

Building Agile Leaders

Disruption” is a word frequently thrown around in business – but it is not an example of needless hype. Many hallmarks of day-to-day living in 2018, such as WhatsApp, would have been unfathomable to most people just ten years ago, and it’s very likely that the lifestyle constants of 2030 will seem equally unfathomable to us now.

In this volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment, the nature of work itself is undergoing a revolution. Roles that exist today will either be obsolete tomorrow, or radically changed:



a recent Jobs of the Future report by technology firm Cognizant mentions that “Genetic Diversity Officer”, “Digital Tailor”, and “Man-Machine Teaming Manager” will be some of the job titles emerging in the next decade.

But the changes are not isolated to singular jobs. They are occurring at a systemic level: whole organisational structures are now shifting away from hierarchies, and into complex matrices.

Even as organisations try to navigate the evolution of work, many are pre-emptively pivoting in their approach to grooming their leaders of tomorrow. They realise that traditional models of succession planning are fast becoming obsolete. Many experts suggest it is being taken over by specialist leadership and learning and development teams.

“For many organisations, succession planning is still a tick in a box,” says Arthur Lam, People and Organisation Lead for Asia-Pacific at Syngenta. “People often put in names of their buddies or those who will be close to them – they don’t look beyond or across their functional teams.

“All this is due to how we identify potentials to begin with. Leaders are afraid of taking risk in investing time developing successors into positions for fear of identifying the wrong employee.”

Succession planning is very much tagged to a specific position. “We don’t know if next year, that position will still exist, not to mention three to five years later,” Lam says. “Even if an organisation is conscientious in choosing the right person for the job, the question is whether that position will still be available.”

The answer, then, is in building a leadership talent pipeline, rather than having successors to particular positions.

“If you have someone who understands broad-based business across different functions, this person can be developed into a leader,” Lam adds.



In the past, and perhaps even sometimes in the present, promotions were very much based on hierarchy and years of experience. But Cynthia Lee Mai, Head of Talent and Learning, Asia-Pacific at HP Inc, says organisations which cling to that model, instead of identifying high potential talent based on agility, are likely to lose out.

“We can’t predict what’s going to happen in the next two years, much less four or five, so it is important for our high-potential talent to be able to learn and adapt to changes,” she told HRM Asia’s Leadership Development Congress last year. “If we can help them now to build their resilience and to handle stress and the fast pace of disruption, they’ll be equipped to take on whatever challenges are thrown at them in the future.”

Kung Fu fighting

In an era of exponentially accelerating change, the question of succession planning then becomes one of how to best nurture leaders who are agile and adaptable.

Harlina Sodhi, Senior Executive Vice President of HR, IDFC Bank, says she is close to discarding the succession planning function altogether. “It’s not about building up ‘successors’, but about having leaders who are agile and able to cross into any function – and who are able to evolve and adapt to



changes really quickly,” she tells HRM Magazine Asia. “We believe we can get anyone to do anything if they understand the art and science of experiences.”

This is about customer and employee experience specifically. “Netflix understands the experience it must give to its viewers. Amazon understands the experiences people must have when they come on their platform,” Sodhi notes.

Lam says preparing leaders requires a two-pronged approach of functional competencies and experiences. Ultimately, a future leader should be able to easily slot into a variety of positions depending on what the company needs at any given time.

“You want to help them understand the business as a whole; how it functions as a living system,” he says.

Practically speaking, this means one-year or half-year stints in changing functions like sales, business development, HR, finance – or even shadowing experiences where they sit by colleagues for the first two hours of every day to understand what those colleagues do and the challenges they face.

He cautions that HR must be modern and dynamic in how it approaches the learning and development pathways of such high-potential talent. Traditional workshops are of little value on their own. Instead, a key aspect of development should involve coaching and mentoring from management.

“If you watch Chinese kung fu movies, there’s often a young rookie with a few kung fu masters surrounding him, imparting each of their skills. Similarly, senior leadership needs to have joint ownership in developing high-potential talent by imparting each of their unique skills, competencies, and expertise,” Lam says.

But at the end of the day, the focus should be on identifying, within the talent, the factors that underpin learning agility: the ability to question the status quo (that is, innovate), pick up new skills quickly, be self-aware, and take progressive risks.

As Sodhi says, “I don’t care about knowledge or domain as much these days. Such gaps can be bridged.

“What I need them to have is learning agility, so they can quickly learn and adopt, and move on to do the next level role.”

By pivoting from grooming successors for specific positions, to instead nurturing leaders who are more versatile and adaptable, businesses will be armed with talent who can keep up with whatever the future brings. After all, in a time of disruption, the only constant is the organisation’s own ability to navigate and keep ahead of change.



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