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# EXPERIENCE- DRIVEN LEADER DEVELOPMENT



**MODELS, TOOLS, BEST PRACTICES, AND ADVICE  
FOR ON-THE-JOB DEVELOPMENT**



**WILEY**



## Praise for *Experience-Driven Leader Development*

“There is a wealth of experience presented in this volume that is both cutting edge and grounded in leader development research and theory. It is highly recommended reading for anyone interested in state-of-the-science leader development.”

**David Day**, Ph.D., Woodside Chair of Leadership and Management, The University of Western Australia Business School

“CCL pioneered research on experience-based leadership development, and now this book showcases a wealth of tried-and-true practices that transform research into reality. Leadership developers can access and adapt tested advice, models, organizational practices, and tools to their unique circumstances. Finally—some ready-to-use answers to how informal experience-based learning can be developed, designed, and supported in ways that boost performance for leaders and their organizations!”

**Victoria J. Marsick**, Ph.D., Department of Organization & Leadership, Columbia University, Teachers College

“*Experience-Driven Leader Development* is a comprehensive resource rich in examples, models and practical advice. This is a must read for anyone interested in developing leaders to achieve personal or organizational goals.”

**Marcia J. Avedon**, Ph.D., senior vice president, Human Resources and Communications Ingersoll Rand, Board of Governors., Center for Creative Leadership

# About This Book

## Why Is This Topic Important?

Learning from experience is *the* number one way that leaders develop. If you are reading this book, you probably already know this. It's evident in the research you follow. It's plain from your own observations and experiences in organizations. Despite the overwhelming evidence, however, experience-driven leader development receives considerably less attention and organizational resources compared to formal education, training, and coaching. Thus, there are untapped opportunities to optimize the value of experience for leader development.

## What Can You Achieve with This Book?

For the greatest impact, you want to harness the power of experience for leadership development. The way to do this doesn't lie in a formula or a step-by-step process. Rather, you can find different ways to answer that challenge using the array of tools, techniques, interventions, initiatives, and models collected in this volume. These are not simply ideas that ought to work. They come from practitioners like you, people who are enhancing experience-driven development in organizations and communities, in many different ways and with a wide variety of audiences. Whatever your approach, you can find in this book the tools and practices that will help you develop the best possible talent in organizations while having a positive and powerful effect on people's lives.

## How Is This Book Organized?

The book is organized into four sections, each targeting a critical element of experience-driven development.

In the first section, *Developmental Experiences: More Intentional for More People*, you will find ways to help more people access leadership experiences to target their particular development needs.

Section 2, *Leaders: Better Equipped to Learn from Experience*, addresses the fact that an experience does not guarantee learning. In these pages you will see how you can enhance leaders' ability to learn from their experiences so that they extract the maximum developmental value.

Section 3, *Human Resource Systems: Designed for Experience-Driven Development*, looks at the formal systems and processes for managing talent that many organizations have put into place. The contributions in this section describe how to build experience-driven development into those processes.

Section 4, *The Organization: Enabler of Experience-Driven Development*, takes on the shared values, the behaviors, and beliefs of employees, and processes and routines found in organizations. Rather than allowing those attributes to get in the way, you can use the knowledge in this section to influence an organization in ways that enable rather than inhibit experience-driven learning.

We have tagged each contribution based on whether it shares a tool (a specific activity or technique), an organizational practice (a formal process or initiative), a model (a conceptual framework that guides thinking and action), or advice (an overview of a topic with insights based on expertise or research).

# Experience-Driven Leader Development

**Models, Tools, Best Practices, and Advice for  
On-the-Job Development**

Cynthia D. McCauley  
D. Scott DeRue  
Paul R. Yost  
Sylvester Taylor

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Cover design: JPuda

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Published by Wiley

One Montgomery Street, Suite 1200, San Francisco, CA 94104-4594

[www.wiley.com](http://www.wiley.com)

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**CIP data is available on file at the Library of Congress.**

ISBN 978-1-118-45807-5 (hbk)

978-1-118-76765-8 (ebk)

978-1-118-76784-9 (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America

*HB Printing* 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# Foreword

## A Quarter Century and Counting: Getting Serious About Using Experience to Develop Talent

*Morgan W. McCall, Jr.*

University of Southern California

LONGER AGO THAN I care to admit, my colleagues and I set out to understand how experience shaped leadership talent. Back in those days we talked about managers and executives, reserving the term *leader* for something else, though it is common today to use the terms interchangeably. Also back in those days, *executive development* referred almost exclusively to programs, usually training programs, in house or out of house, designed and delivered by human resource professionals or academics. To be sure, there were experience-based practices such as career paths (for example, IBM's famous two years line, two years staff), rotational assignments, and *assistant to* positions, but conversations about systematically using on-the-job experience for development seldom got past "throw them in the fire and see who comes out the other side." Ironically, our effort to understand development through experience began in a place that, appropriate to the time, strove to be a premier leadership training center.

The product of our initial research into experience, *The Lessons of Experience* (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988), almost never made it into print. We had interviewed and surveyed successful executives about their experiences and what they had learned from them, and we hoped that by analyzing their stories we would change how development was viewed. But the original contract was with a major publishing house that seemed intent on a book with titillating stories about celebrity executives. Although we had plenty of tales to tell, they weren't about people you would have heard of. They were the stories of talented but regular people educated in the metaphorical "school of hard knocks" and by "learning in

the trenches.” Fortunately, a small publishing house picked up the book, which is still in print, and over time interest grew in using experience more systematically.

Fast-forward through the years as additional research accumulated on experience, what it can teach, and how it might be used more effectively to develop talent (see, for example, McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994; McCall, 1998; McCall, 2010; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002; Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997). But even though interest in the concepts increased, putting the ideas into practice stumbled forward in fits and starts. For the reasons so beautifully articulated in the introductory chapter of this book, the knowing-doing gap (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000) persists. True, the companies *Fortune* considers “most admired for their leaders” do more than others to use experience for development (Colvin, 2009), but experience-driven leadership development, despite some heroic efforts to implement it (see, for example, McCauley & McCall, in press), has not yet created a paradigm shift.

It is with delight that I discovered that there has been an insurgency building all along. Sung—but mostly unsung—heroes, operating in all kinds of organizations, quietly have developed tools and practices that make it possible to *do* experience-based talent development. Instead of trying to change the world, they have been trying to nudge, twist, cajole, prod, and otherwise influence practice. Not only that, these bricoleurs are willing to share the results of their efforts with anyone facing similar issues. But it took tenacity and insight to pull all of these pieces together and make them accessible, so hats off to McCauley, DeRue, Yost, and Taylor for providing this compendium of raw material.

Making experience-driven development work is not as easy as it sounds, and that’s why the tools, practices, and advice found in this book are so important. At first glance using experience seems straightforward: identify someone with leadership potential, put her in a stretch assignment, repeat several times, and voila—a leader. Even if it were this simple, to actually do it one would still need some way to identify potential, a way to identify the stretch assignments and choose the appropriate one, and some way to assess and track development across repeated trials.

But it isn’t that simple. How do you match people to experiences? What do you do to get the right person into the right experience at the right time—especially if the “right” assignment involves crossing an organizational boundary? Because people don’t always learn what an experience offers, what can you do to increase the odds of actually learning the lessons in the experience? What can you do if the needed experience isn’t available, either because it doesn’t exist or because it is being blocked by a solid performer? What happens if you make a mistake and put someone in an assignment that is over his head? Perhaps even more daunting, how can effective use of experience be embedded in an organization’s core so that it is a natural act rather than a peripheral one?

These are just a few of the practical questions that doing experience-based development raises, and for which answers will come only by trying things out and seeing how well they work for learning through experience. As Mary Catherine Bateson observed, “Insight, I

believe, refers to that depth of understanding that comes by setting experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another” (Bateson, 1994, p. 14). And that’s what this book is, at its heart: eighty or so experiments that will give you things to try out, to chew on, and that I hope will inspire others to follow suit in developing appropriate tools and sharing their accumulating wisdom.

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# Acknowledgments

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to name all the people who have played a role in developing and advancing experience-driven approaches to leader development. However, we want to acknowledge Morgan McCall, Mike Lombardo, and Bob Eichinger, each of whom has played a major role as thought leaders and champions of on-the-job leader development. The field owes much to their pioneering work.

This book would not have been possible without the many authors who joined us in this endeavor. We are enthusiastic about the models, tools, and practices they have crafted and grateful for the advice and lessons learned that they shared, as well as their willingness to respond to rounds of feedback and editing. We also appreciate the organizations that were open to having their tools and practices published as resources for others.

Finally, we want to thank Shaun Martin, Steve Rush, Peter Scisco, Taylor Scisco, and Martin Wilcox from the publication staff at the Center for Creative Leadership. Special thanks to Elaine Biech for sharing her expertise early in our process, and to Jill Pinto for helping to organize the disparate pieces of the book into an orderly manuscript (and doing it with a smile).



# Introduction

INDIVIDUALS BROADEN AND deepen their leadership capabilities as they do leadership work. In fact, there are good reasons to believe that learning from experience is *the* number one way that leader development happens.

As a leader development practitioner you know this. You know it from the research-based professional knowledge you consume and from your own observations and experiences in organizations. Yet the field continues to focus considerable time, money, and resources on the other two major sources of growth and development for leaders: (1) education and training, and (2) relationships for learning. U.S. companies spend an estimated \$13.6 billion annually on formal leader development (O’Leonard & Loew, 2012). The vast majority of this investment goes toward education and training. On average, another 20 percent or so of an organization’s leader development solutions are relationship-based (for example, formal coaching or peer networks). In contrast, the average percent of experience-driven leader development solutions range from 9 percent for first-level supervisors to 14 percent for senior managers (O’Leonard & Loew). The number one driver of leader development gets the least attention in leader development systems.

How can organizations rectify this imbalance and better harness the power of experiences for leader development? In our search for answers to this question, we connected with practitioners who had taken up the challenge of enhancing experience-driven development in organizations and communities—in many different ways and with a wide variety of audiences. We did not discover a formula or a step-by-step process, but rather an array

of tools, techniques, interventions, initiatives, and models. We invited these individuals to share their work. The result is a compendium of resources that you can use to jump-start, guide, and stimulate your own efforts to use experience more intentionally to develop leaders.

Let's first return to the imbalance and understand why it happens. A number of forces draw your attention and energy away from experience-driven development and toward coursework and relationship-based development:

- The field is part of a larger society that takes for granted that learning is something that happens in the classroom, yielding knowledge and skills that are put to use later in one's career or back on the job or in some other aspect of one's life. This cultural mindset is pervasive. Classroom language is even used when describing learning outside of that realm (for example, "the school of hard knocks" or "leaders teaching leaders"). Putting experience-based development ahead of formal education and training is countercultural—not just for leader development professionals but for their customers, too.
- Practitioners have developed a wealth of knowledge and expertise about how to design and deliver effective programs, coaching initiatives, and formal mentoring processes. Done well, these practices do make a difference—they impact the development of leaders in important ways. It is no surprise that people focus on what they know how to do well, particularly when they can point to the positive impact of their work. There is much less knowledge in the field about how to best use experiences to develop leaders.
- Experience-driven development is messy. Programs have a beginning and an end, specific objectives, and design elements that support those objectives. They can be managed, evaluated, and continuously improved. On-the-job experiences are unfolding and unscripted. Teasing out the impact of a particular experience on a leader is tricky. When training or coaching, the practitioner is right there guiding and encouraging the learner. Give a leader a stretch assignment, and he or she is in charge of any learning that happens.
- Experience-driven development is less visible. It is hard to quantify and, when done really well, is a natural part of business and organizational processes. The closer you come to embedding leader development into the ongoing work of the organization, the less visibility you have for your work. In fact, a real success means that leaders themselves will own and take credit for the development of leaders in the organization.

But it's not as if the field has been devoid of experience-driven development practices. Job rotation programs are common at entry levels in organizations. Organizations often move high potential managers through a series of assignments to broaden their knowledge

and skills in preparation for higher-level leadership responsibilities. Apprenticeship models of learning and development are standard in numerous professions. Action learning is in the toolkit of many practitioners.

Yet we sense a shift in the field. Not a shift away from coursework and relationships as important modes of learning, but rather a move to make learning from experience a more central part of the practice. What's the evidence for this shift?

- *Increased visibility for the concept of experience-driven development.* You can find more publications on the topic. The topic shows up more in conferences and practitioner forums. More research—some of it published in top academic journals—is available. In human resource circles there is even a catchphrase, “70–20–10,” to describe leader development that puts more emphasis on job experiences (the 70) than relationships and training (the 20 and 10). Popularized by one consulting firm (Lombardo & Eichinger, 1996), the phrase is now used regularly in the field.
- *More sophistication in established experience-based practices.* For example, action learning projects that are part of leadership development programs increasingly engage participants in demanding work with real consequences for the organization (rather than safer study-and-recommend projects that might simply end up on a shelf somewhere). Take expatriate assignments as another example. Organizations are now more likely to carefully select candidates, prepare them prior to the assignment, coach them during the assignment, and capitalize on the expatriates' gained insights, connections, and skills in their next assignment.
- *Ongoing experimentation with new practices.* As awareness and understanding of experience-driven development has grown, practitioners have been at the forefront in designing new ways to make it happen and to support it throughout the organization. If you are like us, as you read about the models, tools, and practices in this book, you'll be excited—and sometimes surprised—about innovation in the field.
- *Practices that link and integrate experiences, relationships, and coursework for learning.* One of the criticisms of the 70–20–10 concept is the implication that these three ways of learning represent separate paths. However, what we see in practice is the integration of these three approaches within the same initiative or practice to get the biggest boost for the investment.

This book is about how individuals in the field are making this shift happen. Before you jump in to learn directly from these individuals, we want to accomplish two things in this Introduction: (1) provide you with a brief overview of the stream of research that helped fuel the shift and (2) orient you to the content of this book.

## The Research Catalyst

A significant stimulus for the shift toward more focus on experience-driven leadership development happened in 1988 with the publication of *The Lessons of Experience: How Successful Executives Develop on the Job*, authored by Morgan W. McCall, Jr., Michael M. Lombardo, and Ann M. Morrison. The book became a catalyst, moving the focus away from what distinguishes effective leaders to how leaders are developed. As a result, experience-driven development emerged as a new focus for organizations and leader development professionals.

The book was based on qualitative data from 191 executives who were asked to reflect on their career and identify three key experiences that had led to a lasting change in the way they managed. The executives described their experiences in detail, including the skills and perspectives they gleaned from these experiences. The analysis of the executives' stories yielded five categories of key developmental experiences:

- *Challenging Assignments*: A job or a task within a job that stretched the executive because it was new, complex, or demanding. Examples include being responsible for turning around an operation in trouble and moving from a line to a staff position.
- *Other People*: Positive and negative role models—primarily bosses and others higher in the organization—who strongly influenced the executive's approach to management.
- *Hardships*: Setbacks and failures that generated a sense of loss and aloneness. Examples include business mistakes, demotions and missed promotions, and personal life traumas.
- *Coursework*: Formal training and academic programs.
- *Personal Life Experiences*: Experiences that occurred in the family, in school, or in the community, and that varied in nature from difficult situations to inspirational ones.

A majority of the experiences (56 percent) were challenging assignments, and for the most part, the other people and hardship experiences were also happening on the job.

That people learn a great deal from their experiences was certainly not a new discovery. Learning from cycles of action and reflection is a familiar concept in the field of adult learning. What was galvanizing about *Lessons of Experience* was threefold. First, it grounded this abstract concept of learning from experience in the vivid, real-world experiences of executives. It's like the idea of "seeing is believing"—the stories provided the depth and texture that compelled the reader to believe that the concept was significant. Second, it went beyond saying "people learn from their experiences." The research pointed out what kinds of experi-