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The Crucible Project



Dr. Robert J. Thomas, Managing Director of Accenture's Institute for High Performance and author of Crucibles of Leadership, in a conversation with Dr. Anil K. Khandelwal, former CMD, Bank of Baroda shared insights on how organizations can consciously use situations as crucibles to nurture leadership.

Edited excerpts from the conversation

Anil K. Khandelwal: I think there are more books on leadership than actual leaders. What could be the reason behind this Leadership Deficit Syndrome?

Robert J. Thomas: We need more leadership and not necessarily more leaders. That is, we need people who do things that leaders do: they inspire other people, make decisions, and give voice to the aspirations of both employees and customers.

The challenge is, however, that it takes practice to improve your performance as a leader. Behavioral change requires practice. It does not occur overnight. You have to be willing to practice until you see results. That's a hard thing for many people.

A K: What can organizations do to encourage this behavior and enhance this learning curve?

R T: Organizations recognize the value of leaders, but they don't see themselves as being in the leadership business. People in business are in business; they don't think of themselves as being in the leadership development business. So, they rightly ask: is there a way for faster growth of leaders without losing time for business? My answer is, absolutely!

Every time you face a turnaround situation, every time you deal with a big error in the system, every time you enter a new market, there is a leadership opportunity. If you think about it as a potential crucible, then put the right people in the positions of responsibility. It does not mean that we have to shake-up people all the time, but we should create spaces, so people may see opportunities for themselves.

A K: I believe crucibles are necessary for personal growth. When I was in Bank of Baroda, I was sent to some of the most difficult territories and these experiences helped me grow. One crucible experience enhanced my capability to deal with other crucible experiences. How should organizations design crucibles for their leaders?

R T: There are some built-in crucibles, like in organizations that are under stress, or organizations in high-growth situations where they don't have enough talent, or situations where you've got to turnaround a failing organization. The true test is how you make the most out of these experiences.

There are two sides to learning to lead: the outside and the inside game. The outside game is what we do really well. We provide our people good training, but we miss out on the inside game. The inside game is about engaging the individual, asking how are you going to deal with a situation you haven't encountered before, what do you want to accomplish for the company, for the unit, etc. The inside game is about engaging the heart and the soul inside the individual.

By virtue of how business and life operates, these opportunities keep showing up. A big part of our responsibility is to identify the kinds of experiences we can use inside our organizations to complement the trainings that we provide.

A K: In the organizational context, I think it is extremely important to push people to different situations, different territories, different processes, etc. What can the organizations do?

R T: That is the responsibility that leaders need to take. Leaders need to tell themselves, 'I need to grow more leaders because that is my job'. Sometimes, people sitting at the highest levels get so focused on doing their job that they forget that it is also their job to create leaders. You cannot create leaders by just

A K: What do you think is the best way to develop leaders?

R T: Crucibles are the key. Crucibles are events and relationships that test you ... that teach you critical lessons about what it takes you to be a leader. Crucibles do not have to be big events. There are many opportunities for you to test and expand yourself. What is critical is whether you are prepared for this. It is interesting that two-thirds of the leadership stories that people shared with me were that of being pushed towards their moment of leadership, sometimes by circumstances, sometimes by opportunity. But, when it came to the second time, they jumped into it. So, all that is required are spaces and coaching.

During our research, we found that if you train people, it might appear that you are making them more marketable and attractive to other organizations, but it turns out that they generally want to stay because of that training. If you give people the opportunity to learn, it creates great cultures. We have to accept that many organizations are known for churning out great leaders. It is because they are not afraid to invest in developing leaders.

The 6C framework that organizations can use to nurture leaders and engage people

1. Crucibles: Make the most of crucibles to identify leaders and to help them grow
2. Commitment: Encourage commitment to practice
3. Combination: Focus on combination of inside and outside skills to gain optimum results
4. Coaching: Recognize that nobody learns alone and provide good coaching facilities to your people
5. Community: Leadership development efforts should be group efforts. It helps create a network of people who are able to support each other
6. Culture: Create conducive culture. You attract the best talent when you demonstrate that you create leaders