

# How to Really Customize Leadership Development

by Gianpiero Petriglieri

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There is a question executives always ask early on, when they consult potential partners for their companies' leadership development initiatives:

“Will it be customized?”

The answer, today, cannot be anything other than a resounding “Yes!” Because “customized” has become a synonym of “good” for leadership development.

Sometimes, however, that question hides a request for subordination. It is a nicer way to ask, “Will you do everything that I demand?” Other times, it is the starting point of a professional collaboration, an invitation to learn and work together.

Promising customization, then, is not always good if it stops us from exploring what customization means, what good it is for, and who it is good for.

The important question executives and educators ought to discuss, as I see it, is not whether a learning initiative will be customized – but how.

### **Opening the black box of customization**

I find it useful to break the “customization” of a leadership development initiative down into two sets of practices. The first set involves the contextualization of the learning process. The second set, its personalization.

**Contextualization** refers to making sure that the learning is firmly embedded in the strategy and culture of the organization.

*Strategic contextualization* involves aligning the initiative’s themes, content, and outcomes with the organization’s strategic intent. It includes selecting topics tied to company challenges, and practicing skills prescribed by its competency model.

*Cultural contextualization* involves making sure that the initiative reflects the language and norms of the organization, and that instructors are skillful in helping managers examine the manifestations and consequences of those norms.

**Personalization** refers to making space for each person involved to pursue learning related to his or her own history, concerns, and aspirations.

*Role personalization* involves offering opportunities for participants to examine their experience in their current roles, so as to understand it better or differently, and to enhance their ability to lead more competently in that role.

*Career personalization* involves helping participants connect the learning to their career trajectories, and to recognize the psychological and social forces that sustain or drain one's leadership purpose in the long term.

Contextualization helps the initiative fulfill the organization's aims. Personalization helps it fulfill the learners'. The former assures that learning is relevant. The latter that it is meaningful.

### **Bringing leadership to life**

Corporate sponsors who invest money in leadership development are often most concerned about its contextualization. Participants, who invest time and energy in it, often care more about its personalization instead.

When the Chief Learning Officer of a multinational company approached some colleagues and I to design and deliver a leadership development initiative, this pattern emerged quickly. The company was in a common predicament: nimbler competitors and technologies threatened its legacy business, and the CEO had launched a new strategy in response, calling for more entrepreneurial leadership across the organization.

As he asked us for a "customized" leadership development initiative, the CLO already had in mind what it would look like. We should define the elements of entrepreneurial leadership at the company, ask senior executives for recent examples, and write case studies on them. Participants would dissect these best practices in class, and then practice requisite competencies to implement them.

When we talked to the managers who would be involved, however, they envisioned customization differently. They wanted the initiative to give them insights, tools, and support, and do away with the corporate red tape that prevented them from getting things done better and faster.

Both sides agreed that the company needed more entrepreneurial leadership but they had different views of what prevented it, and how to achieve it. Neither approach alone, however, would suffice. The former had too much reverence for a shared set of standards. The latter had too little.

The challenge that emerged from these conversations was that of bringing leadership to life. Doing so, we suggested, required using the learning initiative as an opportunity for participants to think and act as leaders – within a frame that informed and oriented their efforts without prescribing every action.

The initiative that resulted did include cases aligned to a template of entrepreneurial leadership that the company did develop – but neither limited to internal best practices, nor presented as guides. It also included exercises where managers had to face the tension between the wishes for freedom and for control, key features of the company culture that we had encountered ourselves.

At the same time, the initiative invited each manager to bring their own case study, and work on it with others. Coaches helped participants examine what the leadership template meant for them – what it would take, specifically, to bring it to life in their roles, and how it might affect their careers.

### **Learning happens in the middle**

Contextualization invites managers to acquire – or resolve to change – the language, skills, and scripts that are expected of leaders in their organization. Personalization makes room for them to consider why and how they might do so.

Finding a balance between the two, as the example suggests, involves inviting both the organization and its managers to influence the learning agenda without letting either dictate what the other must do.

Only when that balance happens can a learning initiative develop leadership, as it puts learners in the position of leaders – between personal and organizational aims, making the most of where those converge, and addressing the areas where they diverge.

When that balance is lost, learning initiatives become a surrogate of leadership rather than an opportunity to practice it. Some, paying more attention to the needs of the company than to those of its managers, become little more than thinly veiled attempts at indoctrination. Others, focusing mostly on helping managers search their soul and expand their networks to find and achieve their own goals, become little more than personal indulgences.

Scratch the surface of “poor customization,” and you’ll often find just that – an imbalance between contextualization and personalization. Learning, like leadership, can’t choose a master between the needs of the collective and those of the individual. Their value is in striving to reconcile both.

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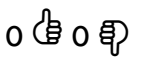
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Clement Gavi 2 months ago

Chacun construit la réalité en fonction de ses intérêts et la décision ou proposition qui s'en suit n'est d'aucune nécessité pour l'autre. Ainsi la question devient ne vaudrait-il pas mieux tenir compte du point de vue de tous dans la décision prise? The following words highlight to my eyes something profound if the needs of the company and those of its managers are conflictual since these managers are supposed to be energies of or for the that company, then the problem is beyond learning and so on, to the extent that as such the company cannot even build on the available energies, the needs of the company should be as such they drive, shape towards answers to those needs the available energies: 'When that balance is lost, learning initiatives become a surrogate of leadership rather than an opportunity to practice it. Some, paying more attention to the needs of the company than to those of its managers, become little more than thinly veiled attempts at indoctrination. Others, focusing mostly on helping managers search their soul and expand their networks to find and achieve their own goals, become little more than personal indulgences.'

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