



SEARCH

Executive Buy-In: Innovative Ways to Get It and Keep It

Engaging line leaders in the general design of executive development programs and architectures increases the level of “ownership” and commitment to both the programs and to executive development in general.

ARTICLE | THU, 11/21/2013 - 00:00

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Despite the lingering recession and the many challenges leadership and executive development professionals face today, innovative and exciting executive/leadership development projects are gaining momentum. Demographic shifts alone are forcing corporations, governments, nonprofits, and educational institutions alike to evaluate their current leadership capabilities, as well as the strength and depth of their bench. Statistics tell us that Baby Boomers are retiring at a rate of one every eight seconds. Today’s companies have as much as 60 percent of their workforce eligible for retirement within the next five years. On top of all that, technology continues to progress at warp speed, and the skills senior leaders needed in the past are no longer enough.

While great leadership fundamentals remain the same, there is increased pressure to understand the global marketplace and technology advances, develop the leaders of the future, and make complex decisions at the speed of light, while simultaneously considering both the macro and the micro level impact on the people and the organization. Executives today are up against some challenging problems, and they are expected to make sound judgments. One of our clients said:

“Our business is changing rapidly and more decisively than ever before, and we need to quickly have something in place to redefine our expectations of leaders during this time, and to provide specific ways of preparing them to lead differently...can we have this in one month?”—Director, Executive Leadership Development

In today’s complex and fast-paced work environment, this type of expectation of executive development resources from the top leaders is becoming more the norm than the exception. In response to the need for both speed and executive engagement, leadership development professionals must create new approaches to assess and design executive and leadership development strategies and programs.

It is practically impossible to gain the full engagement of executives unless they have been involved in the process, and getting them involved in the process is a challenge in itself. However, there are ways to engage your leaders in a fairly unobtrusive manner where they feel that, at a minimum, they have had a say in their own development needs.

Two primary ingredients necessary for a successful and executive-owned design are:

1. Include them in the needs assessment.
2. Include a subset of the executives in the design process.

By including these two primary ingredients, you not only will increase senior line leaders’ understanding, acceptance, and support of the solution by actively involving them in the process, but also enhance the business value of the designs and reduce the “time to market” by half.

Include Them in the Needs Assessment

Companies frequently express a concern that their line executives don’t have ownership, at best, and don’t even support, at worst, their executive/leadership development strategy or programs. The standard of dependence upon Human Resources for design, development, and delivery of executive and leadership development programs has

come into question as line executives seek to ensure that their development investment is clearly linked to and in support of company strategy and line management priorities. Too often, HR has been solely responsible for developing or choosing executive/leadership development programs that then are presented to line executives for review and approval. Since the line leaders typically have little or no input to the solution, HR is put in a position of having to “sell” their solution to a skeptical audience, resulting in low sponsorship and support from the line organization. When leaders feel they have had a chance to voice their needs and concerns, they are much more likely to feel engaged in the process. They also want to know that either they or a credible representative has been involved in the design to ensure that the learning meets the needs and is practical versus theoretical.

Include a Subset of the Executives in the Design Process

In addition, many organizations are experiencing an increasing need to shorten the “time to market” of new executive and leadership development projects. This need for speed is in direct response to rapidly changing dynamics within organizations, industries, and the global economy. Traditional approaches to assessment and design involve conducting large numbers of lengthy executive interviews and highly iterative design and development processes, and often require six months or more to complete. Emphasis often is placed on designing the “perfect” solution, giving too much attention to design elements that often change upon review and adding to the time investment with little return on that investment.

However it doesn’t have to be that way. The design can be developed with great speed and leader buy-in with an appropriate process. One example of an approach we have found helpful is the Rapid-Cycle Design (RCD) process. Through this process we can quickly, and with a high degree of confidence, validate/identify specific executive/leadership capabilities needed to address marketplace challenges, achieve business objectives, generate creative strategy and program design options, and build early understanding and acceptance by key stakeholders through involving them in the process. RCD reflects the new realities of today’s rapid pace of change in the business world, higher expectations of leaders, and the ever-growing demand that executive/leadership development be tightly connected to company strategy.

Figure 1: Comparison of the Traditional Approach vs. Rapid-Cycle Design Process

Traditional Approach	Rapid-Cycle Design
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR owned and operated • “Cover the waterfront” with education options • Extensive interviews with executives • Slow and deliberate • Long time to market—no urgency • Hire a consultant to prescribe the solution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Line + HR owned and operated • Line leaders “interpret business strategy” into key development requirements • Target and focus/prioritize options to meet business goals • Web-based diagnostics to engage large numbers of key stakeholders + strategic executive interviews • Cut time to market in half • Design process flexibility allows higher frequency updating to match changing business cycles

RCD provides a way to achieve greater results through the optimum combination of speed and engagement. In the typical approach, too much effort is expended to develop the perfect strategy or program design (to “get it right”), and typically not enough effort is invested in generating acceptance of the concepts by key stakeholders. Focusing too much effort on getting it perfect (a lengthy and ultimately impossible task) and not enough on generating acceptance often minimizes the potential impact of a great idea. However, by generating ideas early in the process that are *directionally correct*, and then engaging line leaders in reacting to them, validating them, and contributing to the design, we are able to increase buy-in and generate a much higher-impact solution for the organization.

This type of process quickly produces several critical outcomes, many of which would not be generated through traditional means:

1. Enhanced understanding of the marketplace challenges and the business’ vision/strategy
2. Identification of the organizational and leadership capabilities required to achieve the business objectives
3. Prioritized areas of development and learning for executives/leaders based on the marketplace challenges

and business objectives

4. An executive/leadership development strategy and/or program design(s)
5. Design concepts and specifications for how and when the development/learning should occur (programs, processes, etc.)
6. Identification of implementation challenges and ways to ensure organizational support for the development strategy, programs and processes
7. Line leaders dedicated to the fulfillment of the leadership development plans—eager and willing to serve as ongoing “advisors” to HR and the executive/leadership development team

Download Figure 2 at the end of this article to see an illustration of the Rapid-Cycle Design process.

The Rapid-Cycle Design includes two complementary components: Rapid-Cycle Diagnostics and the Rapid-Cycle Design Workshop.

Rapid-Cycle Diagnostics

The Rapid-Cycle Diagnostics process allows us to identify and/or validate the capabilities that are needed to address the company's marketplace challenges and to achieve the strategy. In addition to traditional needs assessment methods, such as face-to-face interviews, Rapid-Cycle Diagnostics utilizes Web-based diagnostic surveys. This enables a broad reach into the organization to quickly obtain input from a large number of stakeholders regarding strategic business issues, marketplace challenges, competitive strengths and weaknesses, and required and current leadership capabilities. By using a Web-based survey, you can include all of your key stakeholders in the needs assessment portion. Everyone gets a say. The process generates significantly increased engagement and ownership, and is completed in about 10 days versus the months a traditional process requires.

Rapid-Cycle Diagnostics comprises four critical components:

1. **Strategic Review:** Understanding the background of the business and its challenges so the RCD methods can be tailored and focused. This involves reviewing reports, speeches, and other relevant data to develop a solid understanding of the company's vision, strategy, and values.
2. **Web-based Survey:** A brief survey that takes senior leaders less than 30 minutes to complete online.
3. **Executive Interviews:** Interview questions are designed to follow up on and clarify survey findings, and these in-depth interviews enable us to obtain top leaders' input and reactions to the survey findings. When an RCD workshop involves line leaders and there is enough time, the interview step can be eliminated in favor of an interactive review of survey findings during the workshop. Another time-saving approach is to conduct brief Web-supported focus group discussions that involve executives or other leaders in facilitated discussion of key questions. Instead of a typical one-to-one or focus group interview, collaborative technology and processes are used to quickly identify critical issues, foster deep understanding, create alignment, and identify critical issues that need to be addressed. This approach is especially valuable when leaders are distributed around the globe and bringing them together in one physical location for such a discussion is not viable.
4. **Findings:** With a solid foundation of first-hand data we then are able to identify key themes, trends, and management issues, as well as executive/leadership development needs and priorities, which will be used to “inform” the work of line leaders as they participate in a Rapid-Cycle Design Workshop, the core element of the Rapid-Cycle Design phase of activity.

Rapid-Cycle Design Workshop

Once the needs analysis is complete, the Rapid-Cycle Design Workshop processes utilize a blend of virtual activities and physical design workshops. This workshop engages HR and a group of credible line leaders who will adequately represent the organization's executives in defining the specific priorities and processes to be included in the executive/leadership development strategic solution. As a result, the ultimate solution is line leader “owned” and HR implemented. “If *they* build it, they will come.”

The Rapid-Cycle Design Workshop comprises four key components:

1. **Preparation/Pre-Work:** Workshop participants are invited to use a custom-designed Website to prepare them for workshop participation, to ensure that everyone starts at the same level of understanding.
2. **Rapid-Cycle Design Workshop:** This is a workshop that engages line and Human Resource/Executive Development/Leadership Development leaders in the work of converting business themes and capability gaps into the Executive Development/Leadership Development (ED/LD) strategy and/or program design.
3. **Sponsor Review and Input:** Following the RCD Workshop, key stakeholders review the recommended

strategy and/or program design(s) with the sponsor(s) of the initiative and solicit their input in order to:

- Develop support for the recommendations and commitment of resources to implement the recommendations
- Ensure that the recommendations are in alignment with the company's overall strategic objectives
- Ensure sponsor/stakeholder understanding of and commitment to implement the recommendations, in order to build the momentum needed to execute

4. Final Strategy and Program Design: After the sponsor's input to the recommended strategy and/or program design(s) has been obtained, the final version—integrating sponsor input and direction—is developed in detail.

As leadership development professionals adjust to the changing times, we are discovering that we can create meaningful learning experiences by using a powerful set of philosophies and tools that can significantly reduce the time required for needs analysis and design/development of executive/leadership development strategies and programs, while also significantly increasing senior line leaders' understanding, acceptance, and support by involving them in the process. With the right preparation, follow-through, and implementation, we will be able to create powerful programs that leaders will value and incorporate. Ultimately, we will do our part to prepare our corporate leaders to tackle the extreme challenges and wicked problems before them.

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