



BUILDING LEADERS FROM WITHIN

Invest in Potential to Stay Ahead

By Anthony Schoettle

At a time when 11,000 Baby Boomers are retiring every day in the U.S., and competition to attract talent – and efforts to retain it – have never been more intense, developing emerging business leaders is more critical than ever. It has crossed the line from important to imperative for the survival of Hoosier businesses across various sectors.

Developing emerging business leaders is essential to building a robust talent pipeline, improving retention and driving innovation. It ensures continuity during leadership transitions, fosters a culture of high performance and agility and equips new managers with the necessary skills to drive strategy execution in a rapidly evolving market.

There's been a shift in the last decade, leadership development experts note, from responsibilities put on the shoulders of the workers themselves or even community-driven leadership initiatives to in-house corporate-led programs.

In fact, much of the onus to develop new leaders is on the businesses themselves, says Mitch Isaacs, executive director of Shafer Leadership Academy, a Muncie-based organization that provides inclusive leadership

training, workshops and development programs to individuals, organizations and communities.

“Companies need to grow their own,” he stresses. “Companies have to show their employees they recognize potential and are willing to invest in them.”

That might be easier said than done, especially for small and mid-sized firms, Isaacs admits.

“The biggest challenge is almost never money. It’s time. Training has always fallen in the important bucket, but rarely urgent. With everything happening in the talent market, that’s starting to change – and more companies are recognizing and coming to grips with it.”

Big picture

The importance of identifying and nurturing tomorrow’s potential leaders has an impact beyond individual businesses.

“Keeping talent is not just important for individual companies, but for the state as a whole,” Isaacs offers. “This is a serious economic development issue. If we fall behind on recruitment, retention and training of emerging leaders, our entire statewide economy will suffer.”

Companies aren’t in this battle alone. Local chambers of commerce too are championing the development of emerging leaders and developing programs to make sure their communities are stocked with talent.



(Left to right) Andrea Butcher, founder of Abundant Empowerment, advises companies to provide emerging leaders a psychologically safe environment to grow and give that process several months to blossom. BHI Senior Living, in the last year, has developed a structured leadership development program for its employees. Shafer Leadership Academy's Mitch Isaacs says leadership development is a key employee attraction tool.

“Business attraction and economic development are not just about beautiful places and nice amenities. It’s about people,” Isaacs emphasizes. “Increasingly, local chambers see the value in investing in emerging leaders. Chambers have realized people development is a big part of economic development.”

The Wayne County Area Chamber of Commerce is one of those organizations.

“With the number of retiring executives and Baby Boomers that are heading into the next phase of life, there are lots of positions opening up, and we as a community need to develop leaders,” says Melissa Vance, president and CEO of Wayne County Area Chamber of Commerce, which serves Richmond, Centerville, Cambridge City and Hagerstown.

“Time is of the essence, especially for small businesses. When business owners and executives are retiring, if there isn’t someone ready to take their place, it’s possible the business could go away. And that’s a big loss for a county. Even for the larger businesses, this is a real risk. If you don’t have the right people in the right place at the right time, you’re not going to be successful.”

Start now

The task of identifying emerging leaders and developing them can seem overwhelming, says Andrea Butcher, founder and chief visionary officer at Abundant Empowerment, an Indianapolis based leadership development and consulting firm that works with individuals, teams and organizations to strengthen leadership capacity and workplace culture.

“Companies can start where they are and take small steps if need be,” Butcher says. “They shouldn’t be inhibited by the feeling they need to take this on all at once. The key is to get started in some way.”

The first critical step is to identify potential early. That could even start with the hiring process.

Emerging leaders are often strong individual contributors who show curiosity, initiative and influence among peers, Butcher explains. Company officials should look beyond performance metrics to behaviors like problem solving, collaboration and emotional intelligence, she adds. Encouraging self nomination can also surface talent that might otherwise be overlooked.

It’s important for corporate executives looking to develop the next line of company leaders to understand that leadership and management aren’t necessarily the same thing.

“Leadership is the head and the heart. Leadership is the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations,” Butcher

imparts. “It’s not about management; it’s about getting people to feel something and move.”

Some leadership traits and skills are innate, but some are learned and most – if not all – can be developed. Leadership skills are a mix of hard skills such as strategy development and decision-making and softer skills such as empathy and understanding.

Butcher adds, “There are core leadership skills that translate across industries.”

Structure needed

BHI Senior Living Inc., an Indianapolis-based senior living organization that operates facilities providing a full continuum of care for older adults across Indiana, Michigan and Ohio, has long sought to develop emerging leaders. But until the last year, a key element was missing.

“The desire was always there. The structure around it wasn’t necessarily there,” explains Jeannie Ambler, Senior Living Inc. vice president of human resources. “So, it was, ‘Hey, go to this conference or read this book or have this conversation or we’re going to throw you into the deep end and hope you can swim.’ None of those are bad things to do. We just didn’t have the structure in place. And over the past year, we’ve developed this really phenomenal leader development structure that has separate components.”

Those components are designed for leaders at various points along their career path, from new leader to established executive.

When Ambler was hired at BHI in 2021, there was a desire by the organization’s top brass and board members to expand the human resources department beyond its traditional role of handling things like hiring, on-boarding, health insurance and time off. BHI officials wanted the HR staff to be involved in leadership development, which they were convinced would help with talent attraction and retention.

“We are doing this because we want to differentiate ourselves from others in the talent market, not only our direct competitors, but those outside (our sector), because we really feel like we’re competing against most organizations in the talent market,” Ambler says.

“We need to bring the right people in and help them to grow and become the leaders they want to be. And then we need to ensure that we retain that top talent as well. And we know if we are not doing the development, then it might not be getting done at all. And likely, the folks that are here are going to start looking elsewhere for where they can get that type of opportunity to grow and thrive.”

In east central Indiana, businesses can look to the Wayne County



Every one of First Merchants Bank's 2,200 employees has the opportunity to work with bank leaders on a personal career growth plan tailored just for them.

Area Chamber for support and structure in developing employees.

In 2021, the group initiated Wayne County Leads, a 12-week leadership academy designed to prepare emerging leaders aged roughly 21 to 40 to take on influential roles in business, government and the non-profit sector within Wayne County.

"We've seen year after year, people in that program move into leadership positions," Vance states.

The Wayne County Chamber also partnered with a leadership consultancy and joined forces with local higher education institutions including Indiana University East and Ivy Tech, so its emerging leaders can earn leadership certificates and degrees. Vance also has encouraged her own staff to attend the leadership training courses.

"We've really pushed hard on this effort in the last five years," Vance emphasizes. "We're continually looking at the emerging trends and needs so we can continue to support our members with the tools and talent they need to prosper well into the future."

Learning on the job

A.J. Walker, First Merchants Bank vice president and talent development partner, believes leadership is often "learned by doing."

Many corporate executives and HR managers develop their employees' leadership skills by assigning stretch projects – such as leading a cross functional team, managing a pilot program or presenting to senior leaders. These are experiences that help emerging leaders build confidence and decision making skills, Walker notes. They should come with clear expectations and support, not trial by fire, he adds.

Workshops and online courses are valuable, but they're most effective when paired with immediate application. Businesses working to develop younger workers should focus on core leadership skills like communication, delegation, feedback and conflict management – and give participants space to practice them in real scenarios, according to leadership development experts.

First Merchants, which is headquartered in Muncie and has a strong presence in Indianapolis, runs a robust and intentional internal leadership development program.

"Talent development is something we really pride ourselves on," Walker states. "It's very important to us that our employees are able to really prosper in their roles."

"It starts with a career growth plan. We look at where the employee is today, where they see themselves in the future and we have

them work with bank leaders to close that gap. Every single one of our employees has the opportunity to have a career growth plan."

First Merchants Bank, which has 2,200 employees, models its leadership development programs after larger, often blue-chip companies, explains Walker, but tailors those programs in a way that works specifically for the bank and its employees. First Merchants also uses tools like the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, a personality assessment tool designed to help people understand their preferences in how they perceive the world, make decisions and interact with others, to build self-awareness. "We do strive to be more toward the higher end with leadership development."

Mentoring and coaching

While learning by doing is critical, mentors and coaches still are critical in leadership development. "Mentors and coaches provide insight and perspective no class can replicate," Ambler states. Whether through formal mentoring programs or executive coaching for high potential employees, consistent guidance helps emerging leaders navigate challenges, understand organizational dynamics and grow more quickly, leadership experts explain.

There are several other key aspects to leadership development. For instance, no one is going to perform perfectly while developing their leadership skills. Development requires risk, and risk sometimes leads to missteps. Organizations that treat mistakes as learning opportunities rather than failures build stronger, more resilient leaders. Modeling this approach from the top reinforces trust and growth.

Consistent, candid feedback is another essential element, Butcher says. Emerging leaders need to know what's working – and what's not. Regular, constructive feedback – beyond annual reviews – helps them adjust, build self awareness and strengthen their leadership presence. Encouraging upward feedback can be especially powerful.

Emerging leaders aren't created in a vacuum. Leadership experts say development is most effective when it supports organizational goals – whether preparing successors, supporting expansion or strengthening culture. "When employees see the connection between development and impact, engagement follows," Isaacs affirms.

The bottom line, he relates, is companies don't have to wait for leaders to "arrive."

"With intentional development, coaching and opportunity, organizations can build leadership capacity from within – strengthening both their people and their future."

RECOGNIZE YOUR EMERGING LEADER

Do you know someone who is making a big impact earlier in their career? We encourage you to nominate them for the Indiana Chamber of Commerce's second annual Jackson Lewis Emerging Leader of the Year Award!

The recognition honors a young leader who has positively contributed to the Hoosier business landscape. Individuals must be 45 years old or younger and Indiana residents.

The winner will be announced at an awards luncheon at the Emerging Leaders Forum on October 7 in Indianapolis.

Nominations are due August 3 at www.indianachamber.com/emerging.

RESOURCES: Jeannie Ambler, BHI Senior Living Inc., at www.bhiseniorliving.org | Andrea Butcher, Abundant Empowerment, at www.abundantempowerment.com | Mitch Isaacs, Shafer Leadership Academy, at www.shaferleadership.com | Melissa Vance, Wayne County Area Chamber of Commerce, at www.wcareachamber.org | A.J. Walker, First Merchants Bank, at www.firstmerchants.com