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9 KEY EXPERIENCES TO DEVELOP FUTURE-READY LEADERS

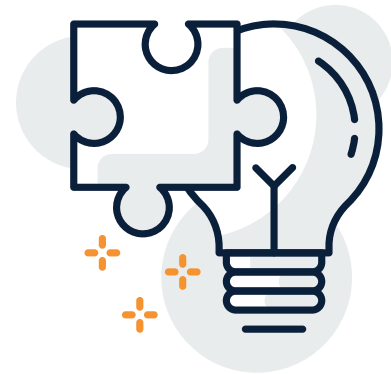
A practical handbook for HR professionals, line managers and emerging leaders

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WHY KEY EXPERIENCES MATTER

A recent Chartered Management Institute study states: "[COVID-19] has demonstrated the importance of good leadership. Managers have needed to respond quickly and effectively to challenges they have never faced before."

The same study also cites a 32% increase in people performance and a 23% increase in organisational performance from leadership development. However, leaders cannot be developed through training courses and coaching alone. Instead, they must develop through increasingly complex situations such as managing change and people or working internationally.



We call such pivotal experiences **key experiences**. Being good at one or two things is no longer enough to succeed in a fast-changing world. As leaders grow in seniority, the less they can rely on existing rule books. Breadth of experience helps to develop the agility, adaptability and creativity that enable a leader to excel at their job. Furthermore, once an emerging leader has worked through a variety of organisational challenges, they are more likely to be able to cope with the size and complexity of a senior role.

It is not only senior leaders who benefit from a breadth of experience. Technological disruption and change mean that jobs at all levels of an organisation are changing fast. As a result, high-potential talent finds itself having to adapt to new situations as jobs change ever more frequently.

MAKING EXPERIENCES DEVELOPMENTAL

One of the challenges with implementing and scaling a successful experiential development strategy can be that learners and their line managers lack an understanding of how to provide effective experiential development opportunities.

Most organisations have built their people processes around competencies and skills. While these are important building blocks for successful development and performance, it is also vital to actively address the bigger development units of **experience**. Stand-alone skills are not enough. For example, an important change management project cannot be delivered with communication skills alone. The emerging leader also needs to understand the broader challenges of the situation to know how and when to apply the skills. It is the experience that counts.

When asked, most senior leaders can readily name the key experiences that they want to see in their emerging leaders, such as working abroad and cross-functional experience. Unfortunately, these experiences are rarely as clearly defined and publicised as skills or competencies. However, once clearly articulated, these experiences can provide significant development clarity for emerging leaders and become a strong enabler of experiential development.

In this handbook, we explore the 9 key experiences that will enable leaders to become future-ready and exceptional leaders.

¹ "Accelerated Leadership Development. How to turn your talent into leaders" by I. Wichert, 2018, London: Kogan Page.

9 EXPERIENCES FOR FUTURE-READY LEADERS

The nine most important developmental experiences are:

Operational Delivery

Roles at the centre of a company, often including responsibility for a 'number' such as productivity, churn rate or customer satisfaction

Unfamiliar Environment

Working in a significantly different role or a new function or business unit

People Management

Managing individual contributors, managers of managers or larger teams

Global Remit

Working abroad or leading an international team

Change Management

Delivering process, structural or cultural change

Growth

Significantly growing an existing team, function, market share or revenue

Start-up

Starting something from scratch, e.g., a new service, product, or business line

Turnaround

Fixing something that has gone wrong, e.g., under-performing teams, failing business units or faulty products

Special Project

One-off projects that are of strategic importance and that typically do not have operational delivery responsibilities

In the next section, we explore each key experience in detail, to enable you to make them a reality in your organisation.



EXPERIENCE 1: OPERATIONAL DELIVERY

WHAT IS IT?

Operational experience provides emerging leaders with an understanding of the day-to-day running of a business. In operational roles, high-potential talent is responsible for operating and improving the systems that produce an organisation's products or deliver its services.

Whether a role is operational depends on what a company produces or which services it offers. Operational roles in a manufacturing organisation may involve running parts of a factory, whereas operational roles in service organisations may involve overseeing parts of a call centre or processing centre.

Operational roles are always found at the core of an organisation's business. This contrasts with functional roles which provide important support services such as human resources, marketing or finance. As emerging leaders gain more operational experience, they are increasingly responsible for entire parts of a business and become general managers. This may involve leading larger teams and multiple operational sites. It may also involve taking on profit and loss accountability.

Operational experience always means working in a metrics-driven environment where results are reported on a quarterly, monthly, or even weekly basis.

WHAT MAKES IT DEVELOPMENTAL?

To meet their targets, emerging leaders must get to grips with several challenges:

- They must be clear about the targets that they are meant to achieve, and they must help those working with them do the same. This means that effective communication is vital.
- They need to learn to balance close attention to production or service processes with a focus on people and training.
- They must also monitor outputs to check for quality and ensure that these are delivered against timelines and budget.

Operational roles provide many advantages, such as allowing an emerging leader to show that they are good at getting things done and that they can deliver measurable results. Furthermore, emerging leaders gain an in-depth understanding of core business drivers, for example, revenue, margins and operational efficiencies. This allows them to make business decisions rather than technical decisions, a crucial leadership experience.

CORE CAPABILITIES DEVELOPED IN OPERATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Strategic Approach

Setting and communicating a clear direction for the unit or business

Linking the direction to the organisation's overall direction

Decision Making

Making tough or far-reaching business decisions

Synthesizing information from different parts of the business to make the right decisions

Business Acumen

Understanding the core drivers of business

Juggling conflicting business demands

Delivering Results

Setting performance standards for others

Monitoring performance and output

Working efficiently and managing costs

Financial Acumen

Profit and loss responsibility; setting budgets and forecasting

Understanding all programmes and teams that contribute to P&L

DEVELOPMENT SUGGESTIONS

Overseeing the delivery of a service to an internal or external customer

Identifying opportunities to improve existing processes to reduce costs and increase quality

Acting as the account manager or key contact for a key customer

Investigating ways to reduce cycle or completion times of existing processes

Getting involved in any cost-saving initiative that the organisation may be running

Taking on an operational role for a struggling not-for-profit organisation or sports club

TOP TIP

It pays to try out operational roles early on. The more senior and the more technically specialist emerging leaders become, the more difficult it becomes to move from functional roles to operational roles.





EXPERIENCE 2: UNFAMILIAR ENVIRONMENT

WHAT IS IT?

It is tempting to stay in a familiar environment. The function where an emerging leader 'grew up' and learnt their trade is well-known to them. They understand its culture and know how to get things done – the high-potential employee has become an expert in their area. However, it is only when we move outside of our comfort zone that our thinking is challenged, and we are driven to learn new ways of solving problems and delivering results.

Moving to a different role does not mean a promotion to a somewhat more senior version of an existing role; it involves a real step change, such as a moving to a different function or business unit.

Cross-functional moves, particularly those from areas such as HR, legal or finance to an operational area, such as a call centre or a manufacturing plant, become increasingly difficult as emerging leaders become more senior and are therefore best tackled early on.

WHAT MAKES IT DEVELOPMENTAL?

Moving to a different environment brings several challenges as emerging leaders find themselves on 'alien turf' and must adapt to a new working culture and new stakeholders. Initially, emerging leaders are likely to feel like 'a fish out of water'. However, their new surroundings will increase their business understanding and force them to adapt their ways of working which will make them more flexible and adaptable. These are important leadership attributes.

Building new relationships, listening, and asking questions increases a leader's capacity to find new ways of being effective. Frequently, the most important take-away lesson from working in a different environment is the confidence that their transferable skills allow them to add value without having to rely on technical knowledge. This enables a leader to demonstrate that past achievements can be replicated in unfamiliar territory. Such a quality is much sought-after in fast-moving organisations that are constantly coming up against fresh challenges.



CORE CAPABILITIES DEVELOPED IN UNFAMILIAR ENVIRONMENTS

Learning

Learning fast about the new area

Listening to and learning from others

Being humble and prepared to say 'I don't know'

Relationships

Building relationships with new stakeholders

Finding allies and (technical) advisors

Prepared to seek others' help

Business Acumen

Using business acumen rather than technical expertise

Delivering through a team of technical experts

Resilience

Persevering and demonstrating resilience while out of one's comfort zone

Dealing with being an outsider and not an expert

DEVELOPMENT SUGGESTIONS

Proactively learning from changes to the role which may have taken place due to organisational restructuring

Joining a committee or task force in an unfamiliar area

Working on cross-functional projects

Taking on a secondment with an external partner organisation

Participating in the organisation's job rotation or secondment programme

Taking on a short-term assignment in a different area or country

TOP TIP

A stretch assignment in an unfamiliar environment is a good, early way for emerging leaders to establish organisation-wide thinking and a larger network of work contacts. These benefits can act as a career accelerator. It can also give high-potential employees the confidence that trying new roles is nothing to be afraid of.





EXPERIENCE 3: PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

WHAT IS IT?

Organisations are social systems that bring together different people to realise a shared vision. Being able to harness the energies of other people and getting everyone working towards the same goal are vital to delivering outstanding results as a leader. People management is a good experience to start developing early, even if it is initially on an informal basis, such as managing interns or being a mentor to a new colleague.

Taking on formal management responsibility for a small team represents an important transition from being an individual contributor to achieving results through others. With increasing levels of seniority, people management frequently evolves from managing smaller groups of people in relatively stable environments, to managing larger groups of people through challenges such as organisational change and crises.

WHAT MAKES IT DEVELOPMENTAL?

The transition from an individual contributor to a team manager can have its challenges. Emerging leaders must learn to stop doing their former jobs and instead start delivering through others. If emerging leaders continue to do what they used to be good at, they will frustrate their team through micro-management.

A strong team can deal with day-to-day problems and provide an emerging leader with the headroom to focus on bigger-picture issues and forward planning. Building a strong team involves several skills such as creating a shared vision and joint meaning, understanding individuals' strengths and weaknesses, and creating a team environment where everyone works together well. This requires a combination of influencing and good listening, as well as showing a genuine interest in others. It also means being clear about what is expected, delegating work and monitoring progress, while also supporting the team through training and coaching, and addressing people problems and underperformance.

As managers, emerging leaders must resist the temptation to hope that people issues will resolve themselves and instead address them with decisiveness and tact. Finally, emerging leaders need to be flexible in their leadership style and recognise that their team's approach to work may be different to their own. These skills allow them to build an environment in which others can work to their full potential.



CORE CAPABILITIES DEVELOPED IN PEOPLE MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

Leadership

Setting clear expectations for team members

Assigning tasks according to business need and capability

Relationships

Being available and approachable

Building trusting relationships with all team members

Building team spirit

Delivering Results

Enabling others to deliver results through training, good planning, performance management and by securing resources

Developing Others

Providing development and stretch projects

Having an active development and career plan for each team member

securing stretch assignments for team members

DEVELOPMENT SUGGESTIONS

Managing through direct line management authority or indirectly through influence

Managing technical experts

Coaching an employee with performance problems

Managing a team with performance issues

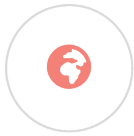
Getting involved in CV screening and recruitment

Managing an inexperienced team

TOP TIP

A lack of people management experience can become a derailer for emerging leaders. High-potential talent who progress fast in organisations, from one stretch role to the next, may run the risk of never experiencing the longer-term benefits of investing time in developing others. This can lead to derailment when leaders have failed to learn how to deliver effectively through others.





EXPERIENCE 4: GLOBAL REMIT

WHAT IS IT?

As businesses become more global, international experience is increasingly valuable. It can also be one of the most formative experiences as it takes emerging leaders out of their comfort zone in many ways. Working internationally can take two forms: First, the classic international assignment or overseas posting where someone lives and works abroad for a few months or even years. Alternatively, global roles where emerging leaders remain in their home country and work with colleagues in one or more international regions. Frequent travel is often a requirement for global roles.

WHAT MAKES IT DEVELOPMENTAL?

At home, an emerging leader's working life tends to be safe and supported by a trusted network of colleagues, friends, and family. They most probably have a clear understanding of what is expected of them and an established track record of outstanding job performance. Once abroad, all this can change. The new role brings with it new markets, customers and working practices. The emerging leader must also rebuild their personal support network and will initially be an outsider who has yet to prove their value to the new team. The challenges posed by working internationally are clearly significant but so is the learning to be gained from this experience.

To succeed, emerging leaders must clarify their organisation's expectations of what they will achieve. Then it is time to build relationships and establish credibility with local stakeholders. To do this effectively, the emerging leader must listen actively and be ready to learn from others. Above all, they must be prepared to leave their comfort zone by fully opening up to the new culture. This includes adopting local customs and ways of doing business, as well as learning the local language.

Living and working abroad is no small feat, particularly at the beginning when everything is new. Perseverance and resilience are key attributes that make an international assignment a success. Working globally is a highly effective time for personal development as a person uncovers their own assumptions and biases about who they are and how the world works. The subsequent questioning and realignment of strongly held beliefs creates effective development. It is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve this type of personal development back home.



CORE CAPABILITIES DEVELOPED IN GLOBAL REMIT EXPERIENCES

Flexibility

Adapting to local customs and ways of doing business to get things done

Adapting own leadership style and being ready to let go of 'tried and tested' approaches if necessary

Learning

Actively listening to and being ready to learn from others

Being open minded and humble

Not afraid to say 'I don't know'

Relationships

Building relationships with new stakeholders and respecting diverse points of view

Showing an interest in, and being prepared to immerse self in the new culture(s)

Self-Awareness

Becoming more aware of own biases and being open to a journey of self-discovery

Seeking feedback and adapting to different expectations

Resilience

Persevering and being resilient while out of one's comfort zone and being an outsider

Maintaining confidence while on a steep learning curve

DEVELOPMENT SUGGESTIONS

Taking on a European or global role as a secondment

Working on a taskforce with members from other countries

Working on a short-term assignment at one of the organisation's international offices

Acting as a local mentor for an international colleague on assignment to the local office

Working on a project that spans a number of different countries or regions

Joining a not-for-profit organisation or community group that focuses on intercultural relations

TOP TIP

Include readiness assessments in the annual development conversation to ensure equal access to this highly formative development opportunity. Personal circumstances may make this experience more difficult to accommodate for some employees.



EXPERIENCE 5: CHANGE MANAGEMENT

WHAT IS IT?

No organisation can afford to stand still. Ongoing adaptation is vital to survival. Change projects may involve business process re-engineering, changes to a company's way of working or the integration of two newly merged businesses. The desired outcome is always the same: cost savings or revenue increases. Change agents must therefore be focused on delivering results. While an emerging leader's first exposure to organisational change may involve leading local projects such as implementing a new IT system in their team, at a senior level, change agents are often responsible for transforming entire organisations.

WHAT MAKES IT DEVELOPMENTAL?

Successful change projects involve three main challenges:

1. Communication.

First, the change agent must convince the organisation and its people of the need for change. This involves communicating a clear vision of the future, along with setting aspirational targets and galvanising buy-in from all stakeholders.

2. Dealing with uncertainty and people's emotions.

Next, they need to deal with uncertainty and the emotions associated with it. This may be fears about the potential loss of power and rewards or concerns about whether their skills will still be valuable in the new structure. These feelings can lead to resistance to proposed changes. As effective change agents, emerging leaders must learn how to deal with these emotions and keep people performing to their best ability during the upheaval of change. This involves proactive and frequent communication, even when there is nothing new to communicate. It also requires active listening and empathy. Learning how to deal with resistance and people's fears is a powerful leadership lesson.

3. Implementing and embedding new ways of working.

Emerging leaders must challenge and discontinue outdated processes and attitudes and instead embed new ways of working to deliver the promised benefits. This entails a combination of risk-taking and creativity, along with coaching others and acting as a role model.



CORE CAPABILITIES DEVELOPED IN CHANGE MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

Communication

Creating urgency

Communicating the need for change

Gaining buy-in from people with potentially diverse agendas

Communicating regularly

Vision

Translating strategic direction into a compelling vision for the future

Defining a programme of related change projects

Supporting Others

Managing the impact of the planned change on staff

Dealing with people's emotions

Providing training to upskill people

Resilience

Overcoming obstacles and resistance to change

Challenging outdated attitudes and working practices

Having courageous conversations

Delivering Results

Delivering short term wins

Embedding new systems, processes and ways of working

Tracking improvements

DEVELOPMENT SUGGESTIONS

Championing change that the business unit may have been resisting, e.g., using a new process or switching to a new system

Changing a system or process in response to customer feedback

Managing a continuous quality improvement process

Getting actively involved in an organisational transformation programme, e.g., digital, finance, supply chain

Becoming the change agent who rolls out a new product or service

Working with colleagues to redesign a work process

TOP TIP

Change initiatives are a powerful development opportunity. Allowing an emerging leader enough time to see the impact of their work is important as change is only successful if new processes and ways of working become fully embedded.



EXPERIENCE 6: GROWTH

WHAT IS IT?

Organisations want to grow and maximise their value by increasing market share and revenue. Other ways in which organisations grow is through increasing the number of employees, setting up new offices or production sites, and by creating new product lines. Growth is typically achieved by either improving the efficiency of existing assets or by investing in new ideas.

WHAT MAKES IT DEVELOPMENTAL?

To generate growth, emerging leaders must start off with a clear understanding of where they are most likely to find growth opportunities. A good understanding of the industry and in-depth knowledge of their customers is helpful at this stage to identify what they want and value. It also helps to stay close to customers, particularly if the proposed growth strategy is driven by new product development and innovation. It also pays to look for opportunities beyond existing markets.

As a second step, emerging leaders must turn their insights into a clear growth strategy and put in place a detailed action plan with ambitious growth targets. To stand a good chance of success, emerging leaders should also check that the people and processes involved in their growth plans are ready for the challenge. Making sure that everyone has had the necessary training and that processes are scalable is time well spent. Access to additional organisational resources must be secured through good negotiation skills and personal contacts across the organisation.

Growth is a balancing act between commercial opportunities on the one hand and people on the other. While the numbers must add up, emerging leaders are only going to generate growth if their colleagues and customers are bought into their vision.



CORE CAPABILITIES DEVELOPED IN GROWTH EXPERIENCES

Analysing

Developing an in-depth understanding of customer requirements

Understanding technology and market trends

Identifying and evaluating opportunities for growth

Planning

Developing a business case for expanding or replicating an existing business, function or offering

Developing a detailed plan for growth

Ambition

Setting ambitious growth targets

Gaining buy-in from stakeholders

Motivating and incentivising others to deliver against growth targets

Delivering Results

Negotiating access to additional or specialist resources

Using own networks, available resources, skills training and innovation to drive growth

DEVELOPMENT SUGGESTIONS

Delivering significant growth in the role e.g., finance, people, reach or impact

Contributing to building a training academy

Taking on a brand champion role

Setting up a loyalty programme to increase customer loyalty

Getting involved in the launch of a new product

Joining a charity and taking on a role in its fundraising team

TOP TIP

Growth roles can be powerful stretch roles for early career professionals; taking existing processes and solutions and maximising these through more efficient use of existing resources. They also provide measurable outcomes which can become a convincing career accelerator.



EXPERIENCE 7: START-UP

WHAT IS IT?

Innovation is vital for organisations to survive in today's fast-moving world. In start-up projects emerging leaders are charged with creating something that has not existed before such as a new product, service or team. When an employee creates something new in an organisation that has not existed before, they are sometimes called 'intrapreneurs' and become the in-house equivalent of their better-known cousins, the entrepreneurs.

WHAT MAKES IT DEVELOPMENTAL?

While entrepreneurs risk their own money, the endeavours of intrapreneurs are not without challenges. An emerging leader can risk their reputation in the organisation with a yet unproven business idea. Creating something new is, however, an important leadership experience as it allows a high-potential employee to demonstrate that they can create new processes, services and products that generate organisational growth and increase competitiveness. Furthermore, their new creation is there for everyone to see – emerging leaders have created a legacy for themselves, a powerful asset for their career journey.

Intrapreneurship involves several exciting challenges that allow leaders to hone their leadership skills and spotting a new business idea is only the start. They must then follow up on their initial idea with research to confirm the viability of the idea and turn it into a detailed business plan. This process sharpens their analytical skills as well as their business acumen.

Next, the selling starts. The intrapreneur must establish personal credibility, persuade others of their idea, negotiate for resources and, when they hit resistance, they must persuade and influence some more. They also need to find creative solutions around the barriers they encounter.

Once everyone is on board, emerging leaders can set off on their journey to create the infrastructure, processes and skills needed for their new offering to succeed. Intrapreneurship means having both a viable business idea and successfully executing the idea, it is not only about brilliant ideas. Good project management, along with a focus on delivering quality results and ongoing stakeholder communication are crucial.



CORE CAPABILITIES DEVELOPED IN START-UP EXPERIENCES

Analysing

Researching the viability of a new venture

Gaining relevant market knowledge

Anticipating future needs and spotting trends

Influencing

Developing and selling the business case for the venture

Building a broad support base

Gaining approval from regulators and external authorities

Negotiating

Securing scarce organisational resources, such as budget, headcount and time

Delivering Results

Delivering quick wins to establish credibility

Building new infrastructure for continued success of the new venture

Delivering skills training

Resilience

Operating independently using own initiative

Dealing with setbacks, resistance and infrastructure constraints

DEVELOPMENT SUGGESTIONS

Taking part in pilot programmes to trial new technology or processes

Starting up something new at work. Seeking seed money for an exploratory project

Proposing and implementing an idea that changes the work environment for the better

Taking on a temporary secondment to a team that focuses on innovation

Pitching ideas as part of an organisational innovation scheme

Setting up a new process, team, product or service line

TOP TIP

For an intrapreneurial experience to be complete, it is helpful to give an emerging leader the opportunity to not only to come up with an idea but also to also implement and drive the new venture to success.



EXPERIENCE 8: TURNAROUND

WHAT IS IT?

Turnaround experts are the fire fighters of the corporate world. When products fail, customers are deeply unhappy and profits start to plummet, they come to the rescue. While all projects must be executed at pace, turnaround projects are a step up from more orderly organisational change programmes. They require immediate, and at times drastic, action.

Emerging leaders are unlikely to be trusted with large scale turnaround projects until they are some way into their careers. This is because turnaround projects require strong change management and leadership skills, alongside a good dose of resilience. However, early exposure to smaller turnaround projects, such as taking on the account management for the most dissatisfied customer in a team or getting involved in a product recall, provide important early experiences.

WHAT MAKES IT DEVELOPMENTAL?

Things go wrong all the time and being able to demonstrate that emerging leaders are good at fixing problems effectively without losing their cool under pressure is a skill that marks them out as leaders. In turnaround projects, emerging leaders need to fix three problems:

1. The immediate crisis.

Emerging leaders need to identify the root cause of the problem without getting side-tracked by too much analysis. They then need to act quickly to stabilise the situation. This requires judgement and fast decision-making; vital skills to learn at an early stage.

2. People issues.

Once the immediate crisis has been averted, it is time to focus on re-establishing commitment and re-energising people. The emerging leader must develop a vision of the way forward, create excitement and gain buy-in. Crisis situations can make this more challenging as they often represent a broken environment where people have become suspicious and are no longer cooperating. Strong communication and influencing skills are necessary but often not enough to get the message across – the emerging leader also needs to show empathy.

3. Processes.

After the situation has been stabilised and adrenaline levels have dropped, it is tempting to move on to a new challenge. However, processes and metrics are required to ensure that the necessary improvements are delivered. Without these, it is all too easy to slip back into old ways of doing things.



CORE CAPABILITIES DEVELOPED IN TURNAROUND EXPERIENCES

Leadership

Taking control of the situation and making tough decisions

Acting with urgency

Establishing priorities and allocating resources

Problem Solving

Identifying the root cause of the problem

Finding creative solutions to deliver a sustainable solution

Achieving more with limited resources

Engaging Others

Building confidence and re-establishing commitment

Re-energising people

Dealing with low morale, distrust and a toxic environment

Delivering Results

Delivering a plan for sustainable recovery

Challenging and inefficient and outdated processes

Embedding new ways of working

Resilience

Operating in a pressurised environment or from a burning platform

Persevering in the face of adversity, possibly over an extended period

DEVELOPMENT SUGGESTIONS

Taking on the most dissatisfied customer or difficult supplier

Taking on an underperforming team

Correcting quality problems in the team

Regaining a lost client

Redesigning a flawed or outdated system that is causing frustration in the team or with customers

Taking over a troubled project

Setting up and leading a task force on a pressing business problem

TOP TIP

Turnaround projects provide the fullest development experience when an emerging leader is given the opportunity not only to stabilise the immediate crisis but also to implement the new processes that are required to stop the situation from reoccurring.



EXPERIENCE 9: SPECIAL PROJECT

WHAT IS IT?

Special projects are one-off assignments that tend to run for a fixed period. They rarely contain operational delivery responsibilities and often involve emerging leaders being asked to address a strategically important and possibly confidential issue.

Developing the strategy for a major organisational change initiative or preparing the ground for a merger or joint ventures are good examples of special projects. They tend to be organisationally significant and have the potential for large-scale impact and are therefore likely to attract interest internally and sometimes externally, too. This means that their success - or failure - is likely to be highly visible, too. This creates extra pressure for the emerging leader but also great opportunities for career acceleration.

WHAT MAKES IT DEVELOPMENTAL?

The main challenge with special projects is that a high-potential employee is required to learn new skills and knowledge fast and on the run. Often, they must get to grips with new concepts, ideas and approaches. Some special projects are highly complex, involving many variables, ambiguous data and fine nuances. The high-potential employee must then analyse data and information, test their hypotheses and formulate recommendations. Furthermore, they must learn to interact effectively with groups of people that they may have never worked with before.

Leaders of special projects may also be exposed to internal politics and must manage senior stakeholders from different businesses, geographies, or functions, each with a different agenda. This requires active listening skills to understand multiple and potentially conflicting perspectives. They must also learn how to get these people to cooperate in situations where they do not always have formal authority. Once the emerging leader has mastered the new skills and knowledge and has aligned all stakeholder agendas, they must draw up plans to progress the project.

Special projects clearly require a great capacity to learn fast as well as excellent people skills. They are often highly strategic or sensitive in nature and emerging leaders are unlikely to be entrusted with such projects until some way into their careers. There are, however, great ways to develop these skills early on, such as volunteering to be an employee representative during the consultation period for a company merger or acquisition.



CORE CAPABILITIES DEVELOPED IN SPECIAL PROJECTS

Relationships

Managing a variety of stakeholders

Dealing with politics and conflicting agendas

Operating in a matrix organisation

Learning

Acquiring new, complex, technical knowledge fast

Actively learning from others by respecting diverse points of view

Resource-fulness

Accessing (sensitive) information and support from a range of sources

Securing access through negotiation

Influencing

Gaining buy-in to recommendations

Harmonising a wide range of stakeholder agendas

Aligning different interests and finding common ground

Problem Solving

Analysing and evaluating data, concepts, ideas from a range of sources

Testing hypotheses

Developing advice

DEVELOPMENT SUGGESTIONS

Taking on a project that requires interaction with external stakeholders

Taking on a role related to one-off opportunities such as a merger, acquisition or IPO

Managing a project that requires interaction with the organisation's senior leadership team

Taking on a role related to topical issues such as COVID-19, Brexit or the introduction of new legislation

Taking on a project that requires interaction with colleagues from other functions

Getting involved in a community group focused on a local issue, e.g., planning regulation or environmental issues

TOP TIP

Special projects lend themselves well to developing enterprise thinking in more experienced emerging leaders who are getting ready for top roles as they are one-off assignments that tend to run for a fixed period. They also rarely have operational delivery responsibilities which allow the emerging leader to focus on strategic issues, senior key stakeholder engagement and building of alliances. This also helps to increase the emerging leader's visibility in the organisation.

HOW TO ADD STRETCH TO EXPERIENCES

Every one of the nine key experiences can have further stretch added to them through additional features. These features could even be used as mini stand-alone stretch opportunities added to everyday situations. However, be mindful that emerging leaders in highly stretching assignments will need support. Where multiple stretch features are present, the risk of burnout is increased. Over-stretch and a potentially developmental situation can turn into one that overwhelms the emerging leader.

SENIOR INVOLVEMENT

Frequent and direct interaction with senior leaders

RISKS AND PRESSURE

Managing a project with tight deadlines, internal / external pressure; responsible for critical decisions; success or failure will be highly visible

BOUNDARY-SPANNING

Working in a matrix organisation; working with external stakeholders (e.g., customers, governments, unions, competitors); working cross-functionally or working with peers and senior leaders without any direct authority

EXTERNAL ADVERSITY

Operating in an environment with economic instability (e.g., stock market crash), political instability (e.g., war or coup), natural disaster or terrorist attack

INTERNAL ADVERSITY

Dealing with demotivated or unskilled staff; outdated or inefficient business models, processes or equipment; falling market share or unpopular products

BREADTH

Being responsible for a large portfolio of products or services; overseeing multiple business units.

DEPTH

Operating in an area with highly complex technical or specialist aspects; intellectually challenging and requires fast learning

SIZE

Role a big step up from previous role; responsible for a large business unit, large project or large team



HOW TO IDENTIFY THE RIGHT EXPERIENCE OPPORTUNITIES

Table 1 below highlights the range of on-the-job learning opportunities that can form part of an experiential development strategy.

Not all experiences need to come in the form of a major stretch assignment. Matching experiential development opportunities to available time, context and seniority pays off. For example, where experiential development is part of a formal development programme, planned activities such as conversational learning, future searches or action learning groups can be useful tools.

For more junior team members or shorter activities, new experiences can be gained by swapping tasks or extending a person's current role. For more senior learners or more intensive development, traditional stretch projects can become powerful development enablers.

Not all on-the-job learning opportunities have to be full-time or take the person away from their main job. It is also effective to ask a high-potential employee to take on a smaller stretch assignment, such as joining a task force, in addition to their main role. And for those who do not want to consider a longer, full-time stretch assignment, a short-term secondment or placement in another part of the organisation will still be beneficial.

Table 1: Range of job opportunities

Type of development				
PLANNED ACTIVITIES	Conversational learning	Action learning groups	Theoretical case studies	Future search
WITHIN ROLE	Swapping tasks (Changes to existing role)	Extending existing role	Deputising managerial tasks	Shadowing
PROJECTS	Setting up / joining a task force	Shorter assignments (project work in addition to main job)	Secondments	Stretch Assignments

MANAGING EXPERIENTIAL DEVELOPMENT RISKS

Organisations must take risks by placing candidates into roles which may represent a big step up for the candidate. At the same time, individuals must be ready to leave the security of well-known roles for uncharted territory. This approach comes with increased risks for both the organisation and the candidate. However, the risk can be managed through:

ASSESS

Understanding emerging leaders and their strengths through in-depth assessment and psychometric profiling before they are assigned to a stretch assignment

GO EARLY

Placing learners into stretch assignments early on in their career where the impact of errors is less pronounced

STAY LOCAL

Using well-known roles rather than newly created roles as stretch assignments so that early signs of derailment are well understood and that help, in the form of experienced past job incumbents who act as mentors, can be provided

START SMALL

Placing emerging leaders into roles in smaller markets where the impact of failure is not as significant as placing them into roles in a main market

KEEP CONTROL

Placing fewer people into high-stretch roles so that enough support is available to guide the emerging leaders

OFFER SUPPORT

Balancing the high challenge of a stretch assignment with high levels of support, such as regular check-ins, action learning groups, or mentors and coaches



ABOUT TALUPP

Talupp is an AI-powered development ecosystem that harnesses the power of on-the-job learning for emerging leaders. Too often learning stops at the training room door (actual or virtual), so we have created a solution that enables managers and emerging leaders to develop as part of their day job, working on live projects and experiences at a pace and time that suits them and their organisation. It provides an ecosystem for ongoing development, putting an end to the stop-start of many traditional development programmes.

TalUpp uses algorithms to assess an employee's experiences and areas for development and to match these to development activities and projects in the organisation. Development suggestions, activity planning and nudges guide and direct, while personal reflections, emotional intelligence models and manager feedback accelerate development. Your high-potential talent is taken on a development journey to develop the experiences and capabilities that you need in your organisation to succeed. Make development intentional, mindful and effective. Never again let development fizzle out without any transfer of learning.

And the best news? It is inclusive and can be done at scale, so no one needs to miss out on the chance to stretch themselves and develop to their full potential.