

Leadership Development is Like a Glacier

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My wife and I spent the past two weeks on vacation, hiking in Alaska. We saw some beautiful territory, and we returned refreshed and safe.

In our travels, we saw many glaciers. We enjoyed ideal hiking temperatures in the 60's, realizing those in "the lower forty-eight" were enduring sweltering heat.

We not only hiked to and on glaciers, we also saw evidence of avalanches from past winters. Below the tree line, a past avalanche is fairly obvious. Anything that was vertical (like a tree!) has been mowed down. It takes decades for a forest to recover from the devastating effects of an avalanche.

Glaciers and avalanches are similar in that snow that has fallen high in the mountains is pulled down by gravity. There are, however, three big differences. As I think about these three contrasts, they seem relevant to the concept of leadership development. (Hey, just because I go on vacation doesn't mean I stop thinking about how to help leaders who want to improve their service to employees!)

I pondered the distinctions between these two ways that snow comes down a mountain. It seems very clear to me that leadership development is much more like a glacier than an avalanche.

The first difference is that the snow in an avalanche is fresh from the current winter. In a glacier, this year's snow falls on accumulations from previous decades, often centuries.

A second difference is that an avalanche comes down fast. One moment the snow is high on the mountain. Some triggering event releases a huge mass that slides into the valley below. A glacier, in contrast, moves very slowly. If you've never studied glaciers, it's hard to believe they move at all.

A third difference is that the avalanche is shaped by the land. Sure, it knocks down trees and skiers and cabins, but the "flow" of an avalanche is molded by the shape of the ridges coming down from the mountain. A glacier, however, actually scours its own path. We saw plenty of evidence of past glaciers in the U-shaped valleys and the collection of boulders that remain after a glacier melts.

Clients over the years have given me the impression that they expect "leadership development" to result in some quick fixes. Maybe an individual is creating detrimental effects with his behavior.

Or maybe someone thinks a two-hour training session will help address problems with uncooperative employees. Perhaps a leader seeks a solution to her time management problems by reading a book.

Any of these approaches may provide improvement for a specific problem. We all want relief from circumstances that weigh us down and limit our effectiveness. However, this approach to leadership development seems to coincide with organizations that function heavily based on crisis management.

There is a better way. You could decide, personally and within your organization, to be more intentional about building your leadership skills. Investigations in this area have provided some valuable insights.

In *Primal Leadership* and his follow-up book, *Resonant Leadership*, Richard Boyatzis shares research on what's required for effective leadership development: awareness, experimentation, feedback, and practice. None of these occur quickly. A fifth characteristic, motivation, is also necessary. Why? The temptation to give up prematurely must be overcome with willful commitment from within the individual.

Rather than "do something fast to solve this problem," leadership development requires a more conscious, planned approach. Excellent information can be learned in two-hour training sessions, but building skills requires experimenting to find what works, then practicing until a new "normal" exists.

Thinking about this contrast, I imagined conversations between an avalanche and a glacier. "Hey, if all our flakes jump at once, we can get off this mountain immediately!"

“Yeah, but if you do, you destroy yourself! We prefer to pace ourselves. We’ll run into resistance along the way, but using our resources, we’ll overcome the obstacles and create a path that other water will eventually follow.”

“You guys are crazy! That will take years--we need to do something NOW!”

“Okay, go for the quick fix. But we’ll be around a long time. And people will come from far away just to marvel at our longevity and the effect we’ve had on our environment.”

An organization’s culture is heavily sculpted by the values and decisions of its leaders. Wouldn’t you rather invest in empowering your employees appropriately, providing more effective outcomes, even though it won’t be immediate? That’s what today’s best organizations do!

Dennis Hooper helps leaders leverage their skills and build their organization’s future. You can find past articles on his website, www.buildingfutureleaders.com. Or call Dennis at 478-988-0237.