

Monitoring and Improving Leadership Development Practices

Of all the tasks involved in setting up and operating a leadership development program, maintaining its “cruising speed” is among the most difficult. One reliable way to keep the momentum going is to continuously monitor your leadership development processes, just as you would any of your organization’s other critical functions, to learn which processes work and which could be improved. What you really want to learn is whether you have created lasting organizational energy for leadership development, so that it becomes integrated into every team member’s daily activities.

The nonprofit leaders we have surveyed admit that of the five processes discussed in [Plan A: How Successful Nonprofits Develop Their Future Leaders](#), measurement and continuous improvement is where they are weakest. Only 27 percent of respondents to our leadership diagnostic said they “agree” or “strongly agree” that they “have established clear goals to guide their leadership development efforts.” And only 19 percent of respondents “agree” or “strongly agree” they “regularly collect data to evaluate [their] progress and to understand what leadership development practices and supports are most effective.”

The goal of monitoring is simple: to help you learn whether your efforts are producing the leaders you will need. Where the efforts are falling short, you want to find out why and fix what isn’t working. Where efforts are going well, you want to do more of the same. The key, we believe, is to begin with four steps:

- Confirm objectives and key actions you are prioritizing.
- Create checkpoints to ensure accountability.
- Assess whether you’re meeting your goals.
- Diagnose potential problems and adjust course.

Step 1: Confirm Objectives and Key Actions You Are Prioritizing

Monitoring practices can be daunting, especially for something as multifaceted and difficult to quantify as leadership development. To knock the problem down to manageable size, begin by stating as clearly and comprehensively as possible what you want to achieve. The vision of the future and the development goals compiled in your [Plan A](#), which encapsulates your strategy for reaching your target, can help organize your thinking.

Next, summarize the specific actions and initiatives you’re taking to build up the leadership pipeline. You can then start to determine whether those actions are having the desired effect. One way to organize your summary is in a table that outlines your leadership development priorities. Our “[Sample Leadership Development Priorities](#)” template provides a few hypothetical

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examples of goals, actions, and feedback desired. The actual specifics will vary depending on your organization's strategic priorities and context.

Now, with your priorities in front of you, you can turn your attention to the information you'll need to measure how well your organization is performing the tasks it has set for itself. What you're looking for is information that will tell you:

- whether you're complying with the leadership development plan you've drawn up;
- how you're progressing against your leadership goals; and finally
- how effective your actions have been in meeting your leadership development goals and whether (and how) to adjust.

These are the guiding questions that each of the following steps will address in turn.

Step 2: Create Checkpoints to Ensure Accountability

Even the best-laid plans will fail to bear fruit without follow-through. Your organization needs to create checkpoints to ensure there is compliance with the actions to which you've committed. You might want to consider baking these status checks into your organization's existing processes. In general, the senior leadership team ought to meet at least annually to discuss organization-wide leadership development needs and priorities. The meetings are a useful reminder to team members that they'll be held accountable for leadership development in their areas of responsibility.

Who's responsible for what?

The board: An engaged board can contribute to your leadership development program's success by informing itself about the organization's development plan and holding the CEO and the rest of the senior team accountable for executing it. At the successful organizations we've studied, the board reviews the status of the leadership pipeline at least annually, and regularly updates itself on the organization's key leadership initiatives.

The CEO and senior team: As we have stressed throughout this guide, no leadership development plan can succeed without a strong commitment from the CEO and his or her senior team members. One way to show that commitment is to convene the senior team for annual talent planning meetings to review leadership needs, assess staff potential, identify gaps, and discuss required actions to develop the organization's leaders.

Line managers: Senior leaders also can support leadership development by modeling effective practices for line managers. By checking in with them periodically, you're doing more than instilling an ethic of individual accountability. You also are creating the opportunity to reflect on progress against your goals and the lessons you've learned, and identify areas for improvement, which brings us to our final two steps.

Step 3: Assess Whether You're Meeting Your Goals

There is no one right way to monitor progress. But you'll probably want to institute some sort of review of the actions you're taking to build your leadership pipeline and gather feedback on their results. Of course, the status of your pipeline may be changing slowly and it may take several years to fully understand whether you are achieving your leadership development goals. So how

can an organization get an early read on its progress? One approach is to check the development of your most promising leadership candidates. A review might show, for example, that while some individuals in your operations group are developing the needed competencies, the pipeline as a whole isn't filling as quickly as you'd hoped. That information may reveal areas that might require more focused investigation.

Step 4: Diagnose Potential Problems and Adjust Course

Leadership development processes and practices can always be improved, but there are only 24 hours in the day, and you can't assess everything all at once. So where do you begin? Start with any trouble spots identified in the previous two steps. If there are particular leadership roles where you have trouble retaining and developing individuals, then these areas merit more in-depth analysis. On the flip side, you can gain powerful information by studying pockets of "positive deviance" within your organization – groups or leaders with a strong record of developing talent and producing new leaders. Analyzing their practices and approaches can help you isolate what works within your organization's culture.

If your leadership development system is still in its infancy and you don't yet have enough information to identify particular trouble spots or bright spots, you might focus your assessment on practices that are new to the organization or those that you believe are most important. For example, if you identified providing cross-functional development opportunities as key to developing future site leaders, you can collect feedback on these experiences and assess whether they are developing the desired competencies. Wherever you decide to dig deeper, it is important to gather feedback through a variety of methods.

If appropriate, start with basic data on the process or area in question. For example, to assess a new training program, you might start with the numbers and types of individuals who started and completed the program. You also can use questionnaires and surveys to understand perceptions and satisfaction with the process or aspect in question. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, can also be used to assess root causes of performance or nonperformance.

More important than the information you collect is what you do with it. The checkpoints you established in step two of this chapter, in addition to fostering accountability, also provide venues to discuss the performance of the leadership development system and how it can be improved. You can use the following questions to help guide your discussion:

- What lessons have been learned over the past year?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the system?
- Does the leadership development system allow the organization to meet its goals?
- What adjustments do we need to make?

These discussions might spur you to adjust the leadership development system. Perhaps you'll determine that you need to develop additional competencies in your potential leaders or provide them with new learning programs.

As your leadership development systems evolve, you will likewise want to consider adjustments to your monitoring efforts. For example, you might want to update the table where you list your strategic priorities and leadership goals. Or you might select different parts of your leadership

development system for a deep dive. Whatever changes you decide to make, the objective is to perpetuate a cycle of continuous improvement of your leadership development efforts.

Related Content

- [Should You Compute Your Leadership Development ROI?](#)
- [Chapter 5: Monitoring and Improving Practices](#)
- [Plan A: How Successful Nonprofits Develop Their Future Leaders](#)

Related Tools

- [Are You Monitoring Progress Effectively? An Excerpt from Our Leadership Development Diagnostic Survey](#)
- [Sample Leadership Development Priorities template](#)