CHAPTER ONE

MANAGING A COMPANY OF ONE

Put Yourself in the Driver's Seat

If there's one thing that our increasingly volatile business environment has taught us, it is that the future is unpredictable. Simply speaking, I know of no organization these days that operates under the stable-state conditions that allow for the creation of reliable career paths. Faced with uncertain business conditions and a competitive field that seems to change on a daily basis, companies are trying to keep pace with these changes by continually adapting their organizational structures, leadership roles, and key business processes. The by-product of these changes is that we've reached a point at which it is a bit unrealistic, if not naïve, for anyone to expect that his or her employer will able to provide a reliable roadmap to advancement and career fulfillment. Instead, it is up to each of us to take the initiative to self-manage our own development as professionals and organizational leaders. This book lays out a simple, coherent approach you can use to jump-start your career and accelerate your development as a leader, while avoiding common (and often painful) missteps.

Now, in asking you to slide into the driver's seat I am not suggesting that your manager, HR department, and senior executives don't care about your growth as a professional—far from it. What I am saying is that

there are several reasons why you benefit when you take the lead in direct-ing your own development:

1. *You are the expert on you.* As helpful as other people want to be, the simple fact is that you know yourself better than anyone else does. As we'll discuss in the following chapters, your organizational stakeholders do play important roles as guides and advisors. They can keep you informed of important business developments that could affect the shape and structure of your organization, provide you with a fuller picture of your organization's changing expectations of its leaders, or alert you to development opportunities that might lie outside of your immediate job function. At the same time, it is a little unrealistic to think that your managers or HR leaders possess your level of insight when it comes to understanding such things as what provides you with satisfaction and meaning in a career or the types of work/life tradeoffs that you are willing to make to pursue a challenging developmental or promotional opportunity. In other words, as you continue along your career journey your managers and HR leaders can provide useful travel directions and help you anticipate those bumps that may lie hidden along the road. What they cannot do is tell you the direction in which you should head; that is your responsibility. So an important part of taking charge of your development is learning how to clearly identify, define, and communicate to your key organizational stakeholders what is most important to you in meeting your development needs.

2. *Self-development fosters self-discovery.* All too often when professionals set out to self-assess their development needs or to explore available development options, they fall into a trap that I call "surface skim-ming." By this I mean that they try to employ a simple, paint-by-the-numbers approach to self-development. While they may perform a cursory scan of their company's training catalogue or read a few recom-mended books on leadership, they seldom go further in the discovery process.

   That is a big mistake, because at the core of development is the willing-ness to ask yourself a few key questions that force you off of autopilot and get you to take a fresh look both about what it is that you really want at this point in your career and the value you could potentially add to your organization. Critical questions include: (1) What it is that uniquely defines you as an individual and an exceptional performer? (2) Which of your strengths provide the building blocks for your long-term career success? and (3) How are you viewed by others in your

organization? As you go through the remaining chapters I will invite you to explore these and several other questions that I routinely pose to my own coaching clients. If you make the effort to actively engage in these questions, you will find that you will discover a lot more about what it is that can make you an exceptional professional in your field.

3. *It is the only way to keep pace with change.* If you think that development is all about promotion, then think again. Taking control of your development is absolutely necessary when you are attempting to keep pace with rapid changes in your professional function, organization, and industry. Failing to take this step is a bit like failing to examine your 401(k) plan every few months to make certain that you are obtaining the best yield from your fund portfolio. Most of us would agree that in today's volatile investment market that isn't a smart move for financial planning. Similarly, it does not make a lot of sense for leadership development. It may be that you are an HR leader who has just started dealing with international employee relations, or a marketing leader whose company is quickly migrating toward online marketing. Whatever your leadership role, my guess is that your employer is expecting you to quickly graft on new technical and leadership skills that can help you to adapt to changing work conditions. If this is the case, the exercises that you will encounter in this book will help you build the kinds of technical and leadership skills you need to stay ahead of these changes.

4. *It saves time and effort.* When leaders lack a carefully targeted development plan, they tend to employ a "scattershot" approach to leadership development. The end result is that they experiment with a wide range of development activities, from taking a smattering of online courses to acquiring a senior-level mentor, in the hope that something will eventually "stick." A faster, more efficient method involves pinpointing and behaviorally defining your most important development needs, then using techniques such as leveraging "naturally occurring events" (more on this in Chapter 5) to fold leadership development actions into planned job activities.

Also, keep in mind that, like you, your manager is also continually under a time crunch. Therefore, the best way to gain your manager's support on your development and career goals is to make certain that before the two of you engage in a development conversation you have first done your homework. By this I mean carefully thinking about where you want to focus your development efforts and the types of

assistance (shadowing opportunities, short-term assignments, etc.) that you actually need from your manager and senior stakeholders.

5. *Passivity is a loser's game.* Each year many organizations engage in something called a leadership talent review (LTR), which is intended to evaluate the performance and leadership potential of their managers and professionals. Not too long ago, leadership potential was defined in terms of the competencies, skills, and experience that an individual had acquired. While these factors are still deemed important, these days, when evaluating leadership potential, executives are placing greater emphasis on each individual's level of demonstrated learning agility. By learning agility I am referring to a person's ability to aggressively learn on the job and readily adapt to new and challenging circumstances. (I will talk more about learning agility in Chapter 5.) Quite often, in order to gauge an individual's degree of learning agility, executives raise the following questions during LTRs:

- "How invested is this person in her own development?"
- "How self-aware is she about her impact as a leader?"
- "How much insight does she have about her own development requirements?"
- "How did she perform when she was thrown into xyz assignment?"
- "How well has she adapted to (a new boss, a difficult work assignment, directing an organizational change, etc.)?

In attempting to answer these questions, senior executives tend to give a high level of attention to the level of thought and effort that leaders appear to put into their own professional development. From my own experience as a talent management leader and executive coach, I can tell you that nothing is more unimpressive than a person who, during the initial coaching session, comes across as being completely clueless about his or her own development needs. The opposite is also true. If you are willing to invest time and effort in formulating and executing your development goals, then you will find that this extra effort helps to distinguish you from the rest of the pack.

Accelerated Development: Is It Possible and Desirable?

In summary, the person who needs to direct your leadership development process is you. "All well and good," you say, "but is it really possible to

compress the time that would typically be required to develop myself as a leader?" The answer to this question is an unqualified "Yes!" Some people doubt that it is possible to accelerate the time needed for leadership development. These individuals still adhere to what I call the outdated "cooking school" philosophy of leadership development. You can hear this assumption reflected in such comments as, "She's a strong performer but she still needs a little more seasoning" or "Experience has shown us that it takes five years for an engineer to be ready to take on a project manager role here."

Statements such as these imply that a standard and invariable "cooking time" is required for a professional or leader to reach a certain level of development. I would argue that, while these types of comments may be appropriate to the preparation of soup, they are not applicable to the area of leadership development. The reason is that organizations typically rely on certain accepted rules-of-thumb for gauging a professional's readiness for advancement, based on the typical time that it has taken for managers in similar roles to take on broader organizational rules. Those rules-of-thumb, however, are based on anecdotal data from professionals who have typically been given little or no targeted developmental support. This assumption falls apart when we take the time to show individuals how to build effective self-development plans and then give them the tools they need to successfully execute against those plans.

In my thirty years as an internal talent management executive and executive coach, I have discovered that it is, indeed, possible for you to accelerate your development as a leader. While I would be the first to admit that leadership development is partially contingent upon a few variables that are beyond your control, such as the availability of unique job assignments, at the same time certain influential factors lie directly within your control. By learning how to manage these factors, you can discover how to leverage your strengths as a leader, more quickly prepare yourself to take on broader leadership responsibilities, and make a bigger impact on your company's performance. What is more, it is possible to do all of this without shortchanging the effectiveness of the development process.

The secret lies in taking a targeted and disciplined approach to your own development. As an analogy, consider the area of physical fitness. I feel good about the fact that, now in my mid-fifties, my running distance and workout levels in resistance training are close to what they were thirty years ago. At the same time, I have seen certain people regularly attend

the same gym that I do year after year without making any improvements to their heath. Why is this? Well, let me share a few observations:

- You cannot get optimal results unless you have first established a clear set of goals. People who only vaguely define their fitness goal as "getting fit" seldom do. A more precise fitness target would focus around making improvements to one of three pillars of heath: flexibility, aerobic endurance, or muscular strength. Taking muscular strength as an example, you get even better results when you target specific muscle groups for improvement.
- Moreover, you need to continue to focus your efforts during the execution phase of your plan. For example, it takes a lot longer to build muscle tone if you use sloppy form. Good form involves restricting your movements to those isolated muscle groups on which you are focusing your improvement efforts.
- You can't push yourself toward good results if your attention is spread, for example, if you are simultaneously talking on a cell phone while doing aerobics.
- Finally, you will find it difficult to achieve good results with a hit or miss, skip the gym for three weeks and then kill yourself with a four-hour session approach to training.

In short, while you cannot control your genetic makeup or certain pre-conditions that could influence your overall health, I do believe that by implementing these types of simple workout guidelines the average person can dramatically reduce the time required to meet his physical conditioning goals. The same holds true for leadership development. By leveraging the following factors that are directly within your control you can get better results, in less time:

First, you need to clearly identify the most important changes that occur to leadership requirements and job demands as you go from your current role to other job roles or the next leadership level in your organization. Simultaneously, you also need to understand the types of leadership adaptations that are required if you are attempting to migrate from your current work setting to other organizational settings in your company. We'll discuss how to master these challenges in Chapter 2.

Next, you need to create a development plan that goes beyond fuzzy language to include a detailed behavioral description of your development goals and targeted priorities for action. You also need to know how to approach organizational stakeholders to ensure that you receive detailed,

timely, and value-laden feedback on your development needs. We'll cover these development challenges in Chapter 3.

A key part of any development planning process is learning how to make the most out of developmental assignments, such as leading a cross-functional project team or being loaned out to another department. In Chapter 4 you will learn how to partner with your manager to prepare for development assignments and to conduct debriefing and feedback sessions to gain the most effective learning from these assignments. You will also learn when and how to use developmental assignments as test points for gauging your readiness to tackle new work challenges. You will also learn how test points can help you lower the risk level associated with making major career moves by providing you with opportunities to conduct pre-views of new work settings or leadership roles. Finally, we will discus how test points serve as avenues for showing your organizational stakeholders that you are ready to take on bigger assignments.

Chapter 5 will introduce you to the concept of learning agility and explain how you can become more learning agile by taking advantage of a variety of learning opportunities, such as social networking and self-directed learning. You will also be introduced to several techniques that you can use to shorten your learning curve on the job. These techniques include using naturally occurring events as a scaffold for development activities, obtaining fast-cycle development feedback, and making more effective use of practice sessions.

Your career success is partially contingent on how you are viewed by others in your organization. In Chapter 6 you will explore your personal brand; those leadership behaviors and interpersonal styles that characterize how you come across to others in your organization. In this chapter you will also learn how to leverage your brand identity to support your career goals and how to aggressively address any aspects of your leadership style that could potentially hamper your progress.

Used together, these six chapters provide a solid framework for accelerating leadership development—one that puts you in the driver's seat of more effectively managing your own career. To make it easier for you to apply this book, the same four-step learning process will be incorporated in each of the remaining chapters. First, an Introduction provides an overview of the development stage covered in the chapter. You are then provided with General Guidelines for applying this stage of the development process. I will then share with you an illustrative example that will serve as a Case in Point for better understanding how that stage folds into the overall development process. I will then

challenge you to take a few Next Steps for moving forward and applying these development stages. In addition, if you are using this book as a coaching and development vehicle for certain members of your work team, you will find the Leader's Guide in the back of this book to be very helpful.

Case in Point: Letting Go of the Past

Sally was a VP of operations, having been promoted into this role after transferring from the position of an operations director in one of her company's divisions. By the time that I had began working with her as a coach, her performance had begun to backslide. Her manager felt that she had the potential to continue to advance in the organization, but for some reason she was finding herself stuck in a performance rut. My initial conversation with this client was very telling. She spent a lot of time talking to me about how frustrated she was that her current manager didn't seem to have the same degree of respect for her as did her previous boss. She also complained that in her new role she was somewhat removed from the senior team, while in her previous role she had been able to communicate freely directly with the company president and senior executives. When she was notified that she been selected for her company's high-potential program, instead of being excited, Sally indicated frustration. She explained that, having already completed a high-potential program in another company division, she felt that she was simply repeating a phase in her development.

Furthermore, Sally was having difficulty adapting to her new role. Instead, she kept insisting that she could turn around her performance if she was only given the support she needed to implement the kinds of changes that she had made in her previous position. Sally's problem was that she was having a difficult time accepting that she was now in a new leadership role that came complete with a very different set of organizational expectations and success measures. In her previous role she had managed a fairly narrowly defined work function and had worked within an established function that had in place strong process controls and adequate staff support. In this previous role Sally had made her reputation by being a team builder and organizational cheerleader and by finding innovative ways to muster the full support of her work team. In contrast, within her new role Sally was expected to set up new procedures and

process controls for a totally new distribution and call center. Most of what would be needed wasn't built yet, and she would need to aggressively recruit and develop her staff to fill a number of position vacancies.

Eventually, Sally made a successful transition, but before she could do this she had to agree to leave her old job behind and move on. As I explained to her, taking accountability for your professional growth is a bit like swinging out on a trapeze bar. You cannot take hold of the empty bar without first letting go of the one you are holding. Before you continue on to the next chapter, take a few minutes to ask yourself, "What bar are you still holding onto? What aspects of your current job do you need to let go of if you want to take on a broader, more expansive role in your organization?"

The Next Steps

I mentioned earlier that senior executives are beginning to place increased emphasis on an individual's learning agility. The chart on the next page summarizes six characteristics of learning-agile professionals. As a starting point for your own development, why not ask your manager or a few selected peers or other managers whom you trust and respect to use the learning behaviors listed in this chart to share with you how they view your learning agility.

Here are a few tips to make the process easier:

1. Rather than ask other people to rate you on each of these factors (people tend to be a bit noncommittal when a friend or colleague asks them for written feedback), a more effective option is ask your colleagues to identify one behavior in which you excel and another one which, if strengthened, would yield the greatest impact for you.
2. If you want your feedback providers to give you an example that illustrates a strength or development need, don't ask them to pull these examples from your past behavior. Once again, that question will make many people feel that they are providing you with an evaluation of your performance. Instead, ask: "Looking ahead, could you give me an example of the type of situations in which this behavior would be especially important were I to take on broader, more complex job roles within our company?"

Learning Factors and Behaviors Related to Learning Agility

Learning Factor	Related Behaviors
Self-Insight	I look for feedback that can provide me with a better understanding of my development needs.
	I know the organizational context in which certain personal characteristics (how hard I sell ideas, my listening ability, ability to build rapport, etc.) work for or against me.
	I solicit input from a variety of organizational stakeholders.
Adaptability	I am flexible with regard to looking at a number of career paths and options.
	I readily adapt to new circumstances, managers, etc.
	I don't require a "paint-by-numbers" work situation; I can easily deal with high-change, uncertain work settings.
Scope	I can view business issues from the perspective of the next level (understand how those issues would appear to leaders at my manager's level).
	I progressively work toward taking on a broader range of increasingly complex work responsibilities.
	I don't get lost in complexity.
Perspective	I understand the business context for decisions.
	I remain current on issues and trends within my industry.
	I factor into account the long-term implications of my decisions.
Impact	I can influence the decisions of others.
	I know when and how to navigate the organization and enlist the support of stakeholders.
	I can make a compelling business case for new initiatives.
Risk Taking	I am able to step out of my comfort zone to tackle new challenges.
	I am willing to make tough tradeoffs (relocation, job security) to advance my career and grow on the job.
	I "play without a net"; in other words, I am fully accountable for my actions.