LEADERS READY NOW

Accelerating Growth in a Faster World

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From the Authors of Grow Your Own Leaders
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A true story: An executive team sat around a conference table papered with spreadsheets and file folders as the CEO rubbed his forehead, poring over the profiles of the organization’s highest-potential leaders and listening to updates on their development progress. Feeling the weight of ambitious growth targets, an impatient shareholder audience, and an agitated board, the senior team had confronted the urgent need for change, launching new performance imperatives. Soon they would have no choice but to push less-experienced leaders into broader, more formidable assignments.

Recognizing that their emerging leaders would need help, the top team had implemented an aggressive leadership-acceleration program, and now was the time to harvest its impact and begin deploying leaders to key assignments.

*It wasn’t going well.*
After hours of studying profiles, debating requirements, evaluating progress, and confronting difficult truths, the CEO looked around the table at his team. “We don’t have the leadership to do this,” he said flatly. “We’re not ready.”

Who was this CEO? The company? Their business issues? It doesn’t matter. Take your pick. Countless business leaders are encountering their own version of this moment right now. They are feeling the same sense of alarm as they realize that the needs of the business stretch beyond the capabilities of the leaders inside it and, worse, that the investments they’ve made to build a stronger leadership bench haven’t worked. It’s a position no CEO wants to occupy, but it’s one that many face as the competitive world hurtles forward. Too many are at a loss for how to respond. Too many are not ready.

Fast World, Slow Growth

This is not a book about how to lead. It’s a book about how to make leaders grow. It will be valuable to you if your organization’s future is in danger because of a lack of leadership and you’ve concluded that you must aggressively address the problem. Those who feel their leaders are growing at a satisfactory pace will not be inspired here. This book will be useful only if you feel it is time to take bold steps to prepare your leaders for bigger challenges—more quickly, more continuously, and fully enough so that they are ready—ready to lead in the competitive, chaotic world that we have come to know as the new normal.

Ready now.

Start by considering what it means to be ready. Are your leaders becoming more so, or are they struggling to keep pace? When weighing strategic alternatives, are leaders available, or do gaps create business risk? Is the energy and vitality inside your organization increasing or waning? And here’s the tough one: When you say “Ready in two years” or “Ready with development,” is it true? Will the time and effort create the readiness you need quickly enough?
Currently, the leadership-readiness curve is trending dangerously in the wrong direction, even as organizations worldwide are investing more than ever to try to turn it around. The evidence has become so glaring that a grim recitation of statistics would be superfluous, so let’s summarize instead: With leadership development consistently ranking among CEOs’ top priorities over the last two decades, organizations have more than doubled their global investment, pouring billions of dollars into preparing the next generation(s) of leaders. But during this time, by every measure, leadership readiness has declined precipitously. Survey after survey, in virtually every sector (some far worse than others), reveals a deep erosion of confidence in leadership as well as a disconcerting lack of bench strength. Even the most optimistic estimates leave the typical organization leaderless more than half the time when needing to fill open assignments. For some, it is far worse: In the C-suite, executives routinely delay or withdraw from strategic priorities for lack of available leadership, and initiatives fail far more often than they would with a firmer hand on the tiller. As the rate of change accelerates, the efforts to help leaders keep up are themselves falling behind.

More than a decade ago, we published *Grow Your Own Leaders* to help organizations address their leadership-readiness problems, laying down the practical foundations of how to identify and accelerate the growth of high-potential leaders to prepare them for higher-level assignments. We called these leadership groups *Acceleration Pools*, and since that time, more than a thousand organizations across the globe—businesses in every industry, health care systems, government agencies, civil service groups, universities, churches, charities, and more—have implemented the Acceleration Pool concept. These organizations have been shown (via independent research) to outpace others in growing leaders and to have larger supplies of ready leaders and stronger performance among them. But as encouraging as these successes have been, the velocity of global competition has made it necessary not only to *grow your own leaders* but also to grow more of them, faster, in a far more complex world.
But is faster even possible? It’s difficult to imagine asking leaders to learn any faster than what life requires already. However dire our leadership shortages may be, it is clear that we won’t overcome them by attempting to cram more into the hyper-driven lives and overloaded minds of emerging leaders. Becoming ready now will not happen simply by trying to run faster.

**Energizing Acceleration**

To speed up in a frenzied world, one must first stop and rethink. But if you are a CEO or business leader seeking fresh insight on how to fundamentally change your organization’s leadership equation, the quest can be exhausting. Two things are true about the current state of guidance on how to grow leaders faster:

1. The intense global need for leaders has sparked a proliferation of highly redundant ideas, often repackaging tried-and-true principles and best practices or making incremental enhancements that are pitched to sound revolutionary. CEOs and HR leaders, often in desperation, must read anything and everything to find any pearl of wisdom or insight that might boost their efforts.

2. The established guidelines for developing leaders now exist in a far more complex world, and many no longer have the impact they once had. This reinforces the need described in the first point and creates a vicious cycle in which the same ideas continue to be recycled, while the need for leaders further outstrips the ability of organizations to grow them.

Don’t worry—we won’t be promising a silver-bullet solution or warning that you can avoid disaster only by adopting our unique and perfect formula. You don’t need us—not really. Everything you need to accelerate the growth of leadership is already inside your organization. You have the people, the resources, the budget, and, yes, the time to make your leadership grow. But if you’re among the 74 percent of top leaders who say their succession management systems aren’t functioning as intended, or the 85 percent who
say they lack the leadership bench necessary to address emerging business challenges, then you’ve stalled and could use a jump start or, at least, some fresh directions.

But figuring out your own formula can’t possibly mean that things have to get more crowded with ideas than they are already. With all that has been learned, written, and applied, haven’t we discovered enough of what we need to know about what it takes to grow leaders? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, we do know a great deal about the tools, technology, content, and methods that influence the speed of growth among leaders, and tremendous progress has been made.

But no, tools and technology do not grow leaders. Leaders grow leaders. And even the latest and greatest inventions do not change the prospects for closing the leadership gap. While the talent-management industry has poured incalculable resources into the advancement of tools and technology, the muscles of human effort for growing leaders have atrophied. It seems the more we invest in things, the less adept we are at investing in each other.

In our work throughout the world, we have asked executives countless times, “What does it feel like when you’re learning at high speed?” Their responses are universally consistent: With rapid learning, there is fear and excitement, worry and anticipation, terror and thrill, anxiety and experimentation, risk and possibility. Accelerated learning generates tremendous energy.

But as you’re probably all too aware, most leadership-development programs fail to spark this brand of energy—or much energy at all. Participants may describe them as educational and interesting or even business relevant or strategically important. But these descriptors are a far cry from the fear, excitement, terror, and thrill that leaders associate with their moments of high-speed learning.
Fear and excitement happen with risk, and that energy turns into growth when you take the right risks, at the right times. This means moving with alacrity and getting quickly to the heart of what really matters when building the skills and capabilities of your people. Speeding up growth will not happen simply by making learning activities happen more quickly. It will occur when you thoughtfully and systematically take risks that ignite energy in your leaders—in the form of uncertainty and enthusiasm. In our experience the leadership-acceleration efforts that fall short of their objectives are bound by a common description: They are aggressive in the pursuit of structure and application of tools, but anemic in the pursuit of energy.

If your acceleration efforts are falling short, you will not fix the problem with more process, tools, technology, or teams of smart consultants. The most fundamental barrier to growing leaders quickly is a lack of energy, and that energy can be generated by boldness—your boldness.

Make no mistake: You definitely will need some tools and processes to make the most of your efforts. But if you want more leaders ready now and you want them faster, you must use your acceleration toolbox far more shrewdly, and with a willingness to take on much more risk. As a management team, you must create and embrace the fear, excitement, anxiety, and experimentation that individual leaders experience in their moments of rapid learning. You must be willing to feel uncomfortable and remain open to uncertain outcomes as individuals and as a company. Only then will the leadership gap begin to close.
Instead of creating energy, your processes are draining it.

The fastest, most powerful learning experiences convert fear and uncertainty into pride and wisdom. Consider several examples:

• A young, inexperienced leader takes on an assignment to lead a team of people older and more experienced than she.

• An operations executive is suddenly given responsibility to run the IT function, which he knows nothing about.

• A new CEO faces a sudden market crisis that requires a major strategic and cultural shift in direction.

Big first-time challenges like these administer a shock, instantly bringing the leader to attention. It’s a jolt of uncertainty that carries a current of doubt; but with effort, discipline, and support, that doubt transforms into action and movement. Ultimately, if and when the challenge is conquered, a backward glance leaves the leader with confidence and insight that can be applied to the next challenge. It is in conquering difficult assignments such as these that leaders become ready to take on bigger leadership roles.

The challenge is scaling this concept beyond isolated, reactive incidents and creating a repeatable dynamic that causes entire cadres of leaders to become ready. For most organizations, scale becomes structure, but structure without energy kills acceleration. It’s not uncommon for management to roll out learning initiatives to groups of anywhere from 10 to 10,000 people, after which those new processes become burdened with guidelines, meetings, documentation, mandatory events, and progress checks. Participants—often the company’s busiest people—work diligently to make time for a process that has many moving parts but little connection to what they view as mission critical. Soon, what was built to generate the energy of growth dissolves into apathy and annoyance at processes that seem (and may well be) devoid of business importance.
It is not the process itself that is failing—it is the absence of energy to fuel it. Without energy, any processes you put in place will be unsustainable. How to rally the initiatives? By reexamining the architecture of your acceleration efforts and rewriting the rules of the game so that more is at stake, more is to gain, and all the players have a clearer understanding of their roles and how they will have an impact on success. You must be far more aggressive in the use and application of your existing approaches, setting bigger development targets for more people earlier in their careers.

**There’s no “why.”**

The business reason for acceleration is often summarized like this: “We’re running desperately short of leaders, and if we can’t get more of them—good ones—very soon, we’ll be in trouble. It’s not an option to buy talent from the outside, so we have only two options: grow from within or fail.”

This usually causes management to sit up straight and pay close attention to the next part of the meeting: How to solve this? What most executives are thinking at this point is basically what’s going through their heads when the organization faces a quality problem or a service problem or a cost problem: We need to analyze the causes, develop solutions, and execute a plan.

Except that acceleration is different. An organization can fix a quality, service, or cost problem with new and better processes that people learn to execute with discipline. But a leadership shortage will be filled only with energy for growth—fear and excitement—which then fuels the process and discipline that an acceleration system also requires. So, aiming to solve the talent problem demands a plan to solve the energy problem.
Energy will grow as you take on more risk with developing your people. But bigger risks require bigger whys. Why grow? Why accelerate? For management, the why is the business case for acceleration. In the absence of a strong one, it is difficult to convince senior executives to take any risks (much less big ones) with development. In fact, acceleration isn’t appropriate for every organization (e.g., companies in rapid start-up mode may need to emphasize talent acquisition, while others may be stocked with so much talent that the main challenge is retention).

For individual leaders, the why is the personal case for acceleration. Without one, it is difficult to convince individuals to take big chances with their own development. The typical conversation with an individual leader highlights the potentially exciting, lucrative, and influential future that acceleration can bring; the leader can—if the process works—learn, earn, and determine much more in the organization. For most, this would be enough to garner full interest and enthusiasm for whatever may come next. But interest and enthusiasm are simply not enough. Remember that the most powerful learning experiences—the ones that truly transform leadership capability—are characterized less by design than by necessity. When asked how they came into their moments of rapid learning, leaders routinely report reasons such as, “They needed me, and I was the only one available who could do it,” or “I thought I could make a big difference,” or “My boss believed I could do it, so I agreed.”

When it comes to creating energy for acceleration, there is a vast difference between “You could benefit from this” and “We need you.” To create a more powerful why for both management and individual learners, it is insufficient to make a case on behalf of only the business or the person. You will need to appeal to both. “We (the business) need you (the person) to take a big chance.” Your case must be compelling to both management and each individual, conveying why the organization needs leaders to step up, what it needs from each leader, and why it’s worth taking big risks to achieve faster, more significant growth.
You focus on doing things to leaders rather than with them.

As a business leader, you may speak frequently to individuals or groups of executives about the future of the business, and perhaps you review key leaders’ development plans or even act as a mentor. All these activities are useful, but they are not what accelerated learners really want and need most from you—and they are not the activities that generate the greatest amount of energy in an acceleration system.

Ask any motivated, emerging leader what would truly ignite his or her energy, and the answer will likely involve working with senior leaders to solve current business dilemmas. As one acceleration-program participant put it, “The leadership training is good, but what I really want is a piece of the action.” She wasn’t talking about more money; she wanted a piece of the business action—to work more closely with leaders who were in the thick of it.

This doesn’t mean that you have to put core businesses at risk by giving junior executives too much responsibility—it means that top leaders need to reframe the ways in which they spend time with accelerated learners and create development experiences that are truly transformational. Instead of offering a problem for an individual learner to solve alone (with tips and guidance from a senior leader), the organization needs to pinpoint a problem that a senior leader or team currently faces and then enlist the accelerated learner to help solve it. Leaders and learners should work on business challenges together, learning and growing simultaneously.

To learn the game, one must play the game. If you aim to prepare more leaders—and do it more quickly—you must put them in the game, and much sooner than what might feel comfortable. You must play with them, learning and growing together, faster than you otherwise would.
If you aim to prepare more leaders—and do it more quickly—you must put them in the game, and much sooner than what might feel comfortable.
The Acceleration Imperatives and How the Best Use Them

Your organization may have some good processes in place to support learning, and because they likely took considerable effort to implement, they may be precisely what is preventing you from achieving the growth you need. To truly transform the speed and efficiency of your acceleration efforts, good won’t always be good enough. You may have to question the efficacy of processes that were difficult to install. But relax, you don’t have to be great at everything, and you don’t have to dismantle and rebuild your systems all at once (in fact, you shouldn’t try). In this book we’ll contrast good practices to great ones and outline those that have helped organizations radically improve the results.
of their acceleration efforts. In each case they didn’t try to do everything perfectly. They made choices about how to channel their efforts and focused on the specific aspects of their acceleration systems that were most essential in their context. We call these Acceleration Imperatives, and while you don’t have to excel in each, you’ll need to be aware enough about them to avoid system breakdowns.

A leadership-acceleration system is like an automobile, run by systems that operate in sync: ignition, transmission, suspension, exhaust, heating and cooling, and so on. The systems in the realm of leadership acceleration must complement one another, although many organizations are like a car that comes off the assembly line missing essential components—no matter how high-quality the car’s elements, it simply won’t run as it should. For example, an organization that focuses only on refining its talent-review process may succeed in establishing a good understanding of its leadership supply and demand, but it will not achieve accelerated growth. Making it work requires installing the rest of the acceleration system.

Other organizations resemble high-performance cars being driven far too cautiously. All the components are in place, but no one steps on the accelerator, leaving a potentially dynamic system idle. Assessments are superficial and offer little business-relevant data; feedback lacks impact; development plans lack creativity and risk. In the end, all the process elements fail to spark the energy and growth that are so badly needed.

Your job is...

*to learn to drive faster.*
Whether the problem is missing components or overly conservative driving, the solution to poor performance is not to junk the machine; rather, it’s to complete its assembly so that it’s fully functional. Then, tune the car to suit your specific driving needs, and press down on the gas pedal. Your job is to learn to drive faster.

None of the Acceleration Imperatives are new concepts; the lessons they teach come from more than a thousand organizations worldwide with whom we have worked to implement them—many with great success, some not. If you are a veteran of leadership acceleration, you likely have had hands-on experience with most or all of them.

But while the descriptions of each imperative might seem like commonsense steps to success, organizations whose acceleration efforts are thriving have very different ways of describing what happens in relation to each of the six. There’s a big difference between organizations that simply install system components and those that relentlessly pursue acceleration and achieve higher-impact results.

This book is organized into six sections aimed at illustrating the difference between good programs and efforts that help leaders learn, and exceptional efforts that make real growth happen, and dramatically improve leadership readiness. Remember, you need not be great in every area to achieve significant gains. Many of our most successful client partners have carefully chosen one or two Acceleration Imperatives and focused on being great in those areas (without completely neglecting the others). With respect to those Imperatives, they don’t let “good” get in the way of “great.”
There’s a big difference between organizations that simply install system components and those that relentlessly pursue acceleration and achieve higher-impact results.
Section I: Commit

We’ve seen senior management teams not only sanction and participate in leadership-acceleration efforts, but also take ownership of them and become intensely competitive about achieving real results that strengthen the business. Leadership acceleration is a central business priority, and it’s managed that way.

**Good**
- When you have management’s support and involvement

**Great**
- When management competes to make acceleration happen

Section II: Aim

Some organizations are satisfied to simply have a competency model in place. Others turn their model into an indispensable tool that management and individual leaders use routinely to point their efforts to where the business is going, how the context is changing, and what they must do to be ready for it.

**Good**
- When you have a competency model in use organizationwide

**Great**
- When your leadership model is an indispensable business resource

Section III: Identify

For some organizations the annual talent review isn’t annual at all, nor is it simply a review. Great talent reviews are talent investment dialogs that happen routinely as part of business discussions. Informed by excellent data, they accurately isolate the most critical talent gaps, identify the individuals who have what it takes to grow as leaders, and secure resources to make it happen quickly so the leaders can be deployed where they are most needed.

**Good**
- When management participates in the annual talent review

**Great**
- When executives become shrewd and incisive in identifying potential
Section IV: Assess
Most executives won’t make big bets on the development of their people without a way to mitigate the risk. Nor should they. Organizations that make great use of assessment leverage methods that enable their executives to see how big bets (e.g., placing a young leader into a major leadership role) will play out and precisely how they can craft accelerated development plans that will make them pay off.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Good</th>
<th>Great</th>
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<tr>
<td>When you use assessment for key roles and high-risk scenarios</td>
<td>When management is addicted to objective talent data</td>
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Section V: Grow
Helping emerging leaders learn new things isn’t enough when trying to quickly convert them from not ready to ready now. New learning must be applied. Practice and experimentation need to become routine. The great ones don’t just enable learning, they ignite the application of leadership approaches that are essential to business success.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Great</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When you have a wide array of learning options available for leaders</td>
<td>When you ignite application and practice of the leadership approaches your business needs</td>
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Section VI: Sustain
Whatever form your acceleration efforts take, they should be built to outlast you and everyone else in the organization. A few organizations have figured out that this happens only when there is tension—positive tension—that builds passion, a common purpose, and devotion to ensuring that growth happens.

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<th>Good</th>
<th>Great</th>
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<tr>
<td>When you hold leaders accountable to fulfill their assigned roles</td>
<td>When you aggressively manufacture positive growth tension</td>
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Strap In; It’s Time to Speed Up

Becoming ready now requires a decision to embark on a journey of continual acceleration. There is no single magical event, test, or training course that will change your organization’s ability to grow leaders faster. Coordination matters, but while the six Acceleration Imperatives imply a sequence, reality seldom adheres to it. Each organization—some with more experience than others—begins the journey from a unique starting point and makes progress by leveraging strengths and building in the areas that will create the greatest return within its unique business context.

Through the Acceleration Imperatives, this book offers six practical ways for you to challenge yourself and your organization to become bolder and to cultivate the energy, risk, collaboration, and ownership needed to sustain acceleration over time and produce tangible results. There is no perfect sequence, nor must you master every component before you begin to realize success. You determine the prescription and scale the challenge to your unique context.

Unlike some others, we don’t view the challenge as a “war for talent.” No war is necessary when the forces of energy, passion, and shared risk are rallied to the common purpose of growing yourself and your organization from within. That is how your organization can grow more leaders ready now.
Defining the Essentials of Accelerating Growth

It would be a mistake for us to convey that acceleration is yet another new program in a world where too many already exist. It is not. Acceleration refers to the organizational effort to make leadership grow more rapidly, and the six Acceleration Imperatives are the categories of tactics to make that happen. Acceleration does not replace your talent-management or succession-management systems; it energizes them to maximize the velocity of growth and readiness for the future.

The imperatives represent a lens through which any effort to grow leadership can be evaluated and enhanced, but they are most applicable where speed of growth is paramount. For that reason, most will find the imperatives particularly useful for succession, which directly addresses the urgency of an empty bench. And so, this book focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on
succession management, discussing Acceleration Pools\textsuperscript{SM} and replacement scenarios mainly to illustrate how the imperatives work. These imperatives also are highly beneficial to broader leadership-development efforts.

As you begin to prioritize your efforts to accelerate growth, you may target your succession-management process, key leadership-development initiatives, or your entire talent-management system. In any of these instances, it will be useful to consider the Acceleration Imperatives in terms of the impact each is intended to have and the talent systems that must be optimized to achieve it (see Table 1.1).

What is acceleration, and how does it fit in a talent-management system?

**Talent management** refers to all organizational systems aimed at securing the talent needed to achieve business objectives. It encompasses all aspects of the employee life cycle, including recruitment, selection, performance management, assessment, development, succession planning, and career planning. Throughout this book we use the terms Talent Management and Human Resources interchangeably when referring to the department or function responsible for acceleration, assuming that both refer to the organization’s collective effort to ensure that it acquires, develops, and retains the talent it needs.

**Succession management** describes the talent-management efforts aimed specifically at ensuring a steady supply of leaders who have been prepared and are ready to fill key leadership vacancies. The principal outcomes of great succession management are a) the consistent, timely promotion of internal associates to open leadership positions, and b) their successful performance once in those roles. More leaders, ready now. There are two primary forms of succession management: replacement planning and the Acceleration Pool approach.

[continued at top of next page]
Replacement planning is the process of identifying executives capable of filling critical roles—those that simply cannot be left vacant for any length of time—should any incumbents vacate their positions through retirement, departure, or job change. While replacement planning is essential as a component of a full-fledged succession-management system, taken alone it predictably falls short of generating a sufficient number of qualified leaders for today’s more dynamic business environment.

The Acceleration Pool approach is the subject of our book, Grow Your Own Leaders (2002). In it, we set forth best practices for focusing on identifying high-potential leaders early in their careers and accelerating their growth toward general executive capabilities (i.e., without a specific position or functional destination in mind) to create a pool of agile leaders who are available and ready now for key posts when vacancies occur. The Acceleration Pool approach maintains the ability to secure replacements for key positions but provides organizations with more leadership agility by starting earlier, casting a wider net to identify hidden potential, and cultivating a larger supply of leaders who can step into more than one type of executive role.

We do not view the replacement-planning and Acceleration Pool approaches as either-or alternatives. Some crucial roles require clear, focused replacement approaches. But replacement planning alone cannot meet most organizations’ broader needs. Effective succession management requires both. Acceleration is the organizational discipline of making growth happen faster, and as such, it goes beyond replacement planning and Acceleration Pools.
## 1.1 The Acceleration Imperatives and Key Systems Associated with Each

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acceleration Imperatives</th>
<th>Key Systems and Activities</th>
</tr>
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| **Commit**               | Align talent needs with business and culture strategies.  
                          | Specify the highest-priority leadership growth initiatives and outcomes.  
                          | Complete Leadership Capacity Analysis to strengthen the business case for talent growth.  
                          | Determine short- and long-term talent system priorities (i.e., how capacity gaps will be addressed).  
                          | Chapters 1–2 |
| **Aim**                  | Align competencies to the few leadership challenges that are most central to business success. This provides the business foundation for a success profile.  
                          | Align success profiles across all levels of leadership, clearly illustrating key transitional challenges.  
                          | Articulate knowledge, experiences, competencies, and personal attributes needed at each level of leadership.  
                          | Chapter 3 |
| **Identify**             | Efficiently review performance and growth of critical positions, units, or groups of leaders against business needs.  
                          | Accurately identify high-potential leaders.  
                          | Determine whom to accelerate and how.  
                          | Chapter 4 |
| **Assess**               | Assess individual and group readiness for future leadership challenges.  
                          | Assess high-potential leaders and possible successors against critical positions, assignments, or levels.  
                          | Evaluate for Key Actions to enable precise, targeted development.  
                          | Gather analytics to objectively examine readiness against future business scenarios and common/critical leadership challenges.  
                          | Cultivate a dynamic, proactive feedback culture.  
                          | Chapters 5–6 |
| **Grow**                 | Secure a diverse array of development alternatives to support unique learning needs.  
                          | Align development solutions with both aggregate (business-level) needs and individual growth needs.  
                          | Foster the application and practice of leadership skill sets required for business success.  
                          | Make leadership development an ongoing process.  
                          | Chapters 7–11 |
| **Sustain**              | Ensure top-management modeling and active engagement in acceleration activities.  
                          | Drive global alignment and engagement.  
                          | Ensure system alignment and full accountability among senior management.  
                          | Secure skill-building opportunities for all process players.  
                          | Chapter 12 |

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Whom Should You Accelerate?

Given that not everyone can (or wants to) be a leader, generating more leaders ready now requires you and your senior team to determine which individuals and groups will be the focus of your acceleration investments. Executives must make difficult choices about whom to accelerate and when. Some organizations struggle with this basic point of departure, maintaining that differential development is harmful to the culture because it excludes some people from participating. This point of view is a nonstarter, because acceleration is not an investment in the culture; it is an investment in the business.

Of course, acceleration can dramatically energize a culture, but that’s not its principal purpose. As we mentioned at the outset, the goal of making more leaders ready now is most urgent for those businesses imperiled by inadequate or insufficient leadership. For that reason, the fear that a new system will damage the culture must be answered with a clear business case and a strong communication plan to counter perceptions of exclusion. Later, we’ll outline how to make that business case (Chapter 2) and how to make choices about whom to accelerate (Chapter 4) in a way that creates positive energy in the organization. Meanwhile, having gained a consensus that acceleration is a business necessity, you can anticipate at least some of the following general acceleration needs:

**CEO and C-level acceleration:** Naturally, having replacement plans in place for the CEO and members of the senior team is essential; nearly every organization with more than a handful of employees has considered the issue of succession, at least at the very top. But the replacement pool may be shallow, and again, the best way to ensure a strong succession plan is to set up an Acceleration Pool to develop and prepare potential replacements long before a position becomes vacant. Accelerating the growth of a small cadre of executives who can develop readiness for these critical roles is crucial to organizational stability and success.
Everything you need to accelerate the growth of leadership is already inside your organization.
Executive acceleration: The most common crisis that acceleration addresses is the absence of leaders capable of taking on executive-level roles. Because the responsibilities and required skills in these roles increase so dramatically, the transition represents one of the most significant and challenging jumps in the career of any leader. And because the feeder pool for these roles is often stocked with individuals several levels below the necessary levels of capability and experience, failure is common, heightening the need for effective acceleration.

Mid-level leader acceleration: Some organizations also create pools that prepare individual contributors and frontline leaders to fill mid-management roles, where much of the organization’s execution energy resides and where many organizations have trouble building strength. Because population sizes are larger, these pools tend to be built and managed somewhat differently than executive-oriented pools, often with more cadre-based learning and growth options that equip leaders with core skills to apply to the challenges of mid-level leaders.

Global/Regional/Business unit acceleration: Multinational, multi-business, or multidivisional organizations often establish pools for each unit to meet the needs of the separate groups. In some instances these disparate pools are managed totally independently of one another; others build in review sessions to create insight into talent across boundaries and to find opportunities to share and grow leaders who have awareness and capability across the enterprise.

Critical role-acceleration efforts: Not all acceleration efforts should focus on traditional leadership roles. Many key positions are technical or functional in nature or require a unique brand of creativity or insight that gives the organization a competitive edge. These positions might require special project leaders or innovators of new concepts, products, or methods. They might have typical leadership responsibilities, or their leadership might be more nontraditional (such as thought leadership) or lateral. Acceleration efforts should target these roles as well and take a pool
or individualized approach based on the nature of the role and size of the group. For example, one global social services organization established an Acceleration Pool for its country manager position (not a formal leadership role, but rather an instrumental public relations agent). In another case, a technology firm cultivated the development of three high-potential players for the role of product-design executive—a highly creative role without traditional leadership responsibility.

**How Many People Can You Accelerate?**

While the size of an Acceleration Pool or cadre of leaders should be proportional to the size of the resources available to develop the group’s members, that doesn’t mean that acceleration is for only a chosen few. We once received a call from an enthusiastic HR leader in a large professional-services firm, proclaiming that the firm had just accomplished something unprecedented: Senior management had assembled to review the firm’s key talent and agreed on their highest-potential leaders. Seven senior leaders along with two HR leaders identified 250 individuals who would receive specialized development; recognition letters were sent to each person, welcoming the individual to this process. Indeed, those were big steps—yet, the top team failed to plan for what would happen next and didn’t even commit to being involved in the development process.

Seven senior executives cannot make 250 leaders ready now, nor did this organization need them to. In fact, the organization was facing critical executive leadership needs for approximately 25 positions over the next three to five years. Only several were seen as prepared to step up, which meant that the firm needed to fill about 20 slots. The group of 250 was then stratified into those with the very highest potential (approximately 40) and the rest. Other top executives were asked to join the seven senior team members to

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support the acceleration of the 40, while the remaining 210 junior leaders participated in more scalable, group-level learning alternatives. All 250 were given development plans, but HR set out to develop the 40 highest-potential leaders far more directly. Their growth assignments aimed higher and pointed toward the urgent leadership needs inherent to the key executive roles. Over time, as leaders began to be promoted out of the pool, more and more of the 210 were brought into the more-focused acceleration process.

There is no magic number or formula for how many people you should identify for acceleration. It depends on the size of your leadership gap and the resources you plan to devote to closing it. (In Chapter 2 we outline how to quantify your gap.) A key point, however, is that converting leaders from not ready to ready now takes considerable support—much more than simply ensuring that leaders have development plans. The key is to analyze both your resources and acceleration needs to determine ideal pool sizes and stratifications based on the precise gaps you need to close.

**Acceleration: Who Is Responsible for What?**

We often hear phrases like, “You have to own your development” and “Ultimately, growth is up to the individual.” And sure, little can happen without the buy-in of the person being developed. But acceleration cannot and will not occur if individuals are left to drive their own growth. To repeat our definition, *acceleration is the organizational discipline of making growth happen faster.* While easy to understand in concept, acceleration does require coordinated effort to ensure that the right growth happens for the right leaders at the right times; therefore, it is a shared responsibility. Top management, the Talent Management function, and individual learners—along with the key players listed in Figure 1.1—all must share in the commitment to acceleration:
**CEOs/President/Business leader:** Principal champion and advocate for acceleration.

**Senior management team:** The group of business leaders (typically reporting to the CEO or business head) who assume responsibility for acceleration and play direct roles in executing various elements of the process.

**Talent Management (HR):** Designer and facilitator of the acceleration system, providing strategy, tools, roles, and processes for ensuring sustainable progress and measurable outcomes.

**Accelerated learners:** Acceleration is not focused solely on high-potential leaders. While high-potentials may be the best example of accelerated learners, they are far from the only ones. Acceleration can and should apply to everyone in the organization, but the manner in which it is applied varies significantly and is determined by the organization’s investment strategy (see Section III: Identify).

**The CEO’s role:** For an Acceleration Imperative to gain a strong foothold, the CEO must be the chief catalyst, establishing talent growth as a key topic on the executive agenda and ensuring that there is full commitment, alignment, and accountability among the top team. As the CEO, you must be the most vocal and visible champion, with the close help and partnership of Talent Management leaders. Many CEOs translate this as the need to advocate and support investment in talent initiatives, but that is only part of it: You also must be a strong manager of talent, taking personal action to build the strength of the senior team and other key leaders. This means playing an active role in identifying leaders with potential, reviewing assessments, evaluating job performance and development progress, and generating creative development alternatives for senior team members and others.

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The senior management team’s role: The top team is responsible for the entire business, including allocating resources to accelerate the growth of leaders. If you are part of the C-suite, it is—or should be—in your job description to help review and approve the organization’s talent strategy, participate in the talent-review process, identify critical positions and high-potential leaders, prescribe development solutions for key leaders, serve as a mentor or coach, and act as a model of personal development by executing your personal development plan. Like the CEO, you play a role in both advocating and sponsoring accelerated growth as well as having personal responsibility as a talent manager who is
deeply involved in the growth and development of the organization’s most critical and high-potential leaders.

**The Talent Management (HR) role:** For HR leaders tasked with ensuring that growth happens quickly, being provocative is more important than being popular: The relationship between talent growth and business success is not self-evident to all leaders, and it is your job to make and sustain the connection. This starts with a compelling business case for growing leadership capability, including the business consequences of doing nothing, and facilitating your organization’s response to this business need in the form of a straightforward talent strategy that clearly articulates both your talent priorities and the initiatives that will be executed to meet them. With a strategy in place, your role then is to design the processes, build or acquire tools and technology, facilitate the key activities that the processes require, and ensure that all stakeholders understand and are equipped to fulfill their roles along the way. Indeed, the entirety of this book is a guide for you, the Talent Management leader, in your journey to answer this call.

**The accelerated learner’s role:** The efforts of the CEO, top management, and HR all point to enabling individual leaders to engage in high-energy learning opportunities and walk away from them more prepared for the next leadership challenge. From that perspective the individual leader’s role is simple: *to learn.* But being invited to learn has a decidedly different ring than being invited to *learn faster.* Learning faster means more than participating in a seminar or attending a leadership-training course—it means taking on new, unfamiliar leadership assignments in order to cultivate new skills. For many, stretch assignments feel exhilarating; others find them terrifying. Delight or
fear notwithstanding, the individual leader’s role is to step up and take on new challenges and, while doing so, seek feedback and prepare to be confronted with the inadequacy of past approaches. While leveraging the insight gained from formal learning opportunities as well as from coaches and mentors, individual leaders must continually reinvent their leadership approaches to adjust for more complex and difficult scenarios. This requires openness and a sense of adventure along with humility and respect for the learning process. Finally, learning faster means embracing discipline. Setting specific, measurable development targets that fully capture one’s unique growth needs requires rigor and courage; achieving them requires perseverance and no small amount of support. So, while the individual leader’s role may be the simplest to understand, it also is the most difficult to achieve.

The Acceleration Credo

When committing to the journey of acceleration, a shared sense of purpose and a clear understanding of the implications help keep your communications clear and consistent and your progress free of confusion or dissent. The Acceleration Credo (see sidebar) summarizes the most fundamental assumptions that top management must share. Why have a credo? Because we find that some of the most important and foundational beliefs about leadership growth are frequently not foregone conclusions among senior leaders, and the potential differences in philosophy can (and often do) cause system breakdowns. This makes it all the more important to surface and confirm the basics. The Acceleration Credo rallies your top team around the fact that accelerated growth is possible, essential, beneficial, and a senior management responsibility. This unified point of departure enables clear communications, ensures perceptions of fairness, sustains progress, and ultimately helps to cultivate a healthy culture of learning and growth.
People grow best when they grow together.
We (the senior management team) believe that accelerated growth is:

- **Vital to the business.** It is a business necessity to grow leadership capability from within the organization, and we assume accountability for ensuring that growth happens—faster.

- **Possible.** We can positively alter the organization’s leadership readiness by investing in the accelerated development of our people.

- **Both a right and a responsibility.** Everyone in the organization deserves the opportunity and must accept the responsibility to grow professionally.

- **Not a democracy.** Because resources are limited and needs are urgent, not everyone can or should be developed at the same rate or by the same means. Some will develop in place, while others will be offered special development to capitalize on opportunities to fill critical leadership needs.

- **More than knowing who our best people are.** It is not enough to retain our key players—we must grow new capabilities and equip leaders to succeed in assignments they have not yet encountered.
Matthew J. Paese, Ph.D.

Matthew J. Paese, Ph.D., is Vice President of Succession and C-Suite Services for Development Dimensions International (DDI). He began his career at DDI in 1994, at a time when succession management and accelerated development were much different endeavors than they are today. Most of what is written in this book reflects lessons that Matt and his coauthors have learned since then from courageous, innovative client partners who have pioneered cutting-edge approaches to closing leadership gaps.

Matt’s work has centered on the application of succession, assessment, and development approaches as they apply to boards, CEOs, senior management teams, and leaders across the pipeline. He consults, coaches, speaks, and conducts research around all those topics and more. He is coauthor of Grow Your Own Leaders along with many other articles and research papers.

Matt lives in St. Louis, MO, with his wife, Ellen, and children Rachel (14) and Louis (11). He currently is attempting to accelerate his growth as a husband, father, fly fisherman, pianist, and barista. He hopes to one day be *ready now* in one or more of those areas.
Audrey B. Smith, Ph.D.

Audrey B. Smith, Ph.D., is Senior Vice President for Global Talent Diagnostics at Development Dimensions International (DDI). Since joining DDI in 1989, Audrey has had a mission to learn what truly sparks leadership growth across ever-changing business realities. She’s done so through deep collaboration with boards, executives, and Talent Management professionals around the world.

Audrey’s customer-driven innovation and global consulting insights have helped shape DDI’s succession, selection, and development offerings, from the C-suite to the front line. She has been a key strategist and solution architect, encompassing technology-enabled virtual assessments and development offerings aligned to contemporary business challenges. She also is a coauthor of Grow Your Own Leaders and numerous other publications and research studies.

Audrey’s commitment to leadership growth shines brightly through her passion for developing current and future generations of DDI leaders. Speaking of new generations, Audrey and her husband, Craig, are enjoying new life adventures with their wonderful (and growing) family, including Lex, Clemens, Felix, Leonie, Josh, Chas, Lance, Robbie, Nick, and Erin. They reside in Pittsburgh, PA.
William C. Byham, Ph.D.

William C. Byham, Ph.D., is Executive Chairman of Development Dimensions International, Inc. (DDI). He cofounded DDI in 1970 and has worked with hundreds of the world’s largest organizations relative to executive assessment, executive development, and succession management. Bill’s work on executive succession has been featured in many leading publications.

Bill is author of Zapp!® The Lightning of Empowerment, a groundbreaking book on empowerment that has sold more than 3 million copies since its 1988 publication. He has coauthored 23 other books, including seminal books on the assessment center method, which established the effectiveness of assessment centers as a method of executive selection and development-needs diagnosis.

Bill lives in Pittsburgh, PA, with his wife, Carolyn, who has been at his side through each and every moment of his long and fruitful career. His daughter, Tacy (now CEO of DDI), son, Carter, and grandson, Spencer, all make him proud every day.
More leaders, ready now. It’s what successful businesses must generate to stay viable and what most are currently unable to achieve. From the lessons of more than 1,000 organizations across the globe, it’s clear that the problem is not the absence of tools, technology, or processes. The problem is a desperate lack of energy.

Businesses everywhere face crippling leadership shortages, and the gaps are widening dangerously. Traditional approaches no longer work the way they once did. It’s time to rethink. That means no formulas or step-by-step guides. Growing leaders at the speed of business should be thrilling, exhilarating, and even scary at times. But that energy must be harnessed. It won’t take new technology or more consultants to make that happen. It will take boldness and focus—from you.

Leaders Ready Now challenges CEOs, business heads, and Talent Management leaders to rethink lackluster approaches to accelerating leadership growth and to change the equation so that tools, technology, and processes don’t rob energy from the organization and, instead, create it. The authors take a fundamentally different angle and clearly illustrate how to transform your existing succession and development systems and grow the leaders your business needs—fast and fully enough to gain the advantage in a complex world.