Preparing High Potentials for Tomorrow

Randy Emelo

Adjust development programs to support relational learning that values creativity, collaboration and self-directed, personal development to build your next generation of leaders.

Global telecommunications giant AT&T believes leading others through change will be one of the top skills future leaders need.

"The pace and degree of change will only get faster in the future; leaders must be able to rally employees and help them transition through change," said Tammy Martin, vice president of talent management for AT&T. Martin also said managing virtual teams and a mobile workforce, in addition to helping other people develop, will be essential skills for the next generation of leaders.

To prepare high potentials to spearhead change, talent leaders need to adjust the focus of their development programs to support more relational learning that values creativity, collaboration and rapid, self-directed, personal development. A 2010 IBM study called "Working Beyond Borders: Insights from the Global Chief Human Resource Officer" focused on today's swiftly changing business environment and found that organizations need to cultivate creative leaders, mobilize for speed and flexibility, and capitalize on collective intelligence if they want to gain workforce effectiveness.

This means the air of exclusivity in many new high-potential development programs should be replaced by a more open, collaborative environment where all leaders are challenged to elevate their own competencies and contribute to others' development. In turn, a larger percentage of the workforce will participate, increasing the leadership bench strength of the enterprise and helping organizations develop more creative and collaborative self-starters as leaders.

Creativity, Not Conformity

The rapid rate of innovation and the global connectedness created by the Internet produce a business context in which tomorrow's challenges are unpredictable.
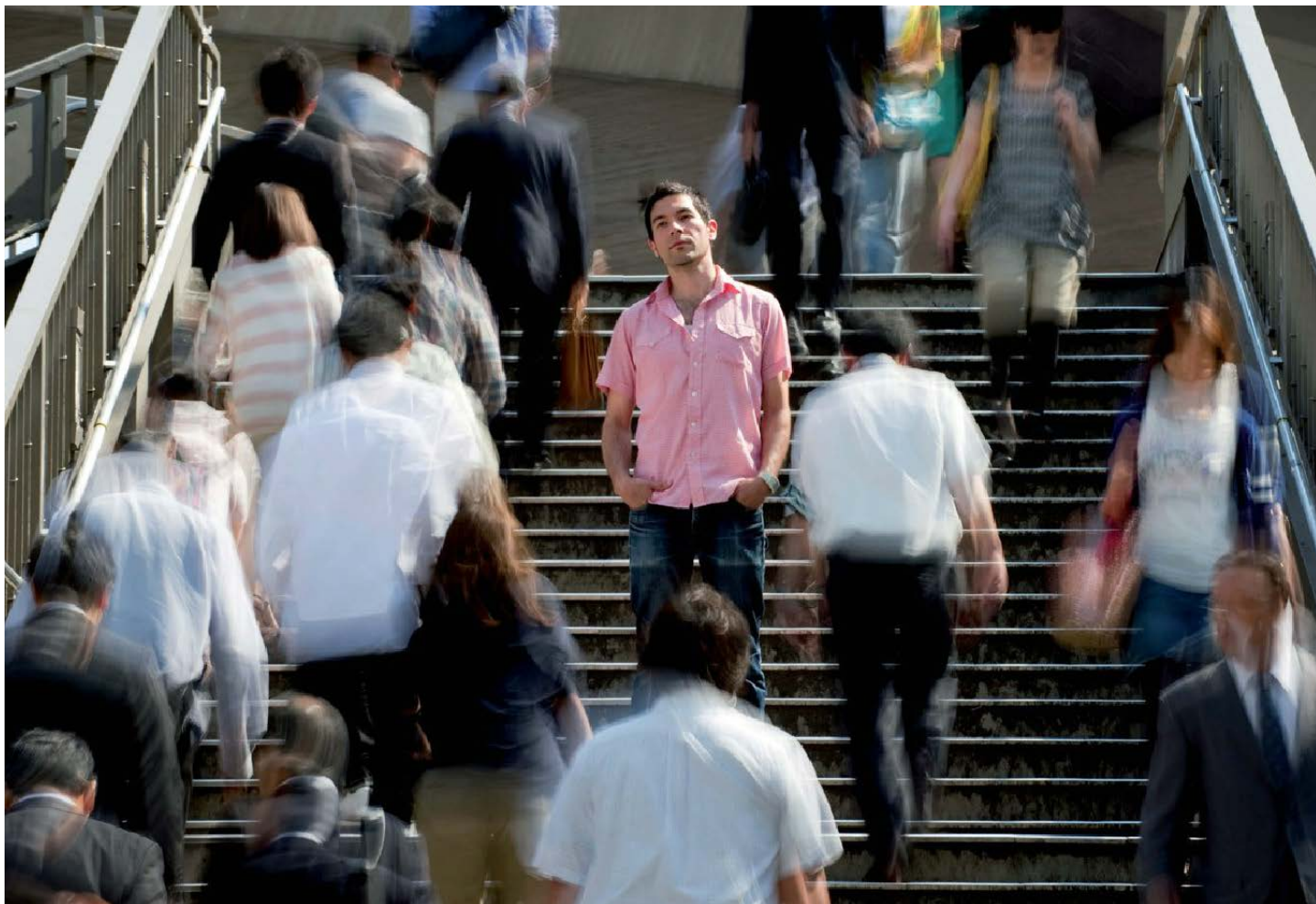
Ideas become global realities almost overnight. For example, in 2006 Facebook was just getting traction as it opened its doors to anyone 13 or older and touted 12 million active users. Fast-forward five short years later to 2011, and it ranks as a social networking behemoth with more than 800 million active users. Who could have predicted that?

In a world that evolves so quickly, the primary qualities needed in tomorrow's leaders also have evolved. According to the IBM study, the most sought-after trait in emerging leaders during the next five years will be creativity. However, the lock step approach that characterizes many existing high-potential programs does not fit with the real job needs facing participants. Old programs reward homogeny, place people on a predictable path, and promote conformity rather than the creativity needed from tomorrow's leaders. Imagine if someone like Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg had been placed in a traditional high-potential program where he was told what path to take and what career moves to make. Facebook might not exist. Talent managers must ask themselves: Is our organization encouraging entrepreneurial thinking or is creativity squelched within the confines of traditional corporate programs?

Designing creative solutions to difficult situations will be a hallmark competency for tomorrow's leaders. To help them accomplish this and build this skill, talent managers need to provide high potentials with a way to find collaborators and experts who can help them solve pressing issues and develop groundbreaking solutions. One way to achieve this is by encouraging and supporting a variety of self-directed, relational learn-

ing opportunities that encourage creative approaches to leadership.

"I'm proud of the way we're leveraging social media tools to reach all employees with mentoring-related messages," Martin said. "For example, for a couple of years we've been producing a monthly video series called Mentoring Moments. These five- to 10-minute videos feature company officers discussing topics such as 'Bringing Your Best Self to Work' or 'Building Your Personal Brand,' and have been very well-received."

AT&T recently introduced Morning Cup of Mentoring, a video series featuring managers from across the business who provide short, practical mentoring tips. These one- to two-minute videos are posted weekly to AT&T's internal networking and collaboration site. "The initial interest and energy in the first few weeks demonstrates that employees desire many forms of mentoring," Martin said.

AT&T uses programs such as Mentoring Moments and Morning Cup of Mentoring to expand the concept of mentoring using globally accessible multimedia. With mentoring seen as more of a knowledge-sharing tool, relationships form to creatively solve problems, not just to network for career advancement.

"Mentoring is a great vehicle for knowledge sharing, and it's one that we use extensively at AT&T," Martin said. "While traditional one-to-one mentoring relationships will always have an important role, we're finding that group mentoring and situational mentoring are as effective or more effective at meeting the learning needs of our employees. Group mentoring provides a great forum for collaboration — something we highly value — and situational mentoring is ideal in our fast-moving and innovative environment because it facilitates the sharing of knowledge that employees need 'in the moment.'"

Leadership development programs of the future must provide a more diverse mix of learning opportunities and individualism so people can follow the right path for them, think innovatively and explore unique possibilities and solutions. In light of the rapid change taking place in the workplace each day, people need these relational connections to help them put their issues and insights into the right context.

Collaboration, Not Competition

By its nature, traditional high potential development encourages competition. Just getting into a formal program is considered an exclusive privilege, at least by those in leadership, and it is achieved by outperforming peers on some scale. Yet this type of competitive culture will not serve future leaders well, nor does the millennial genera-

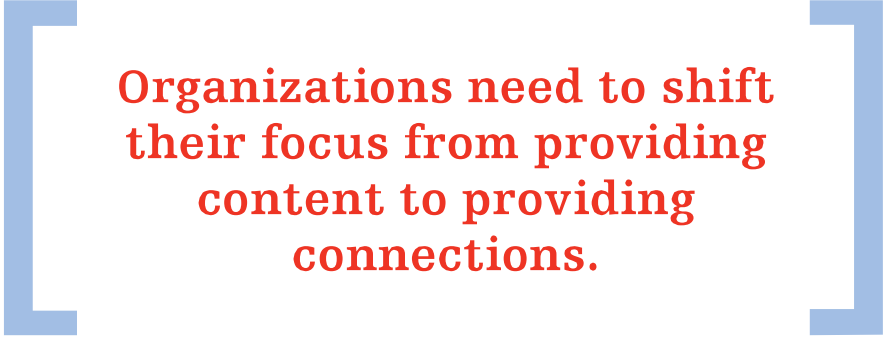tion seem too interested in being arbitrarily ranked and rated on a scale to which they may not even be privy.

In the IBM study, 78 percent of the HR leaders surveyed did not think their organizations were effective at fostering collaboration and social networking. Yet only 21 percent increased the amount they invest in tools required to promote such activities.

Clearly, collaboration must replace competition. In a competitive culture, knowledge hoarding is encouraged either explicitly or implicitly, but this can adversely affect organizations. While those hoarding knowledge may think they are in a position of power, they are actually undermining the strength and health of their company by creating barriers to vital information and

"The curriculum was designed as a blended learning experience that included weekly self-paced activities, a live mentor support session, and a weekly Live Meeting one-hour session that delved into various aspects of sick time with the help from guest experts and mentors."

This approach not only fostered collaboration and peer learning across the organization, it allowed participants to disseminate the accumulated wisdom of organizational experts. This type of collaboration and generosity with knowledge would not occur in a competitive environment where knowledge hoarding was encouraged.

Results for the IHABC were promising. "Curriculum

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know-how. The highest performers in organizations get that way through a network of collaborative learning relationships, not by individual, competitive behavior.

Social network analysis researcher Rob Cross has argued for more than a decade that the best predictor of individual performance in organizations is the robustness and diversity of a person's developmental network. In light of this and the growing demand by younger generations for more peer interaction and collaboration, many organizations are opting for more group mentoring experiences. These mentoring groups encourage people to build learning networks, rather than simply rely on single, top-down mentoring relationships for development and guidance. These groups can break down organizational barriers and bring experts and peers together to learn from each other.

Organizational learning and development consultant Ryan Kineshanko from the Interior Health Authority of British Columbia (IHABC) described how the organization used online group mentoring to explore the issue of employee sick time. During the course of six weeks, the "What's Behind Your Sick Time?" group virtually connected leaders from across the organization to share and deepen their understanding and knowledge around sick time, including causes, pathways of action and proactive preventative measures.

"A team of cross-functional subject matter experts acted as mentors to 20 managers from various business units and geographical locations," Kineshanko said.

mentors noted a shift from a transactional focus on numbers to a transformational focus on education, support and empowerment," Kineshanko said. "Feedback from the session was extremely positive with 100 percent of participants indicating they would recommend a similar curriculum to others and would personally participate again."

Self-Managed, Not Micromanaged

Driven by the need for rapid change, tomorrow's leaders must be guided by internal competencies, general objectives and deeply held values, more than by a goal checklist sent from management

The good news is this already happens in organizations, and leadership should be thankful. Members of the new generation emerging in the workforce are connected to their company's customers, care about the company's image and will go the extra mile to do what they feel is right for the organization.

To help leaders prepare for tomorrow, IHABC implemented mentoring and adopted a nationally approved health care management guideline called the LEADS Capability Framework. "The capabilities of leading self, engaging others, achieving results, developing coalitions and systems transformation are considered essential to the development of leaders in order to set them up for success in one of the most complex and challenging of environments to work in," Kineshanko said.

Tomorrow's leaders will direct their own learning to keep pace with organizational needs and their own passions. Organizations need to shift their focus from providing content to providing connections. These connections will need to be learning-driven and competency-focused to assure alignment with organizational objectives. Employees will gather the best people from all parts of the organization to solve pressing problems through innovative programs such as the situational mentoring approach at AT&T.

"We encourage employees to utilize situational mentoring for on-the-fly learning needs," Martin said. "These relationships are often shorter than classic one-to-one relationships, and it's not unusual for them to involve multiple advisers." Trying to micromanage learning connections that involve numerous people would be an unwise use of time, energy and money. No one is in a better position to know what learning needs they have than the individuals themselves.

"More and more, leaders are finding themselves managing a group of people who are not physically located together, who are on the go, or whose clients and constituents are on the go," Martin said. Trusting people to manage their own learning not only makes sense in the face of such realities, it also supports the learners' desires.

Shaping the Future

Future leaders must be able to evaluate situations, fashion creative solutions, work well with others in collaborative environments and manage their own time and energy to achieve the desired impact. Organizations that understand this trend can take action by:

- Shifting learning from content-focused platforms to collaboration-driven platforms.

- Empowering employees to direct their own leaning to align with immediate needs present in the changing business environment.

- Encouraging cross-departmental and cross-organizational learning opportunities to foster creative solutions.

When it comes down to it, all of these factors work together. Creativity flourishes in collaborative environments, and collaboration is encouraged in cultures where leaders direct their own learning and can forge relationships that advance both organizational and personal goals. **TM**

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