Practitioner's Corner
The Leader as Learner

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A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring;
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again.
       Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

Within much of the world's developed economies, changes in technology, requirements for the workforce, and globalization of organizations are creating new leadership challenges and needs. It has been predicted that companies and organizations will no longer be able to successfully operate using traditional models of leadership. Nadler and Tushman (1999) compared it to "the difference between checkers and three dimensional chess" (p. 49). The world is changing: organizations are becoming flatter, knowledge is being dispersed more generously, and the boundaries traditionally shaping organizations may no longer exist. These changes are having a dramatic impact on the workforce and leadership needs of companies and organizations.

      The importance of leadership in organizations has increased and leadership training and development are increasingly regarded as instruments of organizational change and a method of linking people performance with business strategy. In fact, a survey by Archer Consulting Inc. (1999) revealed that successful corporations across major industries regard training and development as critical to industry leadership. The Hay Group (2000) found that top companies typically differentiated themselves from their peers by the exceptional degree of their focus and commitment to leadership identification, selection, and development.

      Institutions of higher education as well as corporations are investing heavily in the advancement of leadership programs aimed toward improving leadership skills and developing future leaders and leadership scholars for the future well-being of societies worldwide. In fact, leadership education in the United States can be traced to the founding of American colleges, whose primary goal it was to train a generation of young people to lead a new nation. To this

day, many scholars in higher education acknowledge the changing complexities of a new century and urge to teach students new paradigms of leadership (Roberts, 1997).

In addition to educational institutions providing formal leadership education and training, other leadership type training programs have been developed for leaders and managers in both the private and public sectors. The need for leadership development as a means to provide much needed leadership throughout a plethora of organizations and disciplines has literally spurred the leadership development field into a billion-dollar business. Annual corporate spending on leadership development has risen to $45 billion from $10 billion in the mid-1980s. Reports from the training industry say that nearly $50 billion is spent annually on corporate training and development (Fulmer, 1997). Furthermore, 60% of the nation's largest corporations offer some type of leadership training for their employees (Stephan, Mills, Pace, & Ralphs, 1988). Very similar to these numbers, in a survey of more than 5,000 organizations, researchers Drew and Wah (1999) found that 58% of the organizations contacted reported offering leadership development training. An even much larger percentage reported that such programs were under development.

Kouzes and Posner (1995) wrote, "Contrary to the myth that only a lucky few can ever decipher the mystery of leadership, our research has shown us that leadership is an observable, learnable set of practices" (p. 16). In fact, given the array of leadership development efforts and the considerable funds expended upon those efforts, there seems to be widespread agreement that effective leaders can be developed and that leadership makes a positive difference.

According to Cunha and Louro (2000), self-development is critical to a leader's effectiveness; as leaders have the responsibility of influencing, inspiring, and motivating people toward a set of organizational objectives. Vicere and Fulmer (1998) contended that creating an appreciation for continuous learning and new knowledge development are significant attributes of leadership. They further suggested that an emphasis be placed on developing effective leadership development programs designed to offer perspective on the power of learning.

Many scholars and researchers have agreed that leadership is both a skill as well as a learned behavior. As a matter of fact, most have suggested that due to continuous changes in the speed of the economy and technology as well as the speed of change, leaders need to be engaged in constant learning and education processes. Quigley (2002) stated:

> For there to be innovation, there must be a love of learning and leaders who recognize knowledge development as a capital investment. We create knowledge from data and information. We internalize the information by assimilating it into our experience where it integrates with our intellectual and affective selves and ultimately our behavior. We then experience true education – a leading out from ignorance through information to knowledge. And it is personally transforming. (p. 2)

Finally, heightened scrutiny in the wake of corporate and political scandals (e.g., Enron, Arthur Anderson, and WorldCom) resulting in a precipitous decline has caused many to question the role of education in developing and equipping leaders. Thus, the challenges of leadership development and education are both practical and deeply personal. Ultimately, they must lead us to reflect on what we are committed to and what futures we desire to create. Such questioning and understanding is essential to our effectiveness as educators, trainers, coaches, and leaders.

Much is required from leaders, and much is at stake. Considering the plethora of leadership development efforts, the funds expended upon those efforts, and the importance of formal leadership education as a foundational element in developing leaders; the overarching question that must remain is: if leadership can be taught, what kind of leadership education and

development are we offering and for what purpose? Day (2001) provided a comprehensive review of the most popular and promising practices used to develop leaders in the context of ongoing organizational work: 360-degree feedback, coaching, mentoring, networking, job assignments, and action learning.

The 360-degree feedback allows individuals to understand how their performance and behavior is perceived by their peers, direct reports, supervisors, and even external stakeholders. This multisource approach assumes that individual performance and behavior varies across contexts and with different constituencies and thus captures the variety in performance and behavior, increasing reliability of feedback. Feedback usually results not only in increased self-knowledge but also in heightened self-awareness of one's impact on others, which in turn increases intrapersonal competence.

Coaching focuses on improving individual performance and satisfaction through practical one-on-one learning and behavioral change. Day (2001) proposed that the effectiveness of coaching is enhanced to the degree that individuals are carefully selected; willing to be coached in the first place; ready to change; and, in fact, matched with a compatible coach.

Mentoring relationships, the formal or informal pairing of a junior with a more senior and experienced organizational member, are seen as particularly effective tools in enhancing individual leadership development. Day (2001) contributed the success of this form of development to the fact that "it enhances shared mental representations and interpretations of important organizational concerns" (p. 594). He further stated that the likelihood of a more beneficial mentoring relationship increases to the extent that the mentor displays behaviors such as listening, communication skills, patience, knowledge of organization and industry, ability to read and understand others, honesty, and trustworthiness.

Networking geared to develop leaders to know who to contact or connect with in terms of problem-solving resources and building support is believed to effectively increase innovations and problem-solving capacities across functional areas. Equally significant, it encourages people to be exposed to others' opinions and knowledge and empowers individuals to build and foster peer relationships outside their immediate work environment.

Job assignments foster learning and development from experiences, roles, relationships, and tasks encountered while working on assignments. When, according to Day (2001), assignments are *intentionally* matched with individuals' developmental needs; effective leadership development occurs. Job assignments that go along with high responsibility and high latitude, as well as negative experiences or hardship, are usually associated with significant learning and development.

Action learning, based on the assumption that individuals learn most effectively when working on real-time organizational problems, is the "continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with a corresponding emphasis on getting things done" (Day, 2001, p. 601). Individuals are encouraged to try new things and let others stretch their thinking and behavior. Trust amongst action learning project team members is a crucial factor in applying this tool effectively toward individual leadership development.

While all these practices are considered as beneficial and effective tools for leadership development, Day (2001) proposed:

> Effective leadership development is less about which specific practices are endorsed than about consistent and intentional implementation. A key to effective implementation is having the organizational discipline to introduce leadership development throughout the organization, rather than bounded by specific (usually top) levels. Another key to

effectiveness is linking initiatives across organizational levels and in terms of an overall developmental purpose within the context of a strategic business challenge. (p. 606)

Parker J. Palmer (n.d.) explained another approach:

New leadership is needed for new times, but it will not come from finding more wily ways to manipulate the external world. It will come as we who serve and teach and lead find the courage to take an inner journey toward both our shadows and our light – a journey that, faithfully pursued, will take us beyond ourselves to become healers of a wounded world. (left column)

About the Author

Doris Gomez, Ph.D. joined Regent University in the spring of 2004 as the special projects coordinator for the School of Leadership Studies. She is now part of Regent University's School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship where she serves as the program director of the M.A. in organizational leadership and teaches in the school's masters and doctoral programs. Originally from Austria, Dr. Gomez earned her master's degree at the University of Economics and Business Administration in Vienna. After several years in the business world and years of experience in global trade, retail, manufacturing, and consulting; she completed her Ph.D. at Regent University's School of Leadership Studies. Her research interests include leadership development in the online environment, online education and student retention, cross-cultural leadership issues, and the role of leadership development in societal change. She resides with her husband in Virginia Beach, Virginia, USA.

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