

SENIOR LEADERSHIP TRAINING: QUO VADIS?

APARNA SHARMA (DIRECTOR-HR, DEUTSCHE BANK, GBS SERVICE CENTRE, INDIA) ANALYSES THE DIRECTION IN WHICH SENIOR LEADERSHIP TRAINING IS HEADED, AND AFFIRMS THAT LEARNING IS A LIFELONG PROCESS MEANT FOR ONE AND ALL

The following incident occurred several decades ago, in the late 1950s, when I was a student at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. One day, a friend was sitting in her office when there was a knock on the door. When she asked the caller to enter, in came an elderly gentleman in his sixties, wearing white pants, shirt and a coat, a tie askew, a pair of *chappals* and a white turban. He took a seat and said, 'I say, I am told you have studied something of microbiology. Would you mind teaching the subject to me?' My friend was taken aback. Everyday, for a month, the gentleman would come to the Institute to sit with my friend to learn microbiology. He later went on to apply his learning to the study of physiology of vision and wrote a book about it. The name of the gentleman? Sir C.V. Raman. (Source: *Learning: a Lifelong Process* by Dr. N.V.C. Swamy).

Learning is a lifelong process. There is no such thinking as: 'I am a very successful professional with 30 years of experience and I know it all'. Every day is a different experience and provides food for thought. Learning, unlearning, and re-learning are all parts of development for professionals at all levels.

So also is the case with senior man-

agement professionals. Training and development or executive development is important for two reasons. One, it is to ensure continuous development. Two, only when the seniors learn and grow, can they help their teams grow and develop. Thus, executive development, or the lack of it, affects the long-term health of an organisation.

Executive development can take various forms. First, corporations can send their management for strategic management courses to global premier management institutions like Harvard, ISB, Cornell, Wharton, etc. Second, they can enhance senior-level capability through business simulations. This is the process of taking a real-life situation and observing how a manager reacts, makes business decisions, and the learning thereafter. This also helps to ascertain whether or not a manager is ready for the next level or a bigger role. Third option is through soft skills workshops that stress on holistic development, with focus on work-life balance, and improving physical fitness and emotional intelligence.

The above forms of development have worked well so far and will continue to do well in the future too. Here are some more thoughts.

It gets lonelier and lonelier as you get



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to the top. There is a need to bounce off ideas, share insecurities, and express shortcomings to someone who would not judge you or use the information against the company. Sometimes, you just want to speak your mind. This is where a *Life Coach* comes in. Life coaches can play the role of a coach, friend, and guide. An ability to have an external and macro view of the business, along with soft skills, will surely help. They can provoke thought and help one fathom what is going well and what is going wrong. It is like holding a mirror in front of oneself!

Over 65 per cent of India's popula-

tion is under the age of 35. Their thinking, needs, and aspirations are different from earlier generations. Time should be spent with this generation. The crux of the idea is understand both the present and the future consumer, the ones under-35 being the latter. Similarly, if senior management from all functions visits the marketplace and spends time with consumers, it would allow for a better understanding of consumer needs across the spectrum. A couple of years ago, a leading FMCG company made its senior managers across functions spend time in the marketplace.

As responsibility and span of control

grow, managers face conflicting demands on their time. With so much pressure, things could go wrong. A course that shows them how to concentrate would enhance productivity. If senior management does so simultaneously, it would generate collective energy. These sessions could also help to reduce inter-departmental conflict.

Consistent, high-level performance comes through a combination of knowledge and development of soft skills. The above ideas deal with both aspects. Given the pace of change in India and the world, it is very important that executive development be given adequate importance and become a continuous process in organisations.

It would be equally useful for companies to think of out-of-the-box ideas to customise executive development programmes. Involve the youth! Use a combination of external and internal resources. The former brings a cross-industry perspective, while the latter has an understanding of internal needs.

The management must inculcate and encourage the culture of challenging the status quo and asking questions. There should be *jigyasa* – curiosity and desire to learn – in the organisation. If senior management has it in them, this is bound to percolate to lower levels and they could lead by example.

How do you measure return on investment on executive development? Results of monies spent could get reflected in various ways. Enhanced performance, higher productivity, superior interpersonal relationships, amongst others. The manager's subordinates, peers, and superiors would be the first to notice the change. Determining the mode of getting this feedback is no difficult task.

The Indian system places undue emphasis on school and college education. Some believe that obtaining a degree is 'it'. Here, I remember Mark Twain's words: 'I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.'

The views expressed in this article are solely of the author, and not of the organisation she is working with.