

# THE MACRIS GROUP

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## From Dean's Desk:



### Prologue

Our theme on leadership continues, and for those of you who have been following are writings, you know we are continually challenged by the news of the lack of leadership skills, and the declining state of leadership. Development Dimensions International (DDI) publishes a Global Leadership Forecast, In their 2011 report titled "Time for a Leadership Revolution" they begin with "Given the gravity of the role that leaders play in today's highly competitive business environment, this question needs to be asked: Do we have the leaders we need to keep up with the speed of business? Unfortunately, the answer is no—only 38 percent of the 12,423 leaders in our study reported that the quality of leadership in their organization is very good or excellent." Furthermore, the report states that when HR professionals weighed in on the quality of leadership only 18% surveyed reported strong bench strength to meet future business needs. DDI reports that the drivers to improve leadership quality include Leadership Development, Talent Management Systems and Management Culture. An HR professional from the, financial services industry states that "Our capability is weak due to years of focusing on business objectives that did not include developing leaders." This study queues up our article. We know the voids exist. We know leadership development works, but as stated in the report it is not working. Our goal is to close the gap, because when it does work, when the culture is such that the programs can work, companies outperform their competition. This is substantiated in the Global Forecast which indicates that "Organizations with the highest quality leaders were 13 times more likely to outperform their competition in key bottom-line metrics such as financial performance." If any of you would like a copy of DDI's 2011 Leadership Forecast report please contact either Larry or me.

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## Leadership Voids

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### Introduction

We've talked about leadership effectiveness, cited ongoing surveys that indicate a decline in leadership, and have offered some suggestions as to the causes. Yet the issue of leadership voids continues to haunt us, and we continue to pursue answers both to improve the services we provide and to help our clients and readers see opportunities for improvement.

Toward that end, we have challenged ourselves about the content and methods of Leadership Development, and to explore other factors that affect overall leadership quality and effectiveness. As you might expect, there is no simple answer or silver bullet. The three points that follow indicate the evolution of our thinking during the course of our pursuit of insight.

First: the mechanics of leadership development programs, the content, the methods and follow-up.

Second: the organization. Within the organization there are issues such as Organizational culture, organizational leadership and endorsement, and the day-to-day operations. There are also questions about how and why candidates are selected for leadership development.

Finally: the people, a category which includes their knowledge and skill levels, their experience and their awareness.

All three have their respective and distinct impact on overall leadership effectiveness. We will examine each in this article.

### The Mechanics

As with any formalized or even informal training, there are prerequisites. In the case of leadership development, before any enhanced leadership learning can occur certain prerequisite topics must be presented. Traditionally,

# THE MACRIS GROUP

we all include the standard topics of Communication, Listening, Myers Briggs profiles, Conflict Management/resolution, Teambuilding, etc. Conventional thinking holds that these topics give the attendees the tools to improve their leadership skill base. These are basic skills and mechanics that all effective leaders should learn and practice. It is like taking a machine and tearing it apart to see how it works then putting it back together again in hopes of better understanding the mechanics of it all. The problem here is that without a way to practice with the tools and learn the best ways to use them in the right application, retention drops off rather quickly. This is why we say that leadership development is not a sequence of events, workshops or seminars, but an ongoing process of learning sessions, application, feedback, more learning, more feedback and so on. We must question what is limiting the application of these new skills in the workplace.

An issue close to the hearts of senior leadership of an organization, as well as to the CFOs, is return on investment. What is the ROI on leadership development? In addition to the negative trends revealed in the surveys and studies, the ROI on leadership development is not well measured and/or reported properly. Assuming learning occurs, that learning has to be applied in the workplace and positive business results need to occur. However, for to achieve these positive results the supervisors must support those who bring back their learnings to the workplace. Our experience tells us that in many cases when those who attend leadership sessions return to their respective workplaces, they find that their ideas and approaches are inconsistent with the culture of the organization. This conflict in turn demotivates the employee, makes realizing an ROI virtually impossible, and degrades the process. The consequent challenge is to convince the supervisors of the leadership class attendees and the leadership of the organization of the benefit of the training and their overall role in transfiguring the organization. We are now including some of those classes, and working on convincing our clients of the importance of vertical integration of leadership development programs. Our point is that with this first step of leadership development we want to impart the knowledge of leadership basics, as well as provide a forum for those attending to begin practicing and applying their learnings. Our thinking is that if we can remove barriers, enlighten those who may feel threatened, and assist in making the environment safe for the application of learning, the opportunity to begin measuring and seeing an ROI is significantly improved.

As with everything there is a BUT. This step is no different. Once again, through our involvement with a broad range of clients and industries we are seeing a rather universal effect that is less obvious in its manifestation, but very real in its impact on leadership training's potential success, and that is the organization itself.

## The Organization

In the previous section we highlighted material we wrote about in our November 2010 Update article titled: *Why is there a leadership void, and what can be done about it?* We have some ideas! Much of the focus was with individuals. We focus primarily on the context of how when those attending leadership training return to the workplace with the best of intentions find their immediate supervisor or others in their organizational leadership (for a variety of reasons) being barriers to their attempts to apply leadership learning in the workplace. In this section, we will explore the effect the organization has on the success of leadership learning and application within the workplace.

Another influencing effect that we observe in organizations is how those who attend our workshops, when away from the workplace, embrace the sessions and what they learn. They are removed from the day-to-day routine and workplace environment. They are separated from the organism that is known as their company or job. They should be free to learn and try new things. We have observed too many occasions where the attendees are still worrying about the job they left behind. Whether expected by their organizations or their perceived need to constantly stay in touch with the workplace, attendees use every break as an opportunity to call back to the office. This co-dependency can severely limit the focus of the attendees and negate some of the learning. Sometimes we question why an attendee is even at the training. What we attempt to do is make our workshops safe places for our attendees to experiment and try things; to push their thinking and explore new ideas. So what happens when they return?

Recognizing that the time away represents time lost in their day-to-day responsibilities, we expect the first day back to be stressful. Lots to do, lots to catch-up on and too little time to do it. Also, consider an organization where there is a culture of reactivity. One where people protect their turf, such that things they are responsible for back-up even more than if they delegated or empowered someone to take on some of the load while they are away.

So the scenario is as follows:

- The leadership session was good and enlightening.

- As an attendee I feel good that I participated.
- I am concerned about the work time I missed.
- I have some ideas of how I can apply what I learned.
- I know there will be many people vying for my time when I return.
- Deadlines are closing in on me.

Monday morning, back at the desk and lo-and-behold all my suspicions were correct. Armed with all kinds of new knowledge I try applying my new principles. All of a sudden my boss comes in with an unexpected task or wanting status reports, I get calls from people who have been waiting patiently for my time while I was gone at the workshop, and pressures are building. I know better though, I can deal with it. Day one and I did pretty well, but not as much progress as expected. Day two: the race is on. More unexpected tasks, deadlines getting closer, one of your children is sick, you are late to work and you are not feeling very enlightened. First, the unexpected tasks and the fact that you did not feel good about delegating work while you were gone are signals of an organization that is operating in a reactive mode. You quickly fall back into that mode. You become too burdened, stressed, and overtaxed to be responsive to opportunity and to apply leadership learnings. All of a sudden, you find yourself unable to be as ‘in control’ as you thought you would be able to. What happens is the leadership learning gets pushed to the back of your day-to-day crises. The organization has diminished the effectiveness of your learning. The organization is stripping you of the opportunity to apply and practice what you have learned. (Whether this is real or perceived, it impacts you the same way.) Is it your fault? – partly, but when the sky is falling, it’s falling and it’s hard to stop it.

Now to look at the bigger perspective, organizations pay significant sums of money to send their people to leadership development training, or to other forms of professional development training. One of the key issues is why. Most senior leaders know it is the right thing to do. But what is their expectation of these people? What changes do they expect (if any) and how will those changes impact the organization? We see that, in many ways, the result is opposite whatever the expectation might be. It is opposite

when a supervisor diminishes the motivation of a person returning from a workshop and it is opposite when the culture of the organization imposes so much pressure, because it functions in a reactive mode, that learning and application are overcome by the day-to-day stressors. We have to question why the attendee was selected. Was it truly for leadership development and a chance to improve the organization or was it simply “getting the ticket punched?” If the intent was sincerely for development and organizational improvement then it should have been made clear to the attendee that she was to remove herself from the day-to-day operation of the organization and not worry about constantly checking

in. If there is an emergency, the supervisor knows how to get in touch.

What we attempting to do here is illustrate the barriers that prevent people from improving their leadership acumen. The barriers can be organizationally imposed or perceived by the attendee. Clear communication between the attendee and the supervisor must happen before the development program and frequently after the attendee returns.

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#### Awareness

The third piece to this puzzle focuses on the individual and involves awareness and self-discipline. A major part of leadership development is self-discipline, awareness, and maturity, none of which are easy to achieve. The issue here is to not let the burdens and stresses of the day-to-day ‘job’ become overwhelming. In addition, awareness includes understanding the integrated learning that transpires as a result of the leadership development progression. A key question the attendee must answer is whether he even wants to be at the development program. Does he want to learn new skills and apply them back in the workplace? Is he mentally and emotionally prepared for the learning process? Can he separate himself from the day-to-day aspects of his job and be open to learning and internalizing new skills? We will look at both dealing with the job stresses and understanding the integrated learning.

The first effect is when the stresses of the day-to-day job become overwhelming to the point that a person’s behavior changes dramatically. The change is usually for the worse and essentially transforms an individual to a completely different person. When this transformation happens, said per-

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son may say and do things that, upon later reflection, she regrets. We all have been through a situation like this – whether we are the person who has been so stressed that we lose control or the recipient of that person’s rage or aberrant behavior. In either case, it is not a pretty picture. The point of awareness is this: as leaders, we need to focus on those triggers, those events, conditions or situations that put us in such an overwhelming state of upset that we lose control and transition from a Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde. The effect is that of a split personality; the underlying causes are not the point of this article. Once the conditions are such that the transition takes place, the learnings from leadership development are gone. We have become victims of our gripping condition. Only after a degree of tempering of the angst occurs do we begin to realize the devastation left in its path. The key issue here is to know that this happens, in order to realize, preemptively, the things that cause it to happen so they don’t become incapacitating and take us over.

One of the confounding issues with this desire for awareness is that patterns are somewhat predictable but vary for each individual. So it is difficult to know based on face value how a person will respond to stressors. What is more predictable is the self-awareness piece. How will I respond to those things that trigger me? We have always believed and stress that a major part of leadership success depends on self-awareness; having the knowledge of what drives us into the incapacitated state, and dealing with it before it takes us over, is essential leadership learning. This prescience takes knowledge and practice. But the end result of not becoming overwhelmed is a huge contributor to a leader’s effectiveness. So in answer to the questions we proposed in the opening paragraph of this section – the potential leadership development attendee must do serious introspection before attending. The supervisor must also be aware of the attendee’s performance under stress and how that performance is impacting the organization. The supervisor must be involved before and after leadership development to guide and counsel the attendee. Separation from the day-to-day must be a prerequisite to attendance if true learning and change is a goal.

The second effect is to recognize that leadership learning is not a series of topics taught individually, but the integration of the learning, and further, taking that integrated learning and applying it in the workplace. Yes, we parcel leadership development programs into specific topics, and that is necessary to teach the mechanics as discussed above. The awareness piece here is how these topics all

work together. How they need to flow and which skills and knowledge apply under what conditions. Application is not mechanical. As an example – “Oh we have conflict – let’s see, I know there is a conflict diagram, so let me think which quadrant I am in”. Typically, when situations arise there is no time to dissect the situation and then try to apply each and every bit of leadership learning. It all happens too fast. The key here is to know how to listen, interpret body language, decide your options, and communicate effectively, using your emotional intelligence. Sounds like a tall order and it is. The mechanics of leadership learning must be integrated and then practiced and practiced. To quote Bill Murray in *What About Bob*, “baby steps”; integrating the learning is not going to be applied easily in every situation, but continual baby steps taken with small successes represent real progress. Progress is achieved through the desire, cooperation, and communication on the part of the attendee and her supervisor, who must actively support leadership practice throughout the process.

## Summary

We continually try to understand the many facets that contribute to leadership ineffectiveness. We know—and the survey reinforces our beliefs—that leadership development programs are needed. Initially, we were focusing on the material and method of delivery, and we still believe there is work to be done there, but looking at leadership development in the broader perspective, there are many factors that limit the learnings and limit the application of any new skills and techniques brought back to the “real workplace world.” We have talked about the mechanics of the training process but have also focused on how the organization and the individual are also major factors in the success of a leadership development process. The organization, in the form of the supervisor and senior management, whose role is to establish an environment that supports success; as well as each individual who must be mentally and emotionally ready and open to the difficult task of learning and applying new skills and have the self-discipline and introspection to avoid the traps that diminish his effectiveness. Leadership development is not a short term “vacation” from the job. It is a means to strengthen an individual and eventually lead to organizational improvement, a process legitimized by growth of the aforementioned ROI.

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