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Feature: Liberty Mutual

Liberty Mutual

A lot of companies give lip service to the notion that management development programs have C-level support. At Liberty Mutual, top executives are completely involved in the process of supporting its future leaders.

By Jonathan Leer

On a day that comes about halfway through Liberty Mutual's management training program, Larry Israelite, vice president of human resources development, waits with anticipation, keeping an eye on the meeting-room door. It opens, and in comes Liberty Mutual's chairman, president and CEO, Edmund Kelly. Israelite says that he can almost hear what the participants are thinking: "What is *he* doing here?" The CEO then walks around the room and shakes every single person's hand, opening an hourlong session of discussion of what it means to be a manager in the company.

A lot of companies give lip service to the notion that management development programs have C-level support. At Liberty Mutual, top executives are completely involved in the process of supporting its future leaders.

Headquartered in Boston, Liberty Mutual Group has more than 900 offices in more than 23 countries. It employs more than 39,000 people and is the sixth-largest property and casualty insurer in the U.S., as measured by its 2005 premiums.

Each year, Liberty Mutual trains close to 4,000 employees in management development and professional development. Israelite's training organization at Liberty Mutual includes 24 professionals in the corporate human resources development department. The group runs 30 to 35 programs a year.

With 26 years in the training field, Israelite is in a position to size up how top executives—particularly CEOs—regard training. He puts them in four categories.

"There are CEOs that don't talk about it, don't care about it," he says. "There are CEOs who talk about it but don't give me money for it; and there are CEOs that talk about and give you money for it, but don't show up.

"And then there is what we have," he says. That means a CEO and other top executives who "care about it and talk about, give you money for it, and are completely involved in the process."

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When Kelly visits classes, he greets each manager and then gets down to the business of talking about their jobs, Israelite says. He discusses the importance he places on the manager's role and offers some thoughts about his own time as a frontline manger, and his experiences working with frontline managers. Then he discusses the critical issues facing the business and their relevance to frontline managers. But he spends the bulk of the hour fielding questions from participants about their roles and his views of them.

Support like that from the top of an organization is "without question the greatest differentiator among management and leadership development programs," says Deborah Wallace, a leadership consultant with Massachusetts-based BrinkPoint Consulting. "This means that the top executive team, as well as the board, participates in some sort of development program."

Training at Liberty Mutual is a requirement of the job. All new frontline managers must attend and complete the four-day frontline manager program within the first 120 days of taking the job. The program provides "great role orientation, significant level of CEO and executive commitment and a great first step in helping managers feel welcome and aligned in new manager roles," Israelite says.

The course is integrated into a broader curriculum that includes a set of online learning programs, which are taken in advance of the live program; pre-work that requires participants to gather and review information about their new work units; and post-program follow-up and feedback to help focus application and coaching opportunities.

The content is broad, but focuses on such areas as the context and role of frontline managers, how to create a motivating work environment, coaching for performance, setting the foundation for successful performance, monitoring and sustaining performance, assessing and rewarding contribution and creating long-term value.

To align managers to new roles, Israelite's team uses RightSTART, an orientation road map used by new managers and, in turn, their own managers to get them into the right mind-set for the new job. The training team also uses Role Orientation, a coordinated online learning program that's taken immediately upon placement. It helps build understanding and knowledge of key management roles, practices and resources, Israelite says.

"Feedback is available from their managers and we make available tools and templates to help managers collect and respond to feedback from peers and subordinates at specific points in their development," he says.

To measure goal achievement, the training team does standard evaluations of learners' reactions to the course, and the new knowledge they say they gathered from it. The trainers also "continuously interview upper management in the business units about the alignment of the program and the needs of our businesses, and adjust content accordingly," Israelite says.

After training, "a great deal of the focus for frontline managers is on the effective application of people management processes and tools," he says. "We use our employee opinion survey and important talent management metrics data to assess our progress on these important people management measures."

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Another successful program at Liberty Mutual is "Achieving Profitable Growth," a three-day program available to senior managers, who are nominated by their own managers. This program includes intensive simulations that let managers see the consequences of their decisions on a fictional company's performance.

They get feedback and coaching from very senior executives. The CEO and other executives are directly involved, leading discussions and providing analyses. They also are the major facilitators of the assessment and feedback portions of the program. Participants complete extensive pre-work about a case study to be used in a simulation, which covers four years of a fictional company's performance.

"This single simulation looks at the financial and operational consequences of management decisions given a complex set of variables, outcomes, market conditions and competitive forces," Israelite says. "Decisions made by other teams can impact the outcomes of all others. The intensity is a function of focused teamwork to arrive at important decisions, analysis of outcomes, rethinking of strategy and presentations, and defense of those decisions in front of senior leaders."

Participants consider the program important to their success, he says.

"Our simulation is very tightly integrated with our business. ... The executives who attend immediately relate to its content, its structure, the decisions it requires them to make, and the ways in which they have to discuss and justify them," he says. "And because of that, it is very effective."

The C-level support at Liberty Mutual has had an enormous effect on the success of its management development programs, Israelite says.

He still has a wish list, though: Continued executive sponsorship for management development; more creativity in the design of training solutions, since they help the company deliver better products and services to customers; and, something that most training leaders want: "A general belief that training is an investment, not an expense."

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