

## **Crucibles of Leadership**

### **How to learn from experience to become a great leader**

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**Harvard Business Press, 2008**

#### **Abstract**

*Crucibles of leadership” is a book that teaches leaders how to be lifelong learners by leveraging their transformational experiences. The book explains how leaders can develop their personal learning strategy to draw deep insights from “Crucibles”. It is the duty of organizations to help people develop themselves by preparing them for and helping them to deal effectively with transformational experiences.*

#### **Introduction**

Experience is life’s greatest teacher. Exposure to life changing experiences, often holds the key to the development of a great leader. But experiences have a lasting impact only if we are prepared to learn from them. For learning to happen, we should anticipate ‘crucible’ experiences, be good at drawing insights from them and most importantly apply the learning in our jobs, especially the way we manage people. This book profiles several successful leaders whose lives changed because of “crucibles” of experience. Hence the name “crucibles of leadership.” The key message in this book is that the essence of leadership is learning and the most valuable learning comes from experiences or more precisely transformational experiences.

How can leaders be developed? The author, Robert Thomas mentions that it is not very easy to do so by reading books. A classroom is a “sterile” environment. Learnings from offsite workshops are rarely applied on the job. Last but not the least, a lot of hype is created about “learning from observation.” But here too, learning and developing oneself is not all that easy as it is made out to be.

#### **Learning from Crucibles**

The key to leadership development is exposure to experiences. The author refers to profound experiences as crucibles. A crucible refers to the vessel in which alchemists, during medieval times, attempted to turn base metals into gold. In other words, a crucible is a transformational experience which toughens and changes people and gives them a new sense of identity, motivation and purpose. As Thomas mentions, “crucible is not the same as a life stage or transition, like moving from adolescence to adulthood or from midlife to retirement. Crucibles are more like trials or tests that corner individuals and force them to answer questions about who they are and what is really important to them.”

While experience matters, it is what and how we learn from experience that is probably more important. Extracting insight from experience or abstracting a principle from a critical event is a competence that not many are blessed with. A related competence is

the ability to search proactively for learning opportunities rather than waiting for things to happen. Here we must remember that “openness to experience” is widely recognized as one of the “Big five” personality traits in people. People committed to learning from experience have another remarkable quality. They learn to practice while they perform. As Thomas mentions, they not only learn *by* doing but also learn *while* doing.

Great leaders are invariably great learners. They are clear about their aspirations and motivations. They know what learning style they are most comfortable with. As a result they have a robust “Personal Learning Strategy.” When they go through a tumultuous experience, they are able to ask profound questions:

- Why did this happen?
- Why did it happen to me?
- What can I learn from this experience that I can apply in the future?

Great leaders are characterized by *adaptive capacity, ability to engage others through shared meaning and integrity.*

### **Adaptive Capacity**

Adaptive capacity means the ability to learn, adjust and change. The building blocks of adaptive capacity are resilience, creativity, openness to new experience, willingness to learn and sharp observational skills. By encountering significant new problems and dealing with them adaptively, leaders can achieve new levels of competence which can better prepare them for the next challenge.

To gauge adaptive capacity, we must ask the following questions:

- Are we always on the lookout for ways to improve our performance as leaders?
- Do we set stretch goals for ourselves?
- Do we develop new hobbies?
- Do we try to learn about different parts/aspects of the organization?
- Are we current on new technologies?
- Do we visualise new things?
- Do we persevere through difficulties?
- Do we volunteer for different assignments?

### **Engaging others**

Engaging others through shared meaning involves both teaching and listening. An interactive leader can “enlist” as well as “command” team members. The key attributes of leaders who are able to engage others, are deep sense of purpose, emotional intelligence, excellent communication and the ability to tolerate dissent. To gauge our ability to engage others, we must ask the following questions:

- Do we encourage dissenting opinions?
- How good are we in developing relationships with peers and people in other business/functions?
- Do we communicate clearly the goals to our team members?
- Do we try to get a buy in from people before we start implementing new ideas?
- Do we communicate to others a strong sense of purpose in life?
- Do we take an active role in career planning for others?
- Do we empathize with others?
- How good are we in story telling?
- Do we get too emotional in conflict prone situations?

### **Integrity**

Integrity is knowing about what we stand for. It means having a strong moral compass, having the courage of conviction and remaining strong during tough times. The building blocks of integrity are clarity about personal values, a good balance between ambition and moral principles and the ability to understand when to lead and when to follow. The following questions test the level of integrity of a leader:

- Have we done something in line with our conscience even when others disagreed with us?
- Do we follow through on our commitment?
- Do we have conviction in what we are doing?
- Do people consider us to be honest?
- Are we willing to give up the lead, even at the risk of losing out?
- Do we realize when people agree with us just because of the formal position we occupy?
- Are we comfortable with being proved wrong?

### **Types of crucible experiences**

There are three main types of crucible experiences:

- *New territory* - These experiences help leaders become more alert to new information and honing skills in making sense out of a confusing situation. The challenge is to overcome the disorientation that comes with any situation and weave it into one's experience.
- *Reversal* – Such experiences are associated with loss or failure. They teach both endurance and imagination. Typically, something believed to be permanent, turns out to be temporary or what is believed to be true, turns out to be false.
- *Suspension* – These experiences involve an extended period of contemplation or deliberation. Here, the leaders are challenged to clarify their core values and

purpose in life. If leaders cope with this kind of experience well, they can reinforce their personal foundation of core beliefs.

### **Learning from crucible experiences**

Learning from crucible experiences is effective when three things come together: *personal aspirations, motivations and learning style*.

Leadership is a transition from being a novice to gaining eminence. To move from “novice” to “eminent”, one needs grasp of method, ambition, instruction, feedback and a personal learning strategy. First, individuals must master the fundamental methods that define a domain of expertise. Without this, too much time may be wasted in inventing tools and approaches that already exist. Ambition refers to the desire for accomplishment. But like talent, ambition alone is not enough for superior performance. Practice must become “part of the fabric of performance” as the author puts it. A great teacher or coach can bring a wealth of experience and adjust the instruction and pace to suit the style of the performer. Immediate feedback is vital to anyone who ventures into the world of performance. Feedback enables leaders to adjust their style quickly.

A personal learning strategy consists of both thinking and feeling aspects. The cognitive side consists of the learning style. But it is in the heart from which most eminent performing artists and outstanding leaders get their inspiration. Great leaders are energized by the possibility of accomplishing something grand, making a mark on the world and leave behind a legacy.

There are three building blocks to personal learning strategy:

- A method for extracting insight from experience.
- A powerful aspiration that encourages you to grow and adopt.
- A concept of deliberate practice that connects learning and performance.

A powerful Personal Learning Strategy lies at the intersection of experience, aspiration and deliberate practice.

Understanding what motivates us makes it easier to identify and exploit the right learning opportunities for ourselves, particularly crucible experiences. Understanding how and when we learn best helps sustain our motivation to grow and learn as a leader. A leader’s aspirations are fuelled by intense personal motivation.

### **Organizational implications**

For most organizations, it is a challenge to implement a process by which leaders can leverage experiences. Crucibles are hard to schedule and in some cases difficult to identify. But crucibles are frequent and the learning comes free. Organizations can tap

into the power of crucibles by pursuing an experience based approach to leadership development. This essentially involves weaving together life experience, on the job experience and skill development. Experience based leader development involves three processes:

- *Preparing* – Individuals must be prepared in various ways. For example, people must be trained to separate fact from perception, ask penetrating questions and assess risk and consequences. To be capable observers, aspiring leaders must take into account how their own motives, aspirations, values, stereotypes and expectations shape what they see and how their individual learning styles can be best engaged to aid them in the process of adapting to change.
- *Deploying* - Performance improves through practice. So practice needs to be legitimated as an essential and valued activity for leaders. Each performance is a learning opportunity. So companies must encourage the merging of performance and practice. As the author mentions, “in the absence of encouragement to both act and reflect, it is unlikely that individuals will evolve their own “distinctive leadership perspective.”
- *Renewing* – Companies must help individuals find ways to preserve and renew what they have learned. A personal perspective must be open to adaptation, amendment and change as different experiences and challenges emerge.

Novice leaders need both technique and perspective. Novices must have a good understanding of their role, aspirations, motivation and learning style. Adept leaders need to practice a larger repertoire of techniques and to extend the scope of their responsibility. Eminent or outstanding leaders must keep learning new techniques, lest they stagnate. They must be encouraged to renew their own energies and aspirations, spread their insights through mentoring and delegate effectively so that others may test themselves.

Experiences that involve new territory involve gaining greater insight into personal motivations, aspirations and values and learning style. To leverage experiences that involve reversal, people should be comfortable with self observation and self regulation, be capable of coping with adversity and exercising sympathy. To get the most out of experiences that involve suspension, a leader must understand what it takes to renew oneself, physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. It may also involve effective communication to others, such as through mentoring.

### **Conclusion**

To bring out the importance of lifelong learning through exposure to transformational experiences, the author quotes Albert Einstein, “Wisdom is not a product of schooling but of the lifelong attempt to acquire it.” So organizations must do a lot to prepare people and nurture leaders. Companies must help leaders to adapt and learn.

Experience is the best teacher of leadership. So companies must encourage people to be prepared for experiences and engage in the most intensive learning when experiences actually happen.