

## The vital HR backbone: 'Leadership levels' framework

By Shailesh Deshpande

### A. THE BACKDROP

#### THE EMPLOYEE VOICE

*From a CII – CSEND survey of Indian organizations*

*Most commonly identified reasons for employee attrition :*

*65 % - Lack of clear advancement and learning opportunities*

*48 % - Poor relationship with the supervisor*

Rahul is a 30 year old, part-time MBA from a tier three institute in India and works in the Sales function of a Consumer Products company. He recently participated in a two day long Development Centre (DC), which was supposed to provide him feedback about his potential to take up a 'Manager' level role in the organization. After the DC, he has been told that he has not 'cleared' it and needs to improve his 'Achievement Orientation' and 'Customer Focus' competencies to be considered for the promotion.

This is what he has to say about his experience: *"I feel very frustrated with this decision. For last three years, the depot that I manage has always exceeded Sales targets and met all the key process and control norms. What do they mean when they say I don't have potential? At the DC, they gave us a case study that ran into five pages-I could not even read it properly - because my English is weak - and because of that I could not perform well in the case study discussion. Now they are telling me that I lack in 'Customer Service competency'! Why can't they take feedback from the distributors I manage, to truly measure me on this? When I asked my boss what exactly I need to do to get promoted, he said something very vague about 'managerial potential' and said I should take help from HR. The worst thing is that last year also I went through a DC and could not clear it. Now I have two twenty page reports which have feedback based on the exercises used in the DCs (which is of no direct relevance to work I do every day) but I have no clue what exactly I need to do to improve and demonstrate my potential. It is very unfair – it's like they are forcing me to appear for an exam that has irrelevant and undefined syllabus, and failing me on it"*

## THE CEO VOICE

*From the Deloitte report 'Talent Edge 2020' released in 2013 ( Based on survey of top business leaders )*

*'Respondents anticipate greater executive leadership shortages over the next several years than any other talent category in their companies— and also more than 30% rank leadership as their most pressing talent concern'*

Jai is 45 and he is the CEO of a Pharmaceutical company in India. In last three years, his company has acquired half a dozen businesses across the globe – substantially increasing the scale and complexity of the business. He thinks his biggest risk is lack of a leadership depth in the organization – he thinks he does not even have half the number of business leaders he needs as on date, and even lesser number of potential candidates for number of leadership positions he will have in next 3 to 5 years.

He says: *"If I look at my Management Committee or even their direct reports, I see people who are very strong in their functional capabilities. But when it comes to wider business perspective and ability to create an enabling organizational culture or groom second line of leaders, they seem to falter in a big way. I see many of them struggle while doing very basic managerial tasks such as providing effective feedback for performance improvement. Along with my HR team, we are trying many expensive interventions - such as Executive Coaching, sending people for global development programs and others – to enhance the team's leadership capabilities but I still have a nagging feeling that we are missing some important part of the puzzle"*

## THE MIDDLE MANAGER VOICE

*From Accenture global survey of middle managers*

*35% - Report difficulty with work life balance*

*30% - Say that their companies are mismanaged ( feel they are caught between the top management and people below them )*

Reema is 34 and has a MBA from a top B-school in India – she works as a senior manager with a large multinational bank. Her most significant difficulties on the job are: maintaining a good work life balance and controlling the high attrition levels in her team.

She says *"I have always been a perfectionist – I joined this bank immediately after my MBA and within the first two years, won multiple awards for excellence. Even today, I thoroughly check each and every aspect of the work done by my team members – and if they don't understand the standard of excellence we need to deliver, I actually do the work myself. I don't like to be too friendly with my team, because I think that erodes the respect they have for me -I think all my team members are grown-ups and capable of taking care of themselves- We don't really need to waste too much time on meetings -I have told them that they are free to approach me if they get stuck somewhere on work matters.*

*I don't understand why I see so much attrition in my team – I try to comply with all HR processes my company has (though I don't fully understand half of them). The most frustrating thing about our HR function is our competency model – it has lot of nice English words (like 'Change Advocacy'!) but it does not help me answer two of the most important questions my team members ask me:*

*(a) How exactly is the competency model related to their work?*

*(b) How they can understand what competencies they need to develop to get promoted? (Because across levels, the difference in competencies is shown only through change of few words here and there)*

*The other reason why I too have limited faith in our competency model is that I have seen many people who score poorly on the competency model but do their jobs extremely well and vice versa.*

## **THE HR VOICE**

### **From Deloitte global survey on HR transformation**

*"At most respondents, HR transformation is still about systems and processes. The business drivers are still cost savings and effectiveness. These are not "bad" or unimportant drivers; they are merely solutions in a vacuum. HR transformation—despite the urgency, the competitive imperative, or the call to action from the C-suite—is still occurring slowly and is **NOT occurring in the context of supporting a business strategy or helping a company meet its business objectives**"*

Ana is a Head of HR for a business unit of a large Manufacturing company. She has worked in the HR function for more than a decade. She believes that only when the line managers play their people management role effectively, can the organization bring out the best from its people. To highlight importance of this aspect, she had recently organized a contest to identify 'most admired bosses'. The teams were asked to file in nominations for their supervisors. The panel reviewing these nominations recently completed their deliberations and now Ana is facing a very peculiar dilemma.

She says: *'There is something not right about these nominations – many of the bosses who have come up as top scorers are either people who play politics of power (their style is 'if you are in my camp, I will take care of you – or else..') or softies who often avoid conflicts and are scared of taking tough stances with their teams (and as a result their service to internal and external customers is often not up to mark) Going strictly by the nomination criteria, some of them will be judged as the 'most admired bosses' – but I am worried now that this contest will further increase the cynicism of my line managers about HR!*

### **Can we see any common thread in all these stories and surveys?**

I am sure all us of who are familiar with field of HR and business in India can think of many more such surveys and personal anecdotes that highlight very similar issues. It is certainly not the case that these organizations and their HR functions don't have the right intentions. But this appears to be a very complex and multidimensional problem, without easy solutions.

**Is it conceivable that we are facing all these problems because we are missing one key piece of the jigsaw puzzle?**

**Is it conceivable that this missing piece in fact has been 'in print' for more than a decade?**

I think it can be argued that the missing piece is the 'Leadership Levels' framework proposed by Ram Charan and Stephen Drotter –captured in their book 'The Leadership Pipeline'.

## **B. CORE PRINCIPLES OF THE BOOK 'THE LEADERSHIP PIPELINE'**

- The most important and fundamental reason why many organizations struggle with their people programs and leadership development work ( which has direct impact on long term business performance) is because they lack **'an enduring central architecture'** that logically connects all the relevant factors related to people, business and HR together.
- In absence of this central architecture, organizations end up running multiple programs and processes that have a very low degree of interconnection and hence deliver significantly suboptimal results ( e.g. HR Manager Ana's experience described above )
- The 'Leadership Levels' framework is a useful way to think about this central architecture. The key features of the this framework are as follows :

- a) The organizational hierarchy can be divided into distinct 'leadership levels', with each leadership level being responsible, NOT ONLY for specific set of business and functional results but also equally responsible for specific 'leadership contributions & capabilities'. **This is the most important core principle of the framework.**

*(Unfortunately the organizations often choose to neglect the deficit in 'leadership contributions', because the employee delivers the desired results. In the long run, this neglect becomes a significant root cause behind many of the people issues)*

- b) At each of the 'Leadership Levels', to do complete justice to expected leadership contributions & capabilities, the employee needs to demonstrate a different set of 'work values, skills and time application'.

*(For example, an employee who has taken over people management responsibility for the first time, must demonstrate the following:*

**Work values:** *She must understand that large part of her responsibility is now getting work done through her team and enabling the team to do better work (and she should NOT excessively focus on doing the work herself)*

**Skills:** *She must demonstrate abilities such as forming productive relationships, delegation, review and feedback*

**Time application:** *She must appreciate that significant part of her time now needs to be invested in effective meetings with the team (one on one as well as collective). And she should not view time with team as an interruption or as mechanical chore to be done away with.*

*It can clearly be seen that Reema – the Bank Manager whose voice we heard earlier has not really made this transition successfully)*

- c) It is important that the organization clearly spells out the various levels and exact nature of leadership contributions & capabilities expected at each level.
- d) The organization then needs to hold people accountable for these contributions and also help them develop the relevant capabilities. The organization should NOT promote people to next level unless the results and contributions at the initial level are fully met and capabilities for next level demonstrated on the job.

*(At first glance, none of this appears to be spectacularly new, but the beauty of the framework lies in the few underlined words above. For example, if the organization defines that to move from level one to level two, the individual MUST have demonstrated certain people leadership capabilities - an employee who is functionally brilliant but lacks in people management capabilities WILL NOT get promoted to a generalist role at the next level. In fact if such a process is followed with rigor, such an employee will proactively take serious efforts to develop the necessary people capabilities because he or she will know that not doing that will seriously limit his career growth)*

*(Note: The following sections present my synthesis and expansion of the 'Leadership Levels' principle. It may not exactly match with the ideas presented in the 'Leadership Pipeline' book)*

### **C. PROPOSED FRAMEWORK BASED ON THE 'LEADERSHIP PIPELINE PRINCIPLES'**

A few important background points

- i) The framework should be seen to have a continuum. Which means that it does not imply that no employee at the lower level will be exhibiting 'Leadership Contributions & Capabilities' (LCC) at the next level. But the key question (while reviewing potential of an employee) is whether he displays MOST of the LCCs at the next level, and not just one or two.
- ii) The framework demands that an employee must have demonstrated the LCCs at the lower level and must have the ability to review and coach employees at the next junior level with for the appropriate LCCs. (For example, a supervisor who has team members having 'Leading People' responsibilities MUST be able to effectively evaluate and coach his team members on this capability. The supervisor can not say that giving feedback to his team member on his 'Leading People' capability is HR's job and he will only talk to the team member about functional work )
- iii) While the book proposes a specific set (six) of leadership transition points, each organization needs to define the Leadership Levels that are appropriate for its own context
- iv) The framework described below (as well as the framework described in the book) is broadly meant for 'generalist roles and functional roles with good degree of generalist component (For example – a Supply Chain functional lead with a large team). It may not apply fully to highly specialized niche roles, where even at senior level the contributions are through individual professional and technical efforts and have a very small element of team management.
- v) The framework works very well in conjunction with an organization structure based on 'broad band principles' wherein each organization level represents a step jump in scale, complexity and leadership capability.
- vi) This framework can very effectively replace the trait/input based competency models
- vii) This framework can work well in conjunction with 'leadership values' that the organization may want to emphasize to the employees. The most effective way to do this appears to be articulating these values as core guiding principles that apply to all levels of the organization ( Example : 'Standards of Leadership' at Unilever or 'Growth values' at GE )

**The table on the next page is an initial draft of framework for first three organizational levels for a representative manufacturing company in India.**

Contribution Area	Non-managerial	First Line Managers ( Top tier professional qualification + around 3-5 years of experience )	Second line Managers (Top tier professional qualification + around 5 to 10 years of experience)
LEADING SELF	<i>Demonstrated initiative and tenacity to manage increasing scale, complexity and make continuous improvements</i>		
	-Scale and Complexity Level 1	-Scale and Complexity Level 2	-Scale and Complexity Level 3
	-Working well under some supervision  -Role defined by standard definition to a great degree	-Working under much lesser degree of supervision  -Many projects and initiatives in addition to standard role  -Ability to work well in cross cultural teams	-Working with minimal supervision  -Much larger value add through projects and initiatives in addition to a large standard role -Ability to manage cross cultural team and stakeholders
		<i>Self-awareness and commitment to work on self continuously to improve own leadership impact</i>	
LEADING PEOPLE	-Being a good team player	Level 2 -Strong people management : work allocation, review, guidance -Ability to facilitate team performance, resolve conflicts -Ability to lead core HR processes ( Induction, PMP)  -Defining team agenda, individual roles and conducting regular reviews and feedback	Level 3 -Strong people leadership : hiring, role design, coaching and enabling learning -Ability to structure a team and influence team culture -Ability to lead higher level HR processes ( Talent Management, Engagement, Career planning) -Defining functional agenda, conducting regular reviews and feedback ( Multi-team)
LEADING BUSINESS	- Process execution – for a routine range  -Stakeholder management of limited number and complexity ( SERVE)  -In depth understanding of few functional processes  -Ability to plan and manage own work	- Process execution for a non-routine range and process design for some  -Stakeholder management of higher number and complexity, with some supervision ( COLLABORATE )  -In depth understanding of all functional processes and how they link with other functions  -Ability to plan and project manage a good range	-Process design capability for the whole function including role design and metric -Ability to lead functional work in non-routine areas (Large change projects, turn-around, International, M&A, high growth etc.)  -Stakeholder management of much higher number and complexity with minimal supervision ( INFLUENCE) -In depth understanding of functional processes and their strategic and financial impact  Ability to supervise large volume of project management
EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT	-Good understanding of the larger organization outside one's own function and interconnections with own function	-Good understanding of relevant industry best practices and trends and ability to leverage it at work	-Well-developed professional network : (competitors, practitioners , vendors and suppliers) and ability to leverage it at work

ADDITIONAL POINTERS BASED ON THE FRAMEWORK

	Non-managerial	First Line Managers	Second line Managers
<b>Desirable pattern of time investment</b>		- Substantial amount of time ( around 50%) devoted to one on one and team meetings	-Substantial amount of time devoted to observing and coaching First Line Managers  -Substantial amount of time devoted to customer and cross functional meetings. ( By delegating core functional management to First Line Managers)
<b>SOME TYPICAL RED FLAGS</b>  <i>(Things that highlight the fact that contributions at right leadership level are not happening)</i>		-Views time with team as interruption  -Fixes mistakes of the team instead of teaching them how to do the work  -Takes no ownership of performance issues of a team member ( e.g. easily writes people off, without even providing adequate support, time and opportunity)	-Bypassing and undermining first line managers  -Inability to develop productive team culture  -Inability to work with team members who have very different style of working as compared to own style  -Spending disproportionate time and energy on areas of own expertise ( and less time on other areas )  -Shift from functional focus to strategic focus NOT MADE  -Either controlling too tightly OR free flow – not able to appropriately empower the team

CONCEPT OF 'PERFORMANCE PORTRAITS'

After the organization evolves and finalizes a framework that it thinks is most appropriate for its own context, line managers can provide feedback to employees on how they are doing on the desired ' LCC's in a simple visual form. For example:

Contribution Area	% Extent to which demonstrated compared to expected at current level			
	25	50	75	100
Leading Self				
Leading Team				
Leading Business				
Leveraging environment				

Once the LCCs are defined for each level, the 'Performance / Potential Portrait' can be drawn for current as well as next level – and can be a very effective tool to provide specific feedback to the employee.

#### **D. DISTINCT ADVANTAGES OF THE 'LEADERSHIP LEVELS' APPROACH**

##### **1. Provides ' people leadership capability' it's rightful place**

While all organizations keep on talking about people being their most important assets and keep demanding great people leadership from their managers – in reality very few put their money where their mouth is. **It will be no exaggeration to say that lack of leadership capabilities is the single most challenging issue that the organizations face.** If this framework is implemented in letter and spirit, then having capability for leadership contributions in people area does not remain a nice to have, soft and touchy feely thing – but it actually becomes as important as the functional capabilities. When leaders get tempted to promote someone to a senior leadership position purely based on functional brilliance, this framework will raise serious red flags if this person has not demonstrated appropriate LCCs. In exceptional situation, even if the management takes a decision to promote the person, it will be with a caveat that he or she needs to put significant efforts on developing the desired LCCs or face some serious consequences.

It is my submission that even if HR functions do this one job well – of playing role of a true conscience keeper and not allowing the organization to compromise on people leadership capabilities while taking hiring and promotion decisions, and helping line managers to consistently improve these capabilities – it will result in dramatic improvement in the impact of the function.

The other significant advantage of publishing the LCCs for each level is that from day one, a person who has moved into a new Leadership Level knows the importance of focusing on all four contribution areas. For example, a new first line manager must understand her job now is not doing the work herself but it is to enable others to do the work. This may sound like a very obvious point- but if it is left to chance, for a prolonged initial period the new managers end up stifling their team members with micromanagement and also suffer personally because of the added workload.

##### **2. Focus on results and not on input factors or personality characters**

One of the reasons why most people find the trait/characteristics based competency models frustrating is the fact that they focus a lot on process or inputs that go in, instead of the results themselves.

*(If one believes in the uniqueness of individuals, then it logically follows that people use different strategies and approaches to achieve the same results. For a systematic and comprehensive description of this school of thought, a very good source is Gallup Organization's work on strengths based leadership and their critique of the standard competency based approaches).* In stark contrast to the trait based approach, the LCC framework specifies the end



results that a leader needs to achieve (needless to say, through behaviour that is in conformance with organizational values)

**To quote the Master (Ram Charan): *'Competency models seem to be everywhere, so we have to account for them. Unfortunately, most competency models are not differentiated by layer or are differentiated inappropriately. They suffer from a "one size fits all" construction. We suggest you align them by layer where possible by connecting them to the work of that layer. That will improve the value of your competency models. If your competencies are not or cannot be connected to specific work, call them what they are — values. We observe line managers ignoring them in most companies because they don't have a clear connection to the work***

### **3. Transparency and democratization**

If an organization does a very rigorous and authentic job of defining the 'LCCs' in a way that is simple and clear, the employees themselves will be able to study them on their own and derive many insights (such as reflecting about where one stands with reference to expected contributions, what kind of projects one needs to take up to demonstrate next level capabilities etc.). Of course the line managers and HR team will have to facilitate this process, but that will be an advanced level of facilitation – such as helping with finer nuances or resolving queries.

*(We should seriously question the standard argument that many HR professionals use to say that 'my employees will not understand this and my line managers are not so sophisticated to use such frameworks'. This is often used as an excuse not to do a clear and logical job of defining the frameworks. If HR does a good job of it, majority of employees and line managers certainly have the ability understand and use such frameworks. This also makes it difficult for line managers to use the complexity as an excuse NOT to own HR processes.)*

The CEO of the German toy company Playmobil once said **'It's not what the toy does that's interesting. It's what the child does with the toy that's interesting'**. In the same spirit, the HR team should aim to devise such a logical and simple frameworks that even a junior level manager should be able to understand it on his own and be able to have a meaningful feedback conversation with his team member using it.

### **4. Shifts the ownership of capability development to the employee and line manager**

Creating a most appropriate LCC framework and making it available to all can really enable the organization to help its people take personal responsibility for their own capability development. The organization can now very easily ask the employee what efforts she has taken and what results has she delivered on the target LCCs.

### **5. Direct link with day to day work**

Since this framework is output focused and specifies results and contributions in work terms (e.g. degree of complexity and scale handled, nature of stakeholders managed) line managers as well as employees find it far easier

to relate it to their day to day work. Senior business leaders would also find it more effective as they can clearly see the link between HR processes based on the framework and the business results.

## **6. Simple but not simplistic**

Most of the business work today is multifaceted and complex (and also ever changing) hence it may not be feasible to reduce the complexity to one or two core principles. But it can be said that by capturing the four key facets of an employee's contribution (Self, Team, Business and function and External environment) this framework captures the important core of most of the roles to a good degree.

## **7. Shift from 'event based' thinking to 'process based' thinking**

Most of us would agree that many deep, complex phenomena in our life unfold over long duration of time and weave together many events and experiences. This framework enables us to see crucial phenomena such as promotion decision or development as gradual processes and not as one-time events.

**( For example, an ' Assessment Centre' based promotion process is a classic example of event based approach – where the fate of the individual is decided over span of two days, that too, often using artificial tools that may not have direct connect with the work the person is doing.**

**As against that if the 'LCC' framework is used appropriately – right from beginning of a year, the employees who are in the consideration set for a promotion can actually be encouraged to focus on projects and initiatives at the next 'LCC' level. The promotion decision can then be taken at the end of the year by reviewing the actual work done by the employees and extent to which he or she has demonstrated the next level LCCs.**

In context of development, this framework highlights the fact that a single training program or an intervention will never be able to address the developmental needs of an employee – but the employee must continuously keep working developing on all the facets the LCCs – using all possible avenues of development ( on the job projects, coaching as well as structured learning inputs )

## **E. EXAMPLES OF APPLICATION TO HR PROCESSES**

Enclosed below are a few specific illustrations of how this framework can be applied to modify / refine people processes

1. **Hiring:** If the organization truly believes that 'Leading People' capability is critical at certain leadership levels, then the hiring process should (in addition to the other standard features) specifically focus on evaluating candidate's capabilities in this area. **Using robust psychometrics or doing reference checks with past team members** could be few possible mechanisms for this. (This is a far better investment of time and resources than hiring a person with poor 'Leading People' capabilities and then trying to coach/train him. Given the relatively stable nature of adult personalities – this is a very slow and expensive route )

2. **Continuously measuring and developing the 'Leading People' capability:** No matter how many tools and processes are used, I firmly believe that finally right people in the organization need to take 'considered judgements' on people matters. As an example – I am describing below the process organizations can consider to 'diagnose and develop the 'Leading People' capability of line managers :
- A) First and foremost the organization should specifically define what specific people leadership capabilities are expected at each Leadership Level – and this information should be commonly available to all.
- B) When we look at a particular line manager, the HR Business Partner of that team and the supervisor of that manager are the people who should be held responsible to anchor this process. The judgement formed by this two member team should be finally reviewed and approved by the supervisor's supervisor.  
(One important implication here is that we need to hire and develop supervisors who can play this role effectively – we cannot have supervisors who don't know how to diagnose and coach their team members on all the applicable LCCs.)
- C) The focus needs to be on forming the right view on the LCCs of the line manager ( and not on mechanically completing specific HR processes – often the HR Managers are so tied up with completing one process after another ( e.g. 360 degree feedback, engagement surveys and others ) that there is no time to take a pause, reflect and have a conversation with the line manager about what exactly is the data saying and how the line manager can think about developing the capability )
- D) Organizations also constantly need to think about using innovative ways to generate high quality data – **for example – capturing feedback about the supervisors at the time of exit interview or team change of an employee. Or capturing feedback from team members of a vendor team in case of long projects where the line manager has indirectly supervised those team members.**
- E) The moment we hold HR and line managers accountable for measuring and developing the 'Leading People' capabilities, tools such as 360 feedback become a means to an end (and not an end in itself). This change in approach will make us think very differently about such tools and other HR processes. The table below is just meant to provide a few examples

	Before	After
360 degree feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Process conducted once in a year for whole organization</li><li>• Due to rules such as 'minimum tenure of 6 months to be eligible for 360' – some Managers may not undergo 360 feedback for as long a period as 1.5 years ( and can potentially cause lot of damage to the team )</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Process conducted every time there is a significant change in team ( either the Manager is new OR the team is new )</li><li>• Such risks are eliminated</li></ul>

Induction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Considered to be largely HR responsibility – and HR function usually struggles to even get time from team members to meet and induct the new joinee</li><li>• Focus on work specific induction is weaker ( because HR is not in the best place to do justice to it ) – disproportionate time spent on organizational induction</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Considered to be responsibility of the new employee AND his manager. The Manager must be measured on how effectively he has enabled the team member to become productive</li><li>• Holding Line Managers accountable would ensure that she focuses on the employee quickly learning the functional 'ropes' and building right relationships</li></ul>
Hiring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Line Managers are not really held accountable for quality of hires they bring in ( often even the data to do such analysis is missing )</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Holding Line Managers accountable for this would mean designing meaningful metric ( e.g. degree of correlation between hiring evaluation done by a line manager and actual performance of a new employee )</li></ul>

F) In addition to strengthening the diagnostic capabilities – the HR teams should also be able to offer most relevant developmental support to line managers – given uniqueness of individuals, the developmental interventions should be customized to the individual.

3. **Implementing '70-20-10' principle of development:** While most organizations have adopted this principle, (which says that 70% of the development happens on the job) very few have been able to actually implement it. The framework described above can help in a big way, because it helps define a clear 'development target' in form of next level LCCs which is commonly understood and shared by all members of the organization.

For example, looking at the framework, a first line manager can come up with specific 'development themes' for herself across all the four impact areas. (Assuming that she is already displaying all the necessary LCCs at her current Leadership Level)

**Leading Self:** Contribute to cross functional projects of higher complexity and scale

**Leading team:** Demonstrate ability to coach and to facilitate learning

**Leading business:** Recommend refinements to functional processes that result in financial impact

**Leveraging environment:** Develop an external network and draw effectively from it to make a difference

As it can be readily seen, these themes can be addressed by many on the job projects and initiatives closely related to her current role. Needless to say, her supervisor and HR person can facilitate this in a big way.

## **F. CHALLENGES IN APPLYING THIS FRAMEWORK**

### **1. The significant pressure of short term results:**

Very often organizations encounter prospective hires as well as existing employees who are functionally very brilliant but lack significantly on 'Leading Team' capabilities. Given the huge competitive pressures, it may be practically very difficult to reject or replace such employees- and it is not even being recommended. But the organization can possibly consider any of the following approaches:

- a) First and foremost, such employees should be told in no uncertain terms that while the organization values them for their functional and business capabilities, they definitely need to improve their 'Leading Team' capabilities. Organization should also provide specific developmental support to them
- b) Such employees can also be specifically given colleagues/partners to have strengths in 'Leading Team' area
- c) Most importantly – if the organization becomes very strict about not compromising on this capability at the time of hiring and promotions – over a period of time, the percentage of leaders who are stronger in this capability will increase.

### **2. Leadership is NOT a natural capability**

Due to its complex and multifaceted nature and due the kind of demands it puts on your own behaviour, leadership is not something that comes to many people naturally. Only those individuals who are willing to work hard on their own capabilities and who truly care about success of their people and organizations can go on to become successful leaders. Hence number of people who can do this well is always going to be limited – and even those who have potential can translate that into reality only if they are willing to work on it on a continuous basis.

*[ Need to think differently about career paths and organizational hierarchies : In fact the two challenges discussed above make it obvious that not everyone can become a good 'generalist leader' ( I am using this term to refer to senior level roles that require managing large teams and integrating work of various sub-functions). It is also equally true that not everyone wants to be a generalist leader and nor do organizations require positions like this in very very large numbers. This is a big opportunity (especially for Indian organizations) to create different types of career paths ( for example- allowing people to grow purely based on expertise or creating career tracks that have a wide range of generalist responsibilities and not just up or out kind of an approach) ]*

### **3. Peculiarities specific to Indian context :**

*(Please note that following statements are very broad generalizations and many exceptions will certainly exist)*

The nature of demand-supply of talent in India and peculiarities of Indian education system create certain unique challenges. Traditionally the Indian education system has been so focused on academic results that the emphasis on holistic development is often lacking. (Aspects such as a broader life and socio-political perspective, abilities to effectively work with people - such as communication, listening and positive influencing are not necessarily focused upon) To make matters worse, many Indian Business schools (even the top ones) do not insist on minimal extent of work experience. As a result, at the time people start their professional careers, they often start with significant deficits in some of these broader capability areas. The business organizations hence have to carry a much bigger burden of improving these capabilities in people.

*(One of the most striking examples of this that we can often find in India is HR MBAs with less than 4-5 years of experience working on areas such as 'Leadership and Organizational Development'. While they have good degree of intelligence and sincere intentions, they often lack the basic level of life and organizational experience. This can significantly limit their ability to meaningfully advise others on areas such as leadership development. They can actually gain a lot by doing stints such as line HR (which allows one to learn about how work actually gets done and about people dynamics) before getting into work areas like leadership development)*

#### **G.CONCLUSION**

Hence it can be argued that most organizations will stand to gain significantly if they apply the principles of 'Leadership Levels'. In fact one great way to do this could be to form a task force consisting of senior HR and business leaders that can design the framework for the organization and recommend an implementation plan. This should have the sponsorship and support from the Management Committee as well as the CEO. This task force should also clearly spell out links between this framework and all key business and HR processes (Hiring, Performance Management, Development, Talent and Compensation Management)

This could potentially be the most significant shift in how HR gets done in organizations and can do a lot of good for people, management and the organization.

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**Author's note:** *Your feedback and comments are most welcome – you can reach me at [shaileshdesh@gmail.com](mailto:shaileshdesh@gmail.com).*

*The views expressed in this article are personal*

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