



HOW TO PLAY WITH FIRE

EQUIP YOUR NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS
TO DEAL WITH ANYTHING. DIGBY SCOTT

WHAT'S MISSING?

Let's put it on the table. The vast majority of organizations put too much leadership development emphasis on people who are already in traditional leadership roles. And not enough on the people who are the promise of the future.

Imagine a fire. The hottest part of the flame is at the bottom, not the top. The top gets all the attention, but the bottom is where the real energy is. You want to be able to harness and use the energy of the people nearer the bottom for positive change. Don't snuff it out before it gets going.

The problem with primarily investing near the top is twofold:

1. You're working with people that have already a track record of success. They've honed the habits and belief systems of a lifetime that have got them to where they are. They very things that enabled their success can get in the way. Letting go of what works is hard work. As Marshall Goldsmith says, "what got you here won't get you there."¹ Instead, people here usually respond to the problems of today by working harder and faster, and those lower down the organization to do the same. Burnout and disengagement is almost a certainty.

2. The senior people are too far from the action. In typical hierarchical organizations, the senior leaders don't get to talk to customers, to hear firsthand what the issues are, and get a sense of what will really make a difference. No, the people who do that are on the front line. But they are not our "leaders." Or are they?

"As organizations grow flatter and more diverse, and as the global operating environment becomes increasingly more complex, there is a stronger demand for people who can lead at all levels of the company." —Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends 2016²

The young blood, sourced at great expense and hired for all the promise they bring, are "leaving, not leading." The enthusiasm and freshness that these talented younger people bring appears to be, more often than not, snuffed out before it has a chance to be channelled into meaningful impact.

Zenger Folkman research³ indicates that the average age that managers first get leadership training is 42. That's two decades into a career. What opportunities have been missed by not investing in these people sooner?

And regardless of whether there's a training programme or not, it's often that they're just overlooked and undervalued.

In particular, Millennials, who bring so much potential, are more often than not looking for a new role sooner rather than later, especially if their energy isn't harnessed in the right way.⁴ According to Deloitte, only 7 percent of companies have accelerated leadership programs for Millennials, and that's a problem. **Our next generation is leaving, not leading. We hired them for their talent and energy, but they don't want to play. Why not?**

What's Needed?

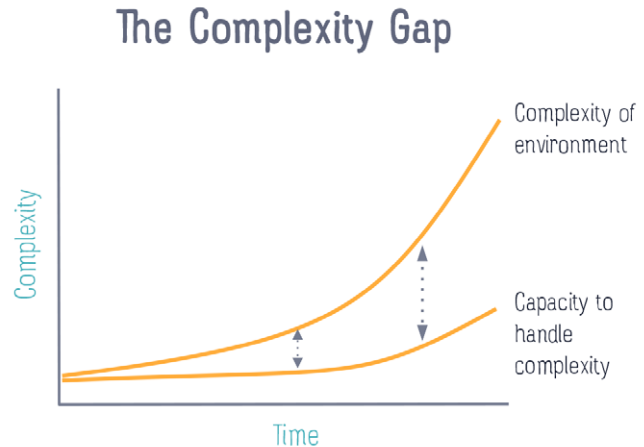
The game has changed, and it requires us to play differently. We need to invest in the people who can bring fresh perspectives to old problems, and we need to invest in them in ways that engage them so they stay around, and build the capacity to lead us in the longer-term. Those people are the ones who are lower down the organization, often earlier in their careers.

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The game you're now playing has two parts: the short game and the long game:

The Short Game (Now): We're facing a complexity gap. The world has got more complex and our capacity to deal with that complexity hasn't kept up. Long-held business models are failing, entire industries are in upheaval, and jobs are being both dissolved and invented at a rapid clip. Our established ways of solving problems don't seem cut it these days. To solve today's problems, we need fresh thinking, different perspectives, and new ways of operating.

The Long Game (Future): The world *will* continue to get more complex. Today's senior leaders *will* eventually step back, or burn out. In the meantime, we continue to play hard in the business game of 21st century, but it's looking pretty thin on the reserves bench.



The Whole Game: You need to play the short game and the long game at the same time. You need smart, passionate people who can give you fresh perspectives on today's problems. You need smart, passionate people who can stay resilient, edgy, and agile in a complex future business environment. The organizations that will thrive in the future are those that can fan the flames of passion in the people who can play their part in both the short and long games: your future leaders.

The Roadmap

The classic leadership development journey looks like this: You start out as an “unknown quantity.” Over time, you learn to master the technical craft of whatever field you're in. Eventually, your amassed expertise can result in you being a strong and competent deliverer in your technical domain. Perhaps you even manage a team.

From this point, you might start to ask deeper questions, and desire to actively shape the broader context in which you're working. This is leadership emerging. With time, you find your own voice, and develop a broad perspective from which to lead yourself and others through complex territory. After many years of rich experience, you've cultivated deep wisdom that you share to help others on the journey.

This journey, as described by adult development expert Bill Torbert,⁵ is one of maturing both skillsets and mindsets. The further along the developmental path you are, the more likely you are to think and act in more sophisticated ways. You're better equipped to handle more complex challenges. It follows that you can have exponentially more impact by actively contributing to solving your organization's more complex challenges.

This matters, because the world we live and work in is becoming more complex. We need more people who can operate more effectively in complexity.



The Shift

Your organization is likely stacked with plenty of people who are technically good at what they do, and are competent and delivering what's needed.

The shift to make is one that has more people who can go beyond simply being experts and deliverers, to doing the work of leadership. That's regardless of their place in the organizational hierarchy. This shift will unleash huge potential, not only for your organization but also for the world at large. Imagine what difference that could make.

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The Skills You Need

As the world changes, so do the skills that make the difference. Beyond the technical skills required for specific roles, there are meta-skills that are fast becoming prized regardless of role or industry. These are the new skills underpinning leadership in the 21st century, and they have nothing to do with how senior you are.

Savvy companies, particularly in disrupted industries, are looking for and appointing leaders who embrace disruption, can connect across diverse demographics and cultures, and are exceptionally curious, open-minded, and courageous.⁶

The World Economic Forum,⁷ The Institute for the Future,⁸ and futurists such as Bob Johansen⁹ have all researched and reported on the types of work skills required for 2020 and beyond. In synthesising their findings, the conclusion is that we need to shift from a world that values Conformity, Competencies, and Certainty to one that embraces Curiosity, Connectedness, and Courage.



If we want to shift the bell curve, these are the skills we need to cultivate in the people who will help us play the game successfully.

1. **Curiosity:** the insatiable drive to ask questions, learn, unlearn, sit with ambiguity and not knowing, to step back, critique, and make sense of things objectively, to seek and find deeper meaning in the patterns, and see things from new and different perspectives, to have novel and adaptive thinking.
2. **Connectedness:** the ability to seek out and connect meaningfully with a diverse range of people, apply social intelligence, serve others, and to collaborate effectively in a wide array of settings.
3. **Courage:** to act without being assured of success, without needing approval or permission, to experiment, innovate, and try new approaches, be agile, and challenge existing ideas and practices.

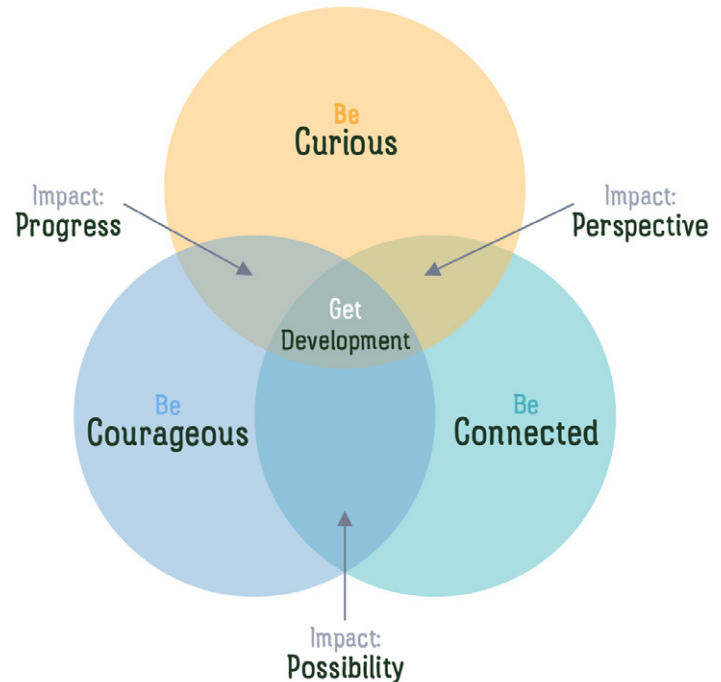
What would be the value in having more of those skills in your organization?

When we deliberately cultivate these three C's together, we get people who help us make progress on our intractable challenges, bring fresh *perspectives* to old problems and emerging issues, and create new *possibilities* for our future. If you're not already hiring for the three C's, you should be, otherwise you won't be getting those three Ps.

Once you've got them on board, the challenge is to cultivate them. Your younger generation is the fuel for your organization's future success. Your task is to set them alight.

The Zenger Folkman research¹⁰ recommends disproportionately investing in leadership development for the younger generations. This is primarily because they scored highest on the fundamental competencies that we need for the future.

Conditions for Development



How To Fan The Flames

Most organizations have a “high-potential” development program, or something similar. You’ve probably got one. Traditionally they’re long-term programs that give the opportunity to a select group of emerging leaders to develop their leadership potential.

While these types of program are not necessarily a bad thing, they often fall short of truly building the organizational capacity to play the short and long games successfully.

What’s needed is a shift in approach:

- Consider everyone a high potential. Equip everyone with the mindsets and skillsets to develop themselves and those around them.
- Incorporate into everyday activities (and formal development programs) the three critical elements¹¹ that actually catalyse peoples’ development and build their capacity to close the complexity gap.

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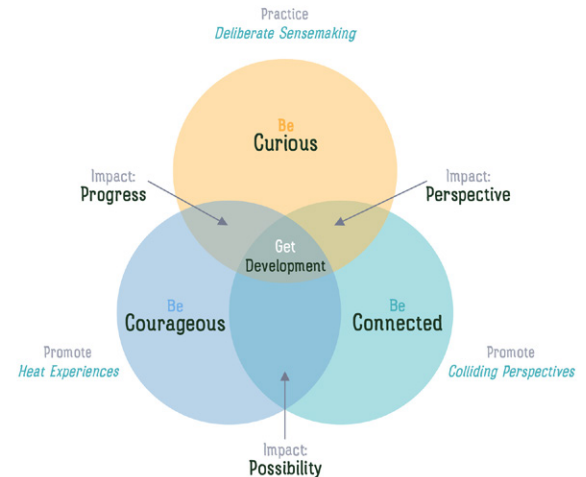
Those three critical elements are as follows:

Heat Experiences: To get a fire started, you need a source of heat. Seek out novel, high stakes situations where existing ways of thinking and operating won't cut it. In these scenarios, people are forced to try new approaches to solve the challenge they face.

Colliding Perspectives: You need the friction to create the sparks. Seek out people that have very different perspectives on the world than your own. The friction that can arise is an opportunity to reconsider your own ways of seeing the world, and see things from fresh perspectives, while also challenging them to broaden their perspective.

Deliberate Sensemaking: To burn brightly, a fire needs space between the logs. Growth happens when you are able to stand back from your situation and get some perspective. You are able to see the patterns at play and the assumptions you are holding. Do this deliberately to help you make sense of things in new ways, and to make more informed choices.

Here's how the three elements support the three Cs:



What Next?

To create the conditions for your future leaders to thrive, breathe oxygen onto the fire. Deliberately develop their three C's by using the three elements that catalyse development.

Here are four things you can do today:

- 1. Involve them in your intractable problems.** Give them a real and gnarly challenge. Let them own it and wrestle with it. Be there to help them think it through. But don't tell them what to do.
- 2. Give them exposure to a wide range of perspectives, practices, and people** (just like the old apprentice and graduate programmes used to do). Don't keep them in their silo.
- 3. Provide them with the time and space to step back and make sense of things.** Foster their curiosity by role modelling it. Take time out with them to ask great questions, and reflect on what you're both learning. Don't simply keep throwing stuff at them.
- 4. Link their short game to their long game.** Deep down, we all aspire to a higher purpose. Find out what it is that sets them alight and help them find the deeper meaning in the challenge in front of them. Don't leave the work unhinged from the meaning.

Four Rapid-Fire Questions:

1. How well do you play the short game and the long game? Are you investing to solve the problems of today, and to ready yourself for what's coming over the horizon?
2. What qualities do you value in your people? How aligned are they to the three C's?
3. Do you know which people in your organization demonstrate the three C's in spades?
4. How are you breathing life into the people who have the potential take your organization forward?

Playing with fire is usually something you're advised not to do. But the wisest leaders seek it out. **Harness the fires of passion of your talented people, earlier in their careers, and your organization will burn bright well into the future.** 📖

1. What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More Successful by Marshall Goldsmith

2. "Global Human Capital Trends 2016" Deloitte

3. "Leadership Development. Are You Starting Too Late?" Zenger Folkman

4. "Millennials: Love Them Or Let Them Go" by Lindsay Gellman, *The Wall Street Journal*

5. "Seven Transformations of Leadership" by David Rooke and William R Torbert, *Harvard Business Review*,

6. "The rise of the not-so-experienced CEO" by Roselinde Torres, *Harvard Business Review*

7. "The 10 skills you need to thrive in the fourth industrial revolution." World Economic Forum

8. "Future Work Skills 2020" Institute for the Future

9. Leaders Make The Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World by Bob Johansen

10. In Zenger Folkman's language, those competencies are Innovation, Collaboration and Driving for Results, which you can map directly to the three Cs.

11. For more on these elements, see "The How-To of Vertical Leadership Development-Part 2" by Nick Petrie, CCL

Info

ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Digby Scott is a leadership development expert who partners with organizations that are committed to developing their next generation of leaders. He is both an edgy catalyst and a wise guide for building organizational resilience in a complex world. He is also the author of the forthcoming book “Beyond The Threshold: An Essential Guide For Restless Go-Getters.” Digby is a former Chartered Accountant with a Big Four firm, as well as a former national manager of a global professional services firm and founder of two successful consulting firms. He combines his commercial and accounting background with his expertise in adult development to bring a down-to-earth, pragmatic approach to how organizations can accelerate the development of their people. With clients ranging from global mining conglomerates to agile start-ups, he is adept at working with a range of audiences. The common denominator for success is the passionate commitment from the executive team to build long-term organizational capability.

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