

the oversight principle: how executives really become authentic leaders

Authenticity has become the gold standard of leadership development. But, the fact is that moving into a bigger leadership role requires people to act against their natural inclinations.

That's why, paradoxically, exhorting managers in transition to be more introspective can backfire, encouraging them to stick with comfortable behaviours and habits instead of growing new capacities.

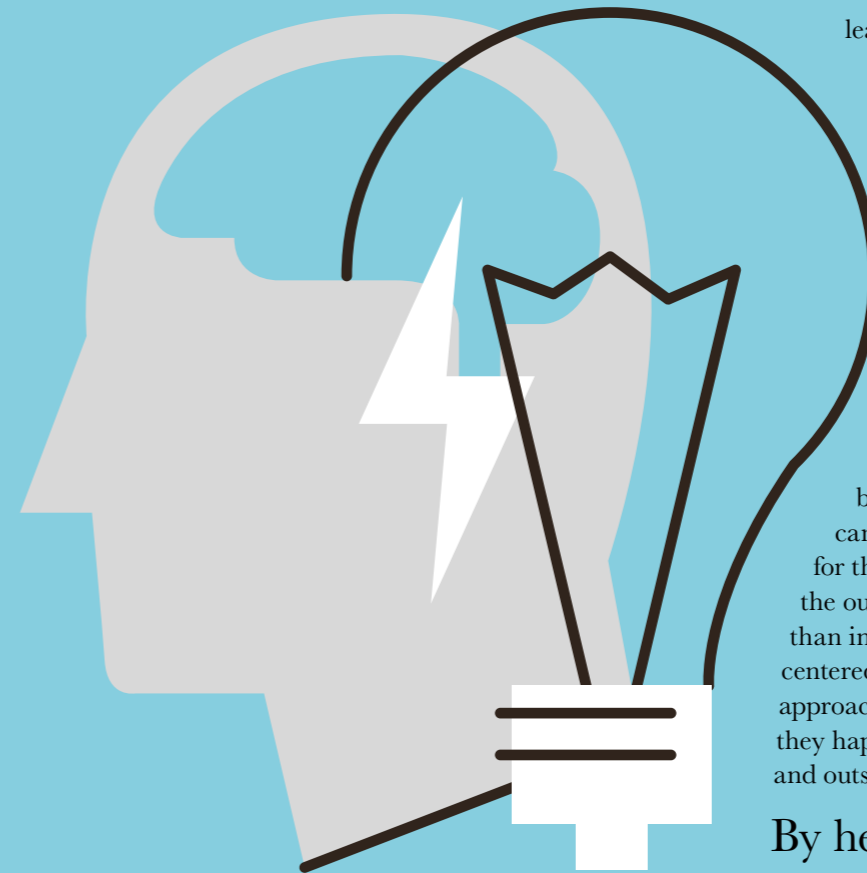
A more effective alternative, I have found, is to help managers to act their way into a new way of thinking by developing what I call "outsight." Outsight is the fresh, external perspective that comes from doing new and different things – plunging ourselves into new projects and activities, interacting with people outside our daily routines, and experimenting with new ways of getting things done. It's the opposite of learning by self-reflection, in which we seek insight on our past behaviors.

Development to increase oversight recognises that the way we act drives the way we think. Working on a cross-functional project, for example, exposes a functional manager to a different vantage point on her work and forges relationships with peers who can inform his partial view of organisational issues. The work itself – and not an abstract notion of, say, a collaborative leadership style – motivates personal change. By working alongside others who think differently,

people gradually start to change the reference by which they judge what is possible and desirable.

Making significant changes, not just in what we do but how we do it, requires a playful frame of mind. Take, for example, the shift from having good ideas to being able to sell them to a broad and diverse set of stakeholders. Many inexperienced leaders find the process of getting buy-in distasteful and "inauthentic" because it feels artificial and political; they believe their work should stand on its own merits. They don't do only because they lack

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the skill set but also because they are not sure they want to be the kind of person that behaves that way.

That's why I recommend that people approach the natural authenticity challenges that are part and parcel of stepping up to a bigger leadership role with a playful mindset. When we adopt a playful attitude, we're not committing to become a specific kind of leader, but to a process of experimenting. We're more open to a diverse, even divergent, set of possibilities. It's OK to be inconsistent from one day to the next. We're not being a fake. That's just how we figure out what's right for the new challenges we face. The trick is to work toward a future version of your authentic self by stretching way outside the boundaries of who we are today. Knowing the kind of

leader we'd like to become is not the starting point of our development journey, but rather the result of increasing our oversight.

It's no secret that many formal leadership development efforts fall short of expectations. At best, managers gain valuable personal insights but fail to learn how they can apply them to create value for their organisation. Applying the oversight principle is harder than implementing self-awareness-centered learning and development approaches because, by definition, they happen outside the classroom and outside HR's direct control.

By helping people develop new experiences and relationships first – before we ask them to redefine themselves – we help them gain the necessary oversight on what it means to be a leader.

Herminia Ibarra, Professor of organizational behavior and the Cora Chaired Professor of Leadership and Learning at INSEAD. Author of *Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader* @HerminiaIbarra www.herminiaibarra.com



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