RESKILLING LEADERS
FOR THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

By Michael Couch and Richard Citrin

It was very exciting for us to read the news about ApprentiPGH, the Pittsburgh Technology Council and FortyX80's very unique and innovative approach to reskilling our local workforce. Apprenti is the kind of talent management innovation that businesses need to address a critical external labor market/skills gap.

We also need to innovate to address critical internal skills gaps that many organizations are facing. In DDI's 2022 Global Leadership Forecast, one of the most concerning trends expressed by global executives was the lack of a pipeline of leadership talent to fill key roles.

Even prior to the pandemic, organizations realized the need to reskill their internal workforces to address a rapidly changing world of work. Now, research has determined that the emphasis on building new capabilities has increased dramatically. In a survey conducted in late 2020 by McKinsey, 59% of global leaders reported that, prior to COVID, growing capability for long-term growth was "very or extremely important." More recent research put that percentage at 78%.

Where do you start and how do you approach such a daunting undertaking as reskilling and redeploying your workforce??

Of course, you can always reskill by firing and hiring for a new set of skills but, not only is that unrealistic and costly, it is a major organizational culture poison pill. Not surprisingly, the majority of the leaders in the McKinsey study indicated that the most effective approach would be to focus on building the skills of current employees and redeploying existing talent.

In our work with organizations employing evidence-based practices, here are three steps that can help any organization reskill for growth in the 2020's.

Step 1: Assess and Build a Learning and Development Culture.

There are two components of culture that are critical to reskilling and redeploying.

- First, does your organization hold the core value that investing in building skills to remain competitive is mission-critical, and do employees clearly see this value reflected in leadership behavior and talent processes (Capability Development)?
- Second, does the culture reflect an emphasis on continually scanning the external environment, learning from the marketplace (including learning from failures), and encouraging innovation to adapt to a dynamic business environment (Organizational Learning)?

These two cultural components are important foundations for any reskilling effort. Without an organization-wide growth mindset, reskilling will be slow or ineffective and employee engagement will suffer. Without an emphasis on understanding the new demands of a competitive climate, organizations will lack a clear understanding of new skillsets demanded for growth. Assessing the clarity and alignment of these two dimensions of organizational culture and addressing any gaps are critical first reskilling/redeploying steps.

Step 2: Assess Current Talent Capabilities.

Organizations have seen leaders step up, inspire others and make a difference during the COVID-19 crisis. Likewise, there have also been leaders who floundered amid the uncertainty and volatility. As the reopening of business proceeds, it's important to ensure that you have the talent available to handle the new world of work.

If you haven't completed a robust assessment of your talent at all levels recently, it's time for a refresh. And even if you have completed a recent review, it may be helpful to revisit it because the demands placed on organizations and leaders have shifted dramatically. If your organization has never completed an assessment of its talent, there couldn't be a better time or business case than now to get going.

Suffice it to say, if your organization has done an effective job of building a growth mindset culture and of scanning the external environment (Step 1) then retooled talent assessment processes can help identify if and/or where the future-focused skills exist in the organization. By retooled, we mean talent reviews that include two key talent assessments, performance contribution (how much the employee contributes to the success of others, how well they align what they do to broader goals) and growth potential (the individual's learning agility and aspiration to learn and grow). In addition, we have found great value in re-envisioning which roles in the organization may now be strategic and/or pivotal. The analytics and insights gained from upgraded talent reviews would identify what cohorts of talent would benefit the most from reskilling and where agile talent can effectively be redeployed.

Step 3: Build Development into Work and Curate Experiences.

Over the last two years, we've had the enlightening opportunity to interview more than 40 C-Suite executives on our weekly webcast, The Leadership Café. We could fill a book with the insights we gained from talking to these extraordinary leaders about how their organizations pivoted and bounced forward. One theme from the leaders was consistent… the executives were amazed at what their teams learned from navigating a challenging experience. Several execs took the opportunity to specifically debrief the events of the pandemic year so that what their leaders learned could be captured and locked in for future value.

Talk about effective reskilling! Does this suggest that we have to wait for another global disaster to effectively reskill? Let's hope not! Rather, this insight highlights that the most valuable reskilling is not going to occur in the classroom or from executive programs but from building development into everyday, challenging work. Talent management plays a key role in this leadership development process, requiring the function to move away from delivering development programs to curating valuable, developmental experiences. Redeploying talent, then, is as much a development tactic as it is a workforce planning tool.

Reskilling and developing the next generation of leaders therefore encompasses:

- A culture that embraces development and has a clear focus on understanding and adapting to the marketplace,
- A robust process for understanding the current capability of an organization's talent pipeline, and
- Development that is built into everyday, challenging work that is not bolted on as something extra that busy leaders have to do.

Is your organization ready to effectively reskill and redeploy for the challenges of the 2020s . . . and beyond?