

Leave those off-the-shelf leadership programs on the shelf

A Saturday morning television staple from the late 1960s until the early 1980s was *The Bugs Bunny/Road Runner Hour*. It featured Wile E. Coyote trying to catch the Road Runner through a never-ending series of unsuccessful yet highly creative schemes.

You may recall the coyote receiving delivery of yet another product from the Acme Corp. to aid him in his quest.

Many companies today are being delivered leadership development programs that resemble the products that Wile E. bought from Acme. Items like the Burmese tiger trap kit or the rocket sled kits were all designed to help the coyote capture his nemesis. Somehow though, poor Wile E. always bore the brunt of Acme product failure as the Road Runner headed for the hills.

There are many off-the-shelf leadership development programs that, like the Acme catalogue, tout breakthrough effectiveness.

Many leadership development companies do an admirable sales pitch, but, as Wile E. discovered, the results don't always measure up.

The programs may make participants feel good, and satisfy the desire of senior management that their leaders are being developed. Ultimately, however, these programs result in little, if any, behavioural changes.

These models are known by a variety of trademarked names, but if they offer a simple formula for assessing the environment and assessing followers, they likely originate from the situational leadership model.

Situational leadership suggests, quite reasonably, that "it all depends." That is, a leader must analyze a situation and the talents of a follower, and then act according to those variables in one of four leadership styles.

A golf analogy is sometimes used to succinctly convey the key message of situational leadership: While you might feel more comfortable with a putter, at times the No. 4 iron is the only way to go.

Situational leadership development strives to provide a simple formula to inform the leader specifically how to behave.

The problem is that neither golf nor leadership is that simple. It would be so convenient to buy a simple model, plunk it down in the workplace and begin producing high-functioning leaders. In practice, however, research shows that situational leadership just doesn't work.

Going in after the fact, we often see the impacts of training based on this approach. One manager we coached saw situational leadership as a justification for "dumbing down" personal development training for those staff he believed had low leadership potential. This strategy can backfire by having a serious impact on performance and morale.

Another problem concerns how the leader assesses the environment, whether through a formalized system of measurement and evaluation or simply making assumptions. Both have potential flaws. One is the danger of becoming deterministic and rigid; another is simply the danger of being dead wrong.

Encouraging situational thinking can also have a negative impact on a leader's values and good judgment. Furthermore, the assumption that leaders can change like a chameleon undermines the concept of authentic presence.

Ultimately, the solution doesn't come in a box. One of the key elements missing from an off-the-shelf approach is a focus on developing self-awareness.

Building self-aware leaders is a commitment to a process under which people reflect upon their values and aspirations.

With self-awareness comes an ability to use many tools that can get streamed into the leadership development process as skills and knowledge merit.

Leadership styles suggested by situational leadership have their place, but the overarching concern is to avoid a cookie-cutter view of leadership and its development.

No company wants to end up with an Acme rocket sled that catapults it away from its goal as the competition "Beep-Beeps" its way to the hills.

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