

GET LEADERS IN THE GAME SOONER

9 | Generating Assignments That Rapidly Build Skill, Knowledge, and Experience

We have discussed the need to get your leaders in the game. Well, it's game time, and the growth you need won't happen with your future stars on the sidelines. You will need to take some risks, and you might have to rethink the concept of *experience*. If your organization is like most, there are high-performing players with leadership potential who don't yet have enough experience to be placed into key roles. It's simply too risky, which raises a dilemma: You need to get less-experienced leaders more involved in the business, but they don't have enough experience to step in where the business really needs them.

This is where many organizations make a costly mistake: They wait. They default to the assumption that experience comes with time. In talent reviews they make time-based readiness estimates like “*ready in two years*” or “*ready in five years.*” But it's not sufficient to let time dictate how quickly your leaders

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gain the skill and experience needed to be ready for larger roles. Readiness does not come with having the same job title for a period of time; it evolves as leaders face challenges. We call them *growth challenges*, and you can develop skill, knowledge, and experience much faster by providing accelerated learners with the right ones at the right time.

Think of growth challenges as *missions* for your accelerated learners. Business missions. Leadership missions. Crucial errands to be carried out—not reckless, haphazard pursuits that put careers and the business at risk. Growth challenges are intentional assignments that make a targeted impact on individual leaders and the organization. They are not simply identified; they are *designed* by you and your management team to meet business objectives while growing the specific leadership skills, knowledge, and experience that your accelerated learners need.

When this aspect of your acceleration system is functioning, your senior leaders will be continually scanning the business for leadership needs that can become growth challenges. Then, senior managers will match these challenges to accelerated learners whose development needs would be well served by conquering them. It's not complex work, but with a bit of discipline and application of some foundational principles, your senior management team will quickly build proficiency in this crucial component of your acceleration process.

Stop Thinking About Jobs and Start Thinking About Growth Challenges

Senior leaders typically equate growth challenges with jobs—a view that severely inhibits acceleration. Here's why: In a traditional scenario, leaders on their way up the organizational ladder are moved from one position to the next, ideally through a progression that, over time, educates them about

important aspects of the business and presents them with incrementally more difficult assignments that build leadership experience. Under this job-by-job development approach, acceleration can be accomplished only by a) shortening a leader's tenure in a given job and offering a promotion sooner, b) taking a risk to place a leader into a job in unfamiliar functional territory, or c) promoting a leader two or more levels beyond his or her current role. These tactics can be useful, but when applied as the sole means of accelerating leadership readiness, they often lead to damaging consequences such as:

- **Leaders change jobs, but don't grow leadership skills.** Development goals tend to be nonspecific, with no ties to learning outcomes, because senior leaders wrongly presume the requisite learning will occur automatically as part of the new job. It doesn't—not without the right planning.
- **Senior management becomes overly cautious in developing leaders.** Organizations with severe leadership shortages are forced to consider high-risk job moves, because they tend to represent major leaps of responsibility. Without the right preparation, however, the success rate of leaders making these jumps will be mixed at best, offering little reinforcement for continuing to take such risks. With no developmental alternative to job moves, management learns to take no risks at all.
- **The rate of leadership growth grinds to a standstill.** The organization quickly runs short of job openings, leaving no developmental opportunities for many accelerated learners.

If you aim to accelerate the growth of more leaders earlier in their careers, you'll need to plan for more than just job moves (rotations, promotions, lateral transfers). With your senior management team, generate growth challenges that meet accelerated learners' unique needs so that they can prepare quickly for larger business leadership roles without having to change jobs.ⁱ

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Growth challenges are assignments that prepare accelerated learners to perform effectively against the success profile of higher levels of leadership.

Specifically, growth challenges:

- Help leaders quickly gain experience important for success in future jobs.
- Enable leaders to develop competencies and overcome derailers.
- Provide leaders with broader insights, understanding, knowledge, and confidence, which prepares them for higher-level roles.
- Can be short-term (one to six months) or long-term (one year or longer).
- Can be part of a job change, but very often are not.

Examples of High-Impact Growth Challenges

- Building and presenting a business case for (or against) a merger, acquisition, joint venture, or strategic alliance.
- Implementing an organizationwide process or system change.
- Developing and implementing a plan to cut business costs or control inventories.
- Negotiating agreements with external alliance partners or regulatory organizations.
- Leading in a high-pressure or high-visibility situation, such as a media relations challenge.
- Leading a reduction in force (RIF).

Shifting the focus from job moves to growth challenges promotes more acceleration, but there is an important caution: Some senior executives lack acumen for this sort of growth planning and might even resist taking it on, viewing it as Talent Management's (HR's) responsibility to generate accelerated-development assignments. But to create the *missions* that challenge your emerging leaders in ways that truly elevate their readiness for larger roles, senior business leaders need to *join* Talent Management in identifying

assignments that best match learners' development needs. Remember, the goal is to get your players in the game—the business game—so your senior leaders must generate growth challenges that do so.

Growth Challenges Offer a Faster Way to Prepare Leaders for Big Roles

Consider the risk your organization might be willing to take in elevating an unproven leader two levels above her mid-level leadership position, or by placing a staff executive into a product leadership position for which he has no experience. Failure in key assignments is not only costly to the business, but it also can ruin promising careers. On the other hand, success can be an exhilarating career turning point and can create great value to the organization.

Testing an individual's ability to conquer new challenges is worth the risk if the person has the right success profile. That includes skills (competencies), knowledge, experience, and personal attributes. But many organizations place too much weight on experience, assuming that it only comes with time in a certain job. To the contrary, with the right success profile, experience can be gained very rapidly. The far greater risk is when an individual has personal attributes (particularly personality derailers) that would likely prevent success in the target assignment. In these cases, the accelerated learner has a much greater chance of failure, even with the motivation to learn and succeed.

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Consider this situation, which occurred recently in a global chemicals corporation: Two leaders were being considered for the role of country manager for a business unit in France. The incumbent was scheduled to retire in a year, and no successor had been named yet. The first candidate, Desh, had limited management experience and would have been required to jump two leadership levels, from a different business unit and to a culture that was literally foreign

to him. Known for having a “smart business mind,” Desh was an exceptional performer. He was a quick learner who sought and accepted feedback readily, easily adapted to different environments, networked effectively, and used the Interaction Essentials consistently.

The second candidate, Irina, had more management experience and would have needed to jump only one level. She had been a leader in this business unit, but in a different country. Although she was a solid performer, some potential derailing patterns had emerged recently. As Irina’s responsibilities expanded, she became far more controlling. To make matters worse, she began to have difficulty keeping her emotions in check. She displayed angry outbursts coupled with demands for her team to rework large-scale efforts at the last minute. Irina was receptive to feedback on these issues, however, and seemed motivated to overcome them.

The outcome? The European VP took the riskier path and selected Desh over Irina, who would have had to overcome behavior patterns rooted in underlying personal attributes. But the company didn’t simply place Desh into the new role and let him sink or swim. The European VP identified a key need in his business unit—revamping the customer relationship management system—and assigned Desh to tackle it. So, the organization relocated Desh to France, and he went to work on a highly critical growth assignment that provided business-relevant experience and knowledge of the France unit. Desh’s assignment included:

- Interviewing and spending time with key leaders and associates in the France business unit, learning about issues, challenges, initiatives, people, processes, etc.
- Assisting with an in-progress analysis to alter the branding of a struggling product line in France.
- Participating in reviews with key French customers to understand their needs and concerns.

- Collaborating with a sales process-improvement team that had been deployed to reduce the cost of sales in France.
- Debriefing his experiences with the very successful country manager of Germany to get coaching and insight.


Desh also participated in leadership training aimed directly at the challenges he was expected to encounter in his new role. Through a combination of formal learning and working with an internal executive coach, he learned more sophisticated strategy execution methods, tactics for building talent in a larger and more complex unit, and advanced *influence* techniques. With his coach he learned and practiced focus Key Actions in advance of his new role and developed plans to apply them immediately upon starting it.

In less than a year, Desh gained extensive knowledge, skill, and insight into the unit he soon would lead, helping him get off to a fast start and establish strong performance early in his tenure. The growth challenge he completed was instrumental to his success and soon became a model of how the organization could rapidly elevate the readiness of its high-potential leaders without having to risk placing them into key jobs prematurely.

In this instance a need to fill a vacant position precipitated the high-speed learning process for the leader, but the right growth challenges can have a rapid effect on skills and knowledge whether there is a job waiting or not. Powerful

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learning assignments like the ones identified by the chemicals company are plentiful in every organization. They can be identified quickly, with little or no disruption to business as usual. Some are short-term assignments (one to six months); others are longer term (a year or more). Some represent small risks; others carry significant risk and require more support from managers, mentors, coaches, and HR. With a bit of structure and discipline (which we focus on next), you can hone your management team's ability to generate the right

growth assignments and dramatically increase the rate at which your leaders gain the experience they need to take on bigger roles. 

With Planning, Growth Challenges Offer Sizeable Returns

Positive learning outcomes won't just *happen*. The mid-level leader won't develop her skill in *Leading Change* if she doesn't intentionally practice the behaviors most essential to her growth. Success requires that long-term growth challenges be assigned with discipline. Harvard development scientist, Professor