, and motivations.

At RLSI, we see this most clearly in our executive coaching. Using a framework from my book, **Fearless Leadership** (2006), we help leaders recognize how irrational fears and faulty beliefs can become obstacles to high performance behaviors. We coach leaders to recognize the symptoms when they begin to react poorly to situations, and we teach them how to create a set of healthy beliefs to shift their core thinking. In the words of the paradox, above, we provide tools for shifting some of their core beliefs. The beliefs we typically focus on are those they have held for many years, but have not examined closely. For example, a leader might have operated for decades on the belief that she must always be correct and show no faults, or that he must avoid conflict situations and make sure that people do not become upset. These kinds of faulty beliefs can undermine a leader's success, especially when paired with irrational fears about looking incompetent or being rejected by senior management.

You can use the two components of this paradox when growing leaders in your organization. Find challenging tasks or problems, new reporting relationships, or different team assignments that will stretch the competence and confidence of your high potential and key leaders. Use the experiences to identify faulty beliefs and approaches that limit their effectiveness, and help them accommodate to become more effective as a result. However, as you put them in situations and provide support to help them change their faulty beliefs, make sure you affirm who they are at the core (their strengths, unique personality/style, motivators, etc.). To sustain the growth, it is critical that they do not conclude that they must change who they are in order to be successful at the next level.