

Beyond the leadership funnel in the digital age



Can a concerted and systematic effort to building a strong leadership lattice over a leadership funnel yield phenomenal results for an organization over time?

By **Rajiv Jayaraman & Subramanian Kalpathi**

“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.”

– Alvin Toffler

Alvin Toffler was a prolific writer and futurist who made several bold proclamations that we today accept as everyday truths. In his 1970 magnum opus *Future Shock*, he explained the psychological state of individuals and the future societies as a personal perception of “too much change in too short a period of time.” We now have a widely accepted terminology for that state of being, one that vividly describes our perception of the world around us – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA).

The 21st century is characterized by a VUCA environment whose defining characteristic is the frenetic pace of change. To thrive in such a setting, leaders are required to not just unlearn the closely

held insular mind-sets, beliefs and attitudes, but imbibe new ones that are more open and futuristic. For talent professionals tasked with the development of such leaders, it is imperative that they too assess for and develop skills that are in line with such new ways of working.

Letting go

Leadership in the industrial era has been heavily influenced by military establishments. It was (and still is) commonplace in corporate circles to hear about terms such as – command-and-control, top-down, status and power, rank-and-file, toeing the line, marketing warfare, and so on. However, what we have failed to consider is that military leadership is also undergoing evolution in the digital age. Consider, for instance, the leadership style of retired US Army General Stanley McChrystal who lead Joint Special Operations Command in the mid-2000s. General McChrystal and his team encountered terrorists on the battlefield in Iraq who simply didn't play by the rules that the erstwhile military was familiar with. Faced with the stark reality of losing against this new, faceless enemy, General McChrystal completely reimagined the rules of the game. He explains one such



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instance of incorporating agility within his team, in his book *Team of teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*. “In place of maps, whiteboards began to appear in our headquarters. Soon they were everywhere. Standing around them, markers in hand, we thought out loud, diagramming what we knew, what we suspected, and what we did not know...” General McChrystal also goes on to explain his newfound thinking about leadership: “The temptation to lead as a chess master, controlling each move of the organization, must give way to an approach as a gardener, enabling rather than directing. A gardening approach to leadership is anything but passive. The leader acts as an “Eyes-On, Hands-Off” enabler who creates and maintains an ecosystem in which the organization operates.”

Letting in

Thinking of a leader as a gardener and not merely a chess-master is a great analogy that drives home the difference between collaborative and authoritative leadership styles. The day a leader learns the virtues of letting go, and more importantly, also builds such capabilities down the line, he or she sows the seeds of leadership as an organizational capability that is not confined to a status or position. This ‘collaborative’ approach to leadership is built on the twin virtues of empowerment and accountability. Collaborative leadership is an essential ‘keystone habit’ or leadership behavior that can help drive further meaningful changes within an organization. Other crucial leadership skills that supplement collaborative leadership include: leading without authority (and by influence), data-driven decision-making, adopting a ‘growth’ mindset over a ‘fixed’ mindset, embracing design thinking, and having an agile outlook towards the work and the workplace.

With modern organizations adopting a ‘lattice’ approach characterized by multiple career pathways, which aren’t necessarily just bottom-up, leaders can enable employees with the opportunities to make lateral career shifts and self-directed working that provides greater autonomy and direct responsibility.

Beyond the leadership funnel

Leadership development in the digital age calls for going beyond the outmoded approaches of capability building and adopting a *leadership lattice* approach over a funnel-based approach that involves identifying, assessing, and developing leaders at all levels of the organization.

- **Identification:** Traditional approaches to identifying leaders emphasize experience, tenure, and past performance. Workers know how long they have served in an organization, keep track of their contributions and over time, expect rewards for their loyalty and tenure in a firm, for example, being considered for senior leadership positions. The leadership lattice approach to identifying leaders places a premium on



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those who showcase agility, problem-solving capabilities and a growth mindset.

- **Assessment:** Conventional approaches to leadership assessment rely heavily on aspects such as subject matter expertise, personality traits, and competencies. In the digital world, leaders are expected to collaborate with others beyond their immediate domain and thereby solve real business challenges.
- **Development:** Formal training programs and adopting an education-driven approach to capability development is passé. Leaders today are developed more through education, exposure, experience, and enablement. They are developed at all levels within the organization and are in turn, required to lead ecosystems and networks.

The process of learning, unlearning, and re-learning is an essential requirement not just for leaders, but also for those tasked with building the leadership pipeline. A concerted and systematic effort to building a strong leadership lattice over a leadership funnel can yield phenomenal results for an organization over time. 📌

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