

Growing Leaders, Bruce Joyce and Gerry Pulvermacher

Peer Network Coaching offers an advantageous and pragmatic approach to leadership development

It's never a good time to be short of leaders. Yet this is precisely the future the public service faces unless development of new leaders is accelerated. Difficult issues are gripping Canada. The issues are as diverse as the country itself: security, economy, environment, social welfare and health to name only some. On every file, Canadians count on leaders to have matters under control. It's not light duty, but difficult issues have always been the terrain of the public service. Typically the issues demanding attention are front and centre; they stare government in the face. But while government's attention is focussed on the issues in front, it can be vulnerable to those coming from behind, some of which matter every bit as much, or even more.

Leadership succession is one of these issues, and we should not lose sight of how important it is to everything else Canadians expect of their government. The demand for leaders is racing ahead of the supply, and the resulting deficit promises to become more pronounced as current leaders retire. Who will lead the public service in the future? What skills do they need? What are we doing today to ensure they are ready to lead when the time comes?

Recognition that Canada faces a leadership succession challenge is merely a point of departure. What can be done about it? This article addresses that question by introducing Peer Network Coaching -- a pragmatic and accelerated approach for developing new leaders. Peer Network Coaching grows leaders in a focussed and disciplined manner. It's an approach that's already being employed successfully in other large organizations. The objective is to develop effective leaders -- better, faster, and more cost-effectively.

Peer Network Coaching is:

- An ongoing process characterized by the mutual commitment of peers to their development as leaders
- Guided by an external coach and internal mentor, then increasingly guided by the peer groups themselves
- Rapidly deployed, enabling organizations to see observable and measurable results sooner
- A mutual journey that creates more cohesive leadership teams by fostering trust, respect, and greater understanding between peers and across functions
- Integrated with the organization's goals and objectives
- A catalyst for growth of coaching in the organization
- Incorporates leadership development seminars on aggregate needs of the peer team
- Can include Action Learning
- Cost-effective -- about half the cost of 1:1 executive coaching

Prior to launching a Peer Network Coaching program, information is gathered on all participants to assess their individual development needs. The information is most useful when it reflects a 360 degree view of the participant – input coming from their superiors, subordinates, and peers. On an aggregate basis, the external coach analyzes the information for key themes in order to deliver training targeted at the specific needs of both the group and the individual participants. Individual information is also communicated to participants to help them develop their own leadership development goals and action plans.

Each participant selects key leadership development goals important to them, and then commits to several specific actions in support of each goal. It's important for participants to focus their plans on a small number of key goals so their attention and effort is targeted, rather than scattered. With respect to actions in support of these goals, the more the better. At the risk of stating the obvious, these goals and action items need to be well considered. Participants commit to them. Peer coaches support each other in a variety of ways, drawing on best practices of coaching gained from the program. They also hold each other accountable.

A common criticism of offsite leadership development programs is that participants learn some new concepts, meet a lot of interesting people, but otherwise return to their organizations and resume performing much as they had before. At any price, this is a poor return on investment. By contrast, Peer Network Coaching generates a favourable return on investment -- a matter of importance given the number of leaders the public service needs to develop. It also focuses development in the context of real organizational issues, a practice known as action learning.

Minting leaders doesn't need to cost a mint. Favourable returns result from:

- Benefits accrue to the organization sooner and more durably
- The learning environment is the real world in which the leaders perform
- Travel-related expenses are minimized, as are the indirect costs of leaders being away
- Other than the external coach, the resources to run a successful Peer Network Coaching program come from within the organization and are already paid for

Those who will benefit most from Peer Network Coaching are the leaders of the future. They are already high performers, and have high potential. They are probably in the early years of their leadership career, or are established leaders being prepared for greater roles. In either case, they need to grow as leaders to achieve their potential.

Don't underestimate how difficult this is – for them and for the organization. High performers often face a formidable obstacle on the path to leadership -- the need to change the way they work. This is difficult, because the patterns they are most comfortable with are the patterns that have brought their success to date. The need to

change is an obstacle that usually can't be seen; but it can be felt, by the leader and those around them. Peer Network Coaching helps them navigate this demanding terrain by:

- Clarifying the required leadership competencies of the organization
- Creating self-awareness among participants regarding their individual strengths and development needs
- Providing participants with the knowledge and tools necessary to close the gap between present and desired leadership behaviours
- Developing personalized plans
- Ensuring participants are accountable for their plans, and are supported in achieving them by their peers, internal mentor and an external coach

In the process, Peer Network Coaching creates the conditions that develop leadership talent. These same conditions also help attract and retain leadership talent, particularly among those who are earlier in their careers.

Peer coaching is not new or revolutionary. To some degree it already happens in the public service. However in the absence of a disciplined framework, implementation is haphazard at best, with outcomes that are predictably hard to verify. A view is sometimes expressed that leaders naturally emerge where leadership is needed. This may be an acceptable risk for some organizations, but don't count on it for the public service. As residents of the United States Gulf Coast experienced in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, leadership of public services is no place for the unprepared.

Present leaders have a great challenge on their hands -- leaving the public service in the hands of a new generation of strong and capable leaders. Failure to do so would profoundly affect Canada, because while leadership is only one of many factors affecting the quality of public services, it is the determining factor. Nothing else is capable of changing so much. Peer Network Coaching meets the challenge with a disciplined program of leadership development, built on a shared foundation of knowledge, purpose, responsibility, and accountability.

It doesn't happen all at once, the product of one week under the leader lamp. Growing leaders happens over time, on purpose and by design. As in nature, growing conditions have a lot to do with the results you eventually see. Human nature works much the same way. Peer Network Coaching is an advantageous and pragmatic way to create the conditions in which leaders grow. In time it will seem as though leaders grew by themselves; which of course they did.

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