Leadership developmental needs – a system for identifying them

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This study is an evaluation of the developmental needs of business leaders. Altogether, 190 leaders, representing 22 nationalities, participated in 12 four-day training sessions. The first aim of this study was to identify the key developmental concerns of leaders; the second was to determine what kinds of training methods the leaders preferred; and the third was to design a form that could be used for further training. Fourteen developmental areas were identified. The key areas that needed development were related to Interaction, Coaching, Giving and Receiving Feedback, and Everyday Work Skills. Artificial experience building and tailor-made training were preferred over lecturing. In further training, activating methods need to be used and demographics taken into consideration.

Introduction

Today's leaders need skills of which their forebears had no conception. They are required to fulfil a wider variety of tasks and roles than ever before, and more and more demands are placed on them that are not directly related to the daily business work. The traditional model of a leader has been someone who is good at business; today's organisations demand much more. Leaders need managerial skills, creative ideas and also excellent people skills (Boleman & Deal 2006; Hatch, Kostera & Kozminski 2005). To be able to meet all these requirements, leaders need continuous training and support.

Purpose

This study combines a review of recent literature in the field of leadership development with an analysis of twelve leadership development programs in European businesses. It has three main aims. The first is to identify the key developmental concerns of leaders in business organisations around the world (Europe, USA and India), taking cultural issues into consideration. Another aim is to determine how leaders prefer to develop their leadership skills. The third aim is to develop a form to be used in leadership training, which will incorporate the key developmental areas.

Framework

The research material for this study has been collected from twelve leadership courses, offered to four companies, originally Finnish but now international. These courses were directed at middle and higher managers in order to develop their leadership skills. During these courses, artificial experience building as well as shorter and longer lectures, creative activities (photographing, painting, video) and discussions were used. Special care was taken to make the training personal and individual. The leadership courses were offered in

France, Italy, Belgium, Finland, the United States of America and India, from May 2004 to April 2007. All courses lasted four days and the participants (N=190) in each course consisted mainly of four to eight different nationalities, although in India and the USA the participants were mainly local people. The same multicultural team (N=4, two Finns, one American and one Russian; two males, two females) of trainers attended all courses.

Learning and development in leadership

It is clear that companies benefit from a culture of leadership development. The development of leaders is important to the long-term health and success of organisations, (Ruvolo, Peterson & LeBoeuf 2004, Mumford, Hunter, Eubanks, Bedell & Murphy 2007), so it is worth the investment. This article focuses on leadership development via training rather than experience. People do not learn only from their own experiences, but also from the knowledge and experience of others. When personal experience is combined with training and time for reflection, a leadership development flow is created:

> Experience + new knowledge + reflection (with support and feedback) + time (more practice/experience) = leadership growth and development (Ruvolo, Peterson, & LeBoeuf 2004: 14).

Leadership training is a big business and numerous forms of training are offered.

Today's pedagogy places a lot of trust in constructivism, where the participants together with the teacher form the knowledge base. The teacher is more a trainer, a modeller or a coach who 'scaffolds' the learners and helps them to reflect and build on their knowledge base. The role of meta-cognition, especially the participants' knowledge about their own personal cognitive-emotional processes, is central

(Rauste-von Wright & von Wright 1994, Steffe & Gale 1995). Coaching can be offered by trainers and by colleagues.

To respond in an ethical, authentic and effective way to different situations in organisations is challenging. In various research projects (e.g. Holliday, Statler & Flanders 2007, Roca 2007, Moberg 2007), the classical Greek concept of 'practical wisdom' (phronesis) has been used. This technique emphasises the role of play in developing understanding between individuals. In particular, communication among individuals from different backgrounds can be enhanced in a safe way through play (Holliday, Statler & Flanders 2007). In some such experiments, participants have used LEGO bricks for building a model of leadership, first an individual model and then a model made together in a team. Participants gave positive comments after such training, like: 'You could have just stood up in front of us and said, "OK, what you think leadership is?" and that would have been boring. But this way our ideas had to evolve' (Holliday *et al.* 2007: 127). During this kind of training, the participants were able to confront complex and ambiguous circumstances in a safe environment and to take risks with new roles and ideas.

Training methods where the focus has been on people skills, such as listening, building trust and understanding one's impact on others, have been successful, especially when combined with personalised, individual feedback from the trainers. This kind of training has helped to achieve greater self-awareness of and deeper insight into how one's behaviour affects others. The training is even more effective with a check-in after a year or two and with ongoing support and clear involvement from the participants' managers (Goleman 1995, Wasylyshyn, Gronsky & Haas 2006). Follow-up, or at least long-term training with specific milestones, has been shown to be particularly important, as well as commitment and support from the upper levels.

Artificial experience building

Artificial experiences are used in many forms in business training, for example, with case-based learning or with computers. Case-based learning (CBL) with paper cases or acted cases is a widely used tool. The technique is most useful when combined with discussions after the case. Use of computer-based business training is also growing; it allows various simulations and can be adapted to different situations. (Lainema & Nurmi 2006, DeKanter 2005).

In the training courses studied in this research, artificial experience building was used as a teaching method. Three kinds of settings for these artificial experiences were created: 1) whole group situations, 2) small team situations and 3) one-to-one situations. Before these situations, all participants' personal development goals were studied thoroughly by the trainers.

- One whole group artificial experience was used where two actors performed a case in front of the whole group, one being the leader and the other the subordinate. After the acted case, feedback was given to the actors and the situation was discussed with the whole group. Giving feedback was safe, because it was given to the actors. It was also made rather light-hearted, to involve a play-element.
- In small team sessions, various challenging situations were practised, like giving positive or negative feedback or delivering bad news to a team. The actor was one of the team members and provoked the situation, a fact which helped the team to be tough enough to challenge negative feedback.
- The one-to-one situation used cases designed with company personnel before the training. Basic cases were tailored according to individual needs in the training situations. The cases were presented by actors, who are also educational professionals. In each case, the actor took the role of a subordinate and one participant acted in the role of a 'leader'. Another participant observed the situation and gave constructive feedback afterwards.

Special care was taken that the feedback was in line with the personal goals of the 'leader in role', as well as of the climate of this feedback session. After feedback, the roles were switched.

The reason for using these challenging exercises in the form of artificial experience building was to involve participants on a cognitive as well as an emotional level, both of which are required in effective leadership (Mumford, Campion & Morgeson 2007, Popper 2005). All these situations had time limits and a constructive personal feedback session was always held afterwards. Everyone was exposed to similar situations, but never in front of the whole group, only in pairs or in small groups.

Culture and demographics

The values and beliefs of the society can be seen in leadership, which means it is culturally dependent on the context in which it exists. Therefore, there can be no 'one size fits for all' leadership. The current Anglo-Saxon theories on leadership place value on empowerment, power sharing, delegation and creating visions and strategic direction for the organisation (Mellahi 2000). Unlike the Western leadership model, the Asian model is more autocratic and directive: honouring family, kind-heartedness and compassion can be seen in Asian, as well as Arab and African leadership. In Asia the leader is very much in charge (Mills 2005, Mellahi 2000).

Mills (2005) mentions five leadership styles in America: directive, participative, empowering, charismatic and celebrity. He lists also main qualities of a successful leader in the USA and Europe – one of the most important is emotional resonance, the ability to understand what motivates others and appeal to it. This, he thinks, will become more important in Asia when living conditions improve there. Popper (2005) says that emotional influence is important, and it is composed of elements which are characteristic of transformational leaders (see Rowold & Heinitz 2007, Keller 2006). When comparing

American and Chinese managers in conflict situations, it was noticed that Americans relied more on a competing style, while the Chinese relied on an avoiding style. This difference in behaviour is thought to derive from cultural values, conformity and tradition in the East and self-enhancement and achievement in the West (Williams, Morris, Leung, Bhatnagar, Hu, Kondo & Luo 1998).

The effect of demographics on leadership skills was studied by Sarros, Cooper & Hartican (2006). Females scored 'compassion' higher than males, and older respondents scored integrity higher than younger ones. Managers with fewer than five years' experience scored lower for courage and wisdom compared to more experienced ones. It appears that wisdom and ethical leadership increase with age, experience and level of seniority. Leadership skills are cumulative and hierarchical. The existence of different needs at different levels emphasises the importance of tailoring leadership development programs (also Mumford *et al.* 2007).

Study instruments and methods

Two main instruments were used to study the developmental needs of leaders, the pedagogy used and the outcomes in terms of leadership improvement.

- The developmental needs and outcomes were studied by using a form completed by the participants during the first day of training. In this form they wrote down two to six main personal developmental targets. The participants were encouraged to concentrate on issues which they personally felt were important. All participants did so.
- At the end of the course, each participant completed a general feedback form about the whole course, where every activity was rated from 1 (unsatisfactory) to 5 (excellent) and in addition open-ended comments were allowed. These activities included

lectures, artificial experience building (using individually designed roles), creative activities (painting, photographing), small team exercise (less than half of the group), whole group exercise (roles played by actors in front of the whole group) and video session. This feedback form was also completed by everyone (N=190), anonymously. Only the mean scores from each course are used in this paper.
- An additional feedback form about the pedagogies used during the eight courses was also completed.

The data received with the first instrument were analysed using content analysis. Content analysis was also used with the open-ended answers to the questionnaire about main pedagogical activities. The two other instruments were analyzed using frequencies, means and distributions. With the demographics (sex, age, profession, work experience and nationality) and the data cross-tabulations, t-test and ANOVA were used.

Demographics

All together there were 190 participants from 22 different countries, with a mean age of 40 years, ranging from 27 to 64 years (standard deviation 6). The majority came from the USA (46) and Finland (43). Other countries represented were Italy (26), India (22), France (15), Germany (8), UK (6), Czech Republic (4), Brazil (4), China (3), Belgium (3), Canada (2) and Denmark (2). In addition, there was one participant from each of Sweden, Norway, Austria, Spain, Russia and Romania. The participants were mainly male, with 152 men and 38 women.

The professions were classified into six categories: engineers (80), marketing/sales persons (43), general management (32), finance/accountancy (13), customer service (12) and human resources (10). The level of these people in the company was either middle or

higher-level management. They came to the course voluntarily, or because their manager had suggested it, in order to develop their leadership skills.

The participants had considerable work experience: 19% (36 persons) had been working for 0-3 years, 17% (32) for 4-6 years and 26% (50) for over 10 years in the company. Unfortunately, 30% of the data is missing because in courses one, two and six this information was not requested.

The developmental areas

When reading the written developmental needs for the first time, we found 30 different themes. When reading them more closely and searching for related themes (using content analysis), similar issues were recognised. After discussion within the authors, several readings and reassessment, these 30 were concentrated into 14 areas, which are presented in Figure 1 in order of frequencies and also in the text with examples from the participants' written developmental needs. The four most common ones were communication, coaching, work skills and giving and receiving feedback. The least often mentioned three were change management, managing information flow and non-performers. Main developmental areas, with direct quotes from the participants, are given in Appendix 1 which is also the form intended to be used in future training courses.
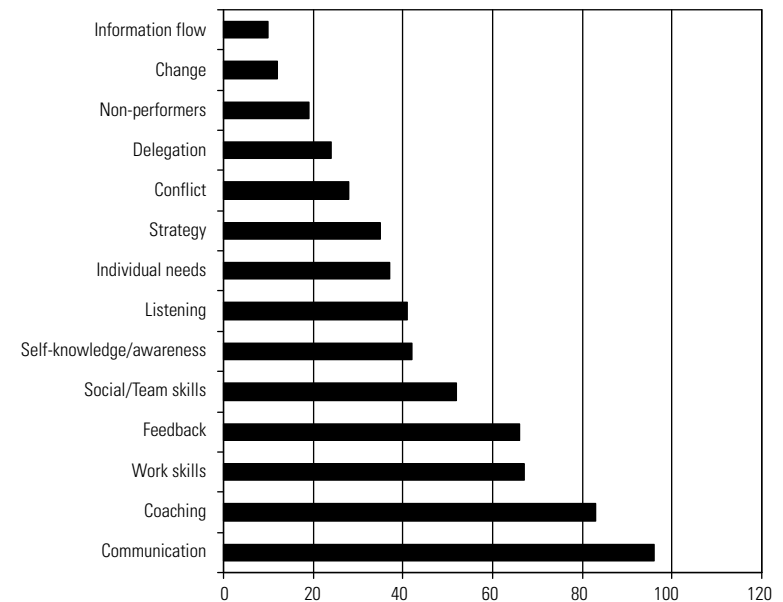

Figure 1:   Fourteen developmental needs of leaders (N= 190), by frequencies

The 14 developmental areas have been classified by the authors of this article and only minor changes were made after discussions. The 14-item tool has the variety necessary for further training. However, we tried to compress these 14 needs using factor analysis. Unfortunately, the factors obtained were not theoretically complete. However, it was observed that further thematic reduction was possible. When compressing these 14 items further according to their content, six categories emerged (Figure 2).

1. *Intercommunication* (communication, listening, social / team skills)
2. *Evaluation* (feedback, non-performers and conflict management)
3. *Personal growth* (individual needs and self-knowledge)

4. *Coaching (*skills that inspire, energise and develop subordinates)
5. *Managing today* (work skills, delegation).
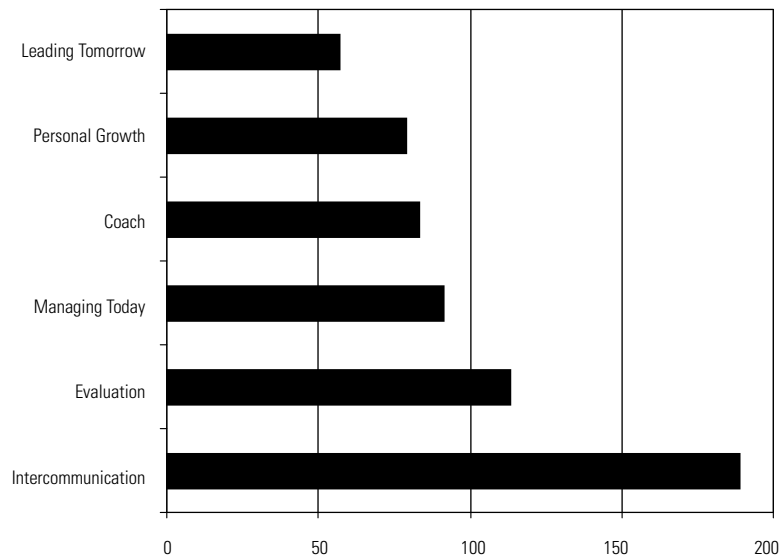6. *Leading tomorrow* (strategy, information flow and change issues)

Figure 2:   Six categories of leadership development

The reliability of the classification system was confirmed by the first two authors, reading 10% of all course material separately.

Who needs what?

The results were studied separately for different demographics, and are summarised below.

Gender and nationality

Men (151) and women (38) did not have significant statistical differences in age, and both men and women were in all professional groups. On the 14-item scale, men and women did not differ from each other, while Listening (p= 032; F=8,787; df=3) and Individual Needs (p= 025; F=9,365; df=3) were most often mentioned by the Indians.

Age, work-experience and profession

Participants were clustered into three age groups (1 = 27-39 years, 2 = 40-52 years and 3 = 53-64 years). When using the 14-item scale, some trends can be seen. The youngest group needed the most development in Work skills (p=.017; F=4,140, df=2). The oldest group seemed to need most development in delegation, but this result was not statistically significant.

Work experience was divided into three parts: 0-6 years, 7-12 years and more than 12 years of experience. On the 14-item scale, managing change was most challenging for the most or second most experienced (p=.026; F=3,722, df=2). The oldest participants needed skills in information flow (p=.046; F=3,132, df=2). It needs to be remembered that 30% of the data was missing. Profession had no significant effect on developmental needs.

Effective training questionnaire

The general evaluation form dealt with many matters, including accommodation and food. However, when evaluating pedagogical matters, these issues were excluded. The training methods in the evaluation form were divided into lectures, video-sessions, small group creativity activity and three different kinds of artificial experience building, namely small team experience, whole group experience and individual experience. All these were evaluated using a scale where 1 was unsatisfactory and 5 was excellent. The most appreciated way of learning was the individual, tailor-made, artificial experience building, the mean being 4.5 (range 3.6 to 4.8). The least appreciated activity was the lectures, with a mean of 3.8 (range 3.0 to 4.4) (see Figure 3).
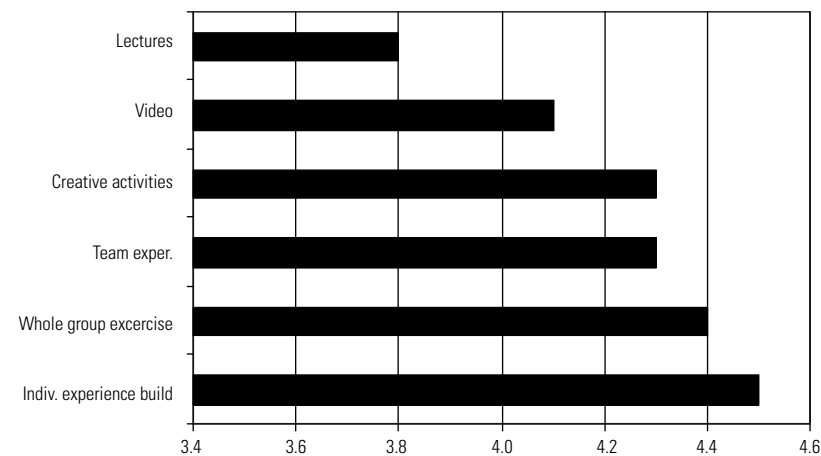
*Figure 3:   Evaluation of the training methods used
(scale: 1=unsatisfactory to 5=excellent)*

Additional feedback questionnaire

Because information from the feedback form was quite general, another questionnaire was used to obtain more detailed information. The information from the questionnaire is in line with the previous set of data. Results from the questionnaire delivered to eight of the 12 courses reveal that the majority preferred mini-lectures with artificial experiences rather than long, powerpoint presentations (see Table 1).

Table 1: Leaders preferred learning modes in frequencies

Total N	Lectures	Lectures + activity	Activities
112	-	63	49

Sample statements from the questionnaires included:

• We need some tips and ideas, concepts, which we then practise. Otherwise there is no learning.
• If you just listen to lectures, you never do it.
• To improve skills, I need to hear something and practise, too.

Descriptions of the artificial experience building were requested and the most common comments included the following: 'enjoyable; instructive; interesting; inspiring; clever; concrete; powerful; helpful; challenging; useful even if sometimes painful; extreme'. The majority found this type of training useful. One participant in 2004 expressed it in a nutshell:

> This was different from normal seminars because of immersion in the subject matter. Interaction, imagination and individualisation of the exercises were allowed, based on personalities and styles.

Similar kinds of comments were received in the research by Holliday *et al.* (2007).

Discussion

The developmental needs of the leaders (N= 190) were grouped into 14 main areas, which have points of convergence with other studies (Mumford *et al.* 2007, Mumford, Hunter *et al.* 2007). The needs mentioned most often were connected to Communication, Coaching, various every day Work skills, giving and receiving Feedback, Listening and Team/Social skills as well as being aware of Individual needs of oneself and of others (see also Campbell 2007). These include interaction with people, knowing the business and knowing the co-workers, also on a personal level. It is also important to be able to function in conflict situations and to give and receive continuous feedback. People skills are essential as well as coaching subordinates.

The 14 areas of development share elements of the transformational and transactional models of leadership. Strategy and change issues could be seen as more transformational, while delegation and work skills issues related more as transactional matters. Other issues share elements from both models, such as listening or team skills (see also Rowold & Heinitz 2007). A modern leader wants to know the business, but that is not enough. S/he wants also to develop

relationships with subordinates and be more of a coach who takes care of teams and also has good self-knowledge. All this demands emotional resonance (Mills 2005) as well as sociability. A leader is a type of artist who knows both business and people, and is also a creative visionary. Leadership is important, although seldom can any single leader be said to affect the performance of a large organization. However, there are positive effects of leadership in the aggregate (O´Reilly, Caldwell & Chatman 2005).

Work skills and delegation skills were needed most by the youngest leaders. Listening skills and the ability to understand and be aware of individual needs was most often mentioned by Indians. The complexity of demands on modern business makes it clear that different training styles are needed. Also, the concept of a good leader is highly variable (see also Håland & Tjora 2006). Leadership is much more than a mixture of skills (Richards 2008).

Learning during the training sessions was socio-cultural, having a constructivist orientation (see Wilson 1996, Steffe *et al.* 1995). The most valued method of training was the tailor-made and personalised approach during the courses. Although modern ways of training via the internet are available, personal contact was preferred. Artificial experience was the preferred model, combining the cognitive and emotional part of learning and taking the leader as a whole person into consideration. Lecturing was the least preferred. Giving and receiving feedback was essential. Feedback has been observed to increase potency in educational research (Hattie 2003), and is one of the most important things when one is learning something new. The idea of experiential learning (Kolb 1984) was used and altered to include artificial experience instead of concrete experience from real life. However, the case was modified according to the person's needs in the role-play process as following: the participant acting in the 'leader' role received a new experience; the observer was able to reflect on it immediately, and the acting leader when given

feedback later. In the feedback discussion, they could discuss details on a meta-cognitive level about the phenomena that were realized in the simulated situation. This meant, for example, realising that subordinates were not necessarily difficult but that the acting leader might have problems in anger management. In this process, the four phases of experiential learning (concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation) were realised.

We acknowledge that this research has limitations. The participants in the training were mainly men and the majority had a technical background. The companies studied were originally Finnish, exhibiting a Scandinavian company culture. No follow-up research was done about the developmental needs and learning. Also the form has not been tested in practice.

Conclusions

In this research, a valuable 14-item form for listing developmental needs was designed in consultation with 190 leaders (see appendix 1). A scale from 0 (no need) to 3 (needs a lot) was later added to it. This instrument will be used in future training. The form has parallels in other research. For example, a similar scale was derived in a school context, in a study measuring good leadership of special school principals. An instrument called Essential Behavioural Leadership Qualities (EBLQ) was designed with subordinates. The subordinates listed essential items and together 18 items were chosen. The most important ones were good listening skills, honesty, ethics and fairness (Oyinlade 2006). The list and the process of developing it were similar to ours. Future training will reveal if our form is useful.

A good leader wants to develop soft skills as well as business skills. Communication and coaching, including energising and inspiring, are the two top skills to be developed. Good communication skills and a coaching attitude are excellent tools for a modern leader.

Our research showed that an individualised approach and artificial experience building are very well received by participants and hold considerable value in leadership training.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1: Leadership Development Scale

(Takala & Winegar 2009)

Here are 14 areas of leadership development. You can choose whether you need 'a lot' of development (3), 'quite a lot' (2), 'some' (1) or 'not at all' (0). You might have some other areas where you want to develop yourself. Feel free to write them at the end of the scale. The black titles can be interpreted broadly. The italics after them are examples. You can write your own specification: if you think you need to develop your communication skills, write something in the space provided.

Area that needs development	0: I don't need any	1: I need some	2: I need quite a lot	3: I need a lot
1) **Communication**:	0	1	2	3
Convincing skills; Assertive communication; Communicating good and bad things to subordinates at the right time; Being approachable.	I need to			
2) **Coach/inspire**:	0	1	2	3
Showing concern about reports on their progress, achieving goals, rewards, feedback; Promoting continuous development; Personal progress of staff; Improving motivation; Inspiring; Energising.	I need to			
3) **Work skills**:	0	1	2	3
Prioritising; Decision making; Organising, Follow up; Analysing own workload.	I need to			
4) **Feedback**:	0	1	2	3
Giving feedback – positive and negative; Feedback seeking techniques; Continuous feedback.	I need to			

5) **Social/team skills**:

0	1	2	3

Treating people with respect; Treating different sub-ordinates with different approach and language; Empathy; Identifying understanding capabilities; Involving sub-ordinates in decision making; Moving towards 'we' from 'I'.

I need to ....

6) **Self-reliance/ self-awareness**:

0	1	2	3

Saying 'no' instead of accepting/agreeing on opinions: Being tougher; Reflecting on own actions; Balancing work and private life.

I need to ....

7) **Listening skills**:

0	1	2	3

Concentrating on the person with whom you are interacting; Not reacting without listening; Listening actively and patiently.

I need to ....

8) **Individual needs/knowing them**:

0	1	2	3

Knowing your people; Adapting style to suit different people and situations; Knowing more about subordinates; Correcting approach in personal situations.

I need to ....

9) **Strategy/vision**:

0	1	2	3

Extending vision; understanding what is more important; Bringing along people to achieve the common goal; Challenging the present status; Remembering the big picture; having a helicopter view!

I need to ....

10) **Conflict**:

0	1	2	3

Handling difficult personal situations – work / non-work related; Handling disappointment of subordinates; Managing conflict for win-win solutions.

I need to ....

11) **Delegation**:

0	1	2	3

Maybe I´m doing others' jobs; Learning to delegate more.

I need to ....

12) **Non-performers**:

0	1	2	3

Being clear to non-performers; Working with difficult/non-performing/ challenging employees.

I need to ....

13) **Change**:

0	1	2	3

Trying out new ways of working; Coping with change resistance.

I need to ....

14) **Information flow/control**:

0	1	2	3

Sharing information; Controlling information flow in order not to waste anybody's time; Presenting information that is not popular.

I need to ....

15)

0	1	2	3

I need to ....

16)

0	1	2	3

I need to ....

17)

0	1	2	3

I need to ....

18)

0	1	2	3

I need to ....