

Leadership Development: Are You Starting Too Late?

by Jack Zenger

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A head start on the path to extraordinary.

We wait too long to begin developing leaders

One of long-term clients, a prominent Silicon Valley software firm, has done a remarkable job of identifying top talent and providing ongoing development for them. As a result, middle managers to senior executives have greatly benefited from formal leadership development.

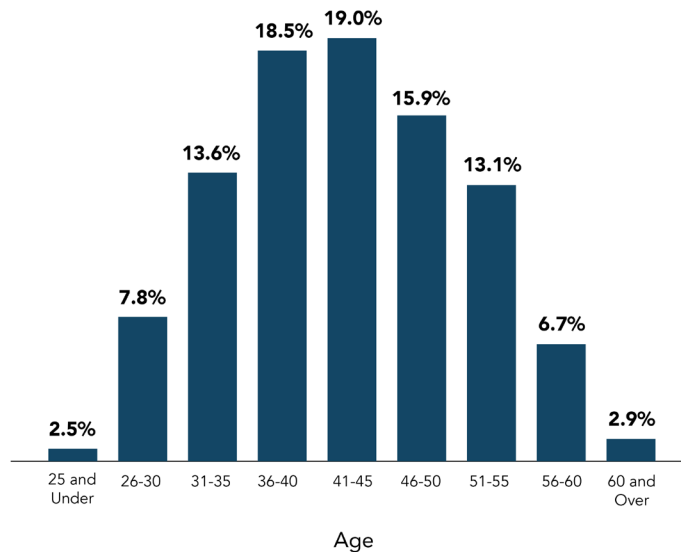
Unfortunately, most organizations wait too long to begin developing leaders. As a result, not only do organizations pay a

big price, but individual careers are less than they could be, and society overall suffers. A clear change is required in the timing of an organization's leadership development programs.

At what age do we start developing leaders now?

Because Zenger Folkman works with a wide variety of large organizations from virtually all industry sectors worldwide, we have a large database to examine. We analyzed data on roughly 17,000

Fig. 1 – Average Age of Leadership Development Participants



leaders for whom we had precise data regarding their age at the time they participated in their company's leadership development process.

It was no surprise to discover that the average age of all participants was 42. Half of all the participants were in a 13-year age band between 36 and 49. Less than 5 percent of all participants were under 27 years of age and only 10 percent were under the age of 30.

Supervisors within these firms had an average age of 33, suggesting that these supervisors would typically wait 9 more years before participating in any development program. Research shows that these supervisors had been in their roles at least 3 years. The gap between the middle managers' age and the supervisors' age was 9 years, indicating that people remain in that role for nearly a decade.

Think of the advantage to be gained by beginning some formal leadership development activity at an earlier age, rather than waiting for nearly a decade to begin. Prior research has shown that less than 10 percent of leaders, left to their own devices, will have any personal plan of development without the encouragement of some formalized process sponsored by their company. Ponder the impact of leaders having an additional 9 years to develop leadership skills.

Advantages of starting earlier

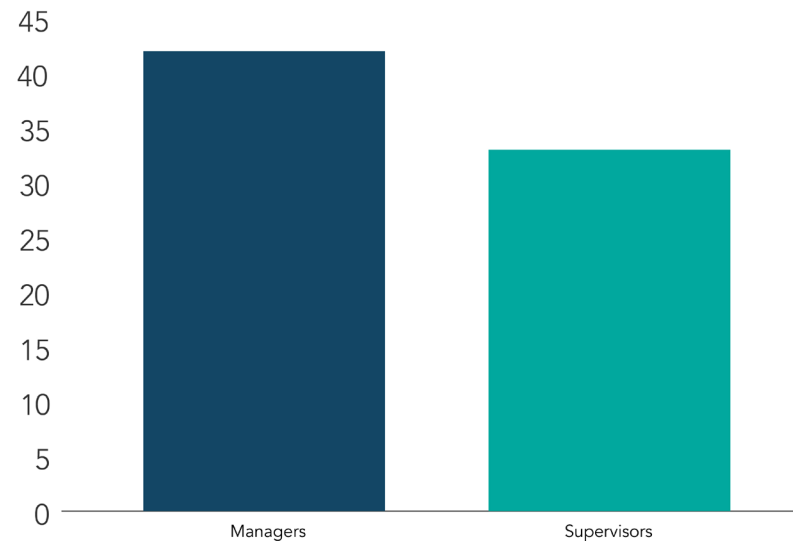
Easier to learn

Most readers can identify with the advantages of learning a skill at a younger versus an older age. If you go to a tennis club and watch the younger players who have had excellent instruction at a young age, and then visit a typical public court and watch young people playing who have had no instruction, the differences are obvious. A few hours or days of instruction and correct practice have created different levels of skill.

Leadership principles can be learned at a young age. Years ago, I was involved with a firm that experimented with teaching leadership principles and skills to elementary school age children. We were training supervisors and managers for large corporations and we experimented with teaching the exact same concepts to 3rd and 4th graders. When we did that, we discovered that they clearly got the message, and went home and informed their parents when they failed to utilize these principles with them. One example of these principles included focusing on situations, challenges, and behaviors rather than on the individual. Another principle was working to preserve the self-esteem and self-confidence of your colleagues. I can't help but smile when I think of a 3rd grader correcting their parent on a basic leadership principle.

We're not arguing leadership development is solely the corporation's responsibility. Nor do we expect school systems to re-vamp their curriculum to include this, even though there would be huge benefits.

Fig. 2 – Average Age of Supervisors and Managers



But if we want extraordinary leaders, why not begin to find those interested in becoming effective leaders and help them accelerate their progress. It is true that younger people are given some opportunities to serve as class president or captain of the basketball team. But there is little or no guidance or instruction about how to excel in those jobs. It's a sink or swim experience for most. That continues throughout their high school and college experience. Some MBA programs are now including leadership development

in their curricula, but even that is a fairly recent innovation.

Avoids acquiring bad habit

I ski with my children and grandchildren, who learned to ski at early ages. This is in marked contrast to my experience of learning at the age of 41. They learned the fundamentals very early and well. They didn't pick up any bad habits. Instructors pushed them to move to more difficult slopes while maintaining good form. As you would suppose, there is a huge difference in skill level.

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Longer time to practice

You may have heard it said that “practice makes perfect.” In reality, however, that is totally incorrect. Practicing bad habits ingrains them all the more. Simply practicing does not automatically create excellent skills. Many aspiring golfers visit a local driving range to hit a bucket of balls. They leave feeling that they have done something to help them become a better golfer. Contrast that person with the aspiring golfer who goes to a range on which they can draw a circle 20 feet in diameter. The aspiring golfer then moves back a short distance and proceeds to hit balls until 80 percent land in the circle. Then the golfer moves further back, takes a different club, and does the same thing. That is deliberate, focused, and productive practice. Perfect practice makes perfect performance.

The research on expert performance in any discipline, whether it be music, golf, or chess confirms that experts:

- Are created by beginning at an early age.
- Have an adult who guided them.
- Practice 10,000 hours, in contrast

to the majority who might practice 2,000 hours.

The organization benefits from improved skills

Of necessity, the young supervisor is practicing leadership from day one. They are in the role, but often in the “hitting a bucket of balls” mode rather than deliberate, focused practice. From the day this supervisor was put in that position, habits began to be formed. Attitudes were being created. Management practices began to coalesce. Would it not be in the organization’s and the individual’s best interest to begin that process the moment they are selected for that position?

The longer we wait, the less success we’re likely to have

For as long as I can recall, there have been those who have observed, “With all the money and effort being spent on leadership development programs, why don’t we have better leaders?” The answer to that question is complex, but could a part of the answer be that we have simply waited too long to develop

these skills? It may be possible to teach old dogs new tricks, but there's no question that it becomes much more difficult over time.

Our proposal

1. Continue to emphasize promotions from within

There is ample data to support the fact that promotions from within tend to fare better than bringing people in from the outside. Yes, there are clearly times when that is the right thing to do, but it is both risky and expensive. Programs that identify those with leadership potential and then provide that development clearly pay off. Companies such as General Electric and Procter & Gamble and have demonstrated that to work.

2. Focus more attention on Millennials

Here's the classic breakdown of generational groups.

- Traditional or silent generation, born from 1925–1945
- Baby Boomers, born from 1946–1954

- Gen X, born from 1955–1976
- Millennials, born from 1977–1998

Today we are devoting roughly 75 percent of our development effort to Gen X and 20 percent on millennials. We concur with our colleague from the Silicon Valley software firm—we would be wise to invest more in the development of millennials. Why? One of the stereotypes we have about the millennial generation is that they are more focused on themselves and less focused on company objectives. After analyzing the data on these different groups, we learned that millennials had the highest scores when it came to driving for results, followed by the traditionalists. The baby boomers received the lowest scores.

Millennials are sometimes stereotyped as being self-centered. Yet on the leadership competence of Collaboration and Teamwork, they were at the 60th percentile, while the percentile scores were lower for each older generation. The traditionalists, for example, were at the 46th percentile.

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Probably to no one's surprise, millennials received the highest scores on Innovation. The final surprise was the extremely high scores of millennials on the dimension of practicing self-development. Here they were at the 64th percentile, while the baby boomers were at the 52nd percentile. This contradicts the image of "complacent know-it-alls" that is held by some.

However, the organization has gained from the improved performance of this person while employed by them. Plus, the likelihood of talented people leaving diminishes if they feel they are constantly improving and developing. Furthermore, our overall talent pool in society has been improved.

Conclusion: What are the risks?

Are there risks? The naysayers will argue that the individual in whom you've invested at a younger age may move on and the investment will be lost. That is correct.

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About Us

Zenger Folkman relentlessly seeks to rise above the inconsistent, and sometimes misleading, nature of popular leadership philosophies and beliefs brought on by opinion. The discipline of leadership and those who pursue it deserve better. Our most valuable asset is the expertise of combining hard data and statistical analysis with logical explanations and actionable application that help individual leaders thrive and organizations succeed.