

# Leadership Development - A Colour Cube Approach

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Human Capital M-Price Hack

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## Introduction

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Today's rapidly changing global business environment requires visionary leaders to synergise the people and get everyone on a journey. A top-down leadership approach is suitable for predictable and slower times. This style works well for a number of organisations and is a disaster in many organisations. The point is that organisations cannot always survive with few leaders in the top level.

With the current agile nature of global business, what we need is a nurturing culture. To enable this, there should be leaders across the organisation at each level to take it to the next level. Each employee needs to be a leader regardless of their position. However, breaking down top-down style overnight to enable a nurturing and agile culture can become suicidal. This requires gradual transition.

Many organisations already have leadership development programs, but most of them focus on developing the managers instead of nurturing leaders (Day, 2000). When leaders fail to nurture leadership talent, organisations fail.

One of the greatest challenges for leaders is creating the leadership-development climate and facilitating it. Each organisation has its own unique leadership demands. The leadership development programme should understand this and align with organisational principles. The program should be seen as part of the organisational culture. Leadership development is not an activity that should be outsourced to external consultants. (Cohen & Tichy, 1997)

In reality, most individuals naturally step up to the leadership role when situation demand and step-back at other times. (Pearce & Conger, 2003). This indicates that when more chances are given, people get more opportunities to exhibit and develop their leadership skills. The proposed solution describes a program which gives more opportunities for everyone in the organisation to develop their leadership skills.

## Traditional Leadership Development Approach

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Traditional organisations are structured vertically with different layers such as CXOs, Senior Management, Middle Management, Lower Management and Floor teams. These organisations also have horizontal divisions such as Marketing, Sales HR, R&D, Production, Customer Support etc.

Most managers in traditional setup are still concerned about power structures and top-down approach which brings incremental changes to position (Conger & Benjamin , 1999). When organisations put focus on internal bureaucracy, the focus on external demands are lost. In these organisations, as Kotter explains, management is more important than leadership. (Kotter, 1999). As a result, managers become stronger in management skills than in leadership skills and the entire team loses the direction.

Traditionally, in leadership-development programs, a lot of effort is put into classroom style teaching. It's about providing facts and information where they learn from external consultants. In this style, candidates get “information” on becoming an effective leader without much of “hands-on” exposure.

Three main issues observed in many traditional organisations are:

- Organisations put more focus on individual leadership development activities. But leadership development has three balanced layers – individual level, group level and collective level attributes.
- Traditional organisations have well-defined divisions - both vertical, and horizontal. However, there is a lack of focus on the ‘diagonal slice’ interaction when it comes to leadership development.
- Social Relationship of people is very complex in a typical hierarchy and function oriented organisation. Informal relationships on the other hand, create a bond between people to become more.

## A Colour Cube Approach

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The guiding principle is that “Leaders should be created at all levels and are capable of leading the change and creating strategies”. (Conger & Benjamin , 1999). Empirical studies have concluded that cross-functional teams working across different vertical and horizontal layers often create a better output (Coghlan & Rashford, 2006). Studies have also proved that successful cross-functional teams engage in effective team processes such as communication and coordination. (Pinto & Pinto, 1993)

The Cube approach therefore focuses on creating small “diagonal” network groups across the organisations. A “diagonal slice” helps the organization to develop the visionaries and revolutionaries at various levels (Hamel, 1996). People are selected from different parts of the organisation from different layers to form one Cube (Fig-1). Ideally, a cube shall consist of 20-25 people randomly selected from different layers of the organisation who want to let free their imaginations and apprehensions.

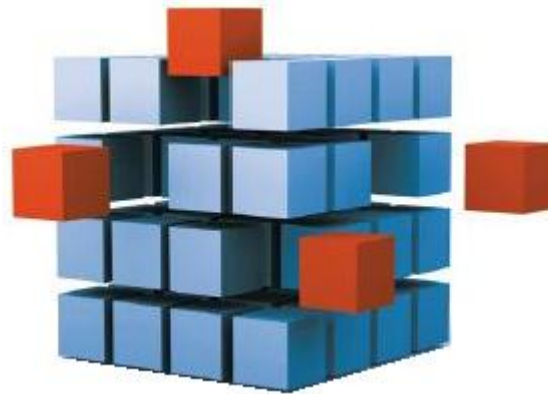


Fig-1: Colour Cubes **across** the Organisation.

Each Cube is the same in size and shape. Each individual in the organisation in this Cube are treated equal whether it's CEO or the Customer Service Representative. The Cube social system breaks all vertical and horizontal boundaries, but at the same time, keeps the entire organisation cohesive.

To ensure these groups add value to the organisational goal, Colour Cubes should be integrated with Organisational Values. Assume an organisation has four different values – Integrity, Innovation, Community and Customer Focus. Each Coloured Cube can be associated with each Value. e.g. Red Cubes can focus on “Integrity”, Blue Cubes can focus on “Innovation” etc.

Cubes are painted with Colour simply because colour is the principal cue to composition; the first thing humans look at for the information which tells us how to respond. (Wright, 1998). It is also a fact that visual atmospherics such as colours, sizes and shapes increases the ability of people to associate variables (Kotler, 1973) & (Aslam, 2006).

Once the network group is formed, they can pick the colour of their cube and all the leadership development activities should be aligned with the associated Value. The benefit of this approach is that values motivate the people and define the way they see the organisation and approach work.

In large organisations, there will be a number of cubes with same colour. An example of colour cube converted into a 2D layout is shown in Fig-2. To help the different cubes act in unison, different cubes of the same colour can organise events and activities on a regular basis.

Colour Cubes are characterised by the absence of hierarchy. However, they can appoint a Cube Coordinator whose role is to guide the member’s development and to stimulate the collaboration within the cube. The cubes will be required to complete a series of hands-on development workshops and other activities. Different Cube members should take different leadership roles in each of these programs. Everyone gets the opportunity to work with people in different levels. Members that are already in the leadership position can support other members to develop their skills (Cohen & Tichy, 1997). On completion of the action plan, the Cube is required to share the learning to other Cubes of the same colour.

The idea is that when people in cube work together on a challenging task, this will help individuals to share, learn and reflect the knowledge (Conger & Benjamin , 1999). This approach helps to develop individual knowledge and skills and at the same time enhances collaboration and resource exchange in creating better organisation.

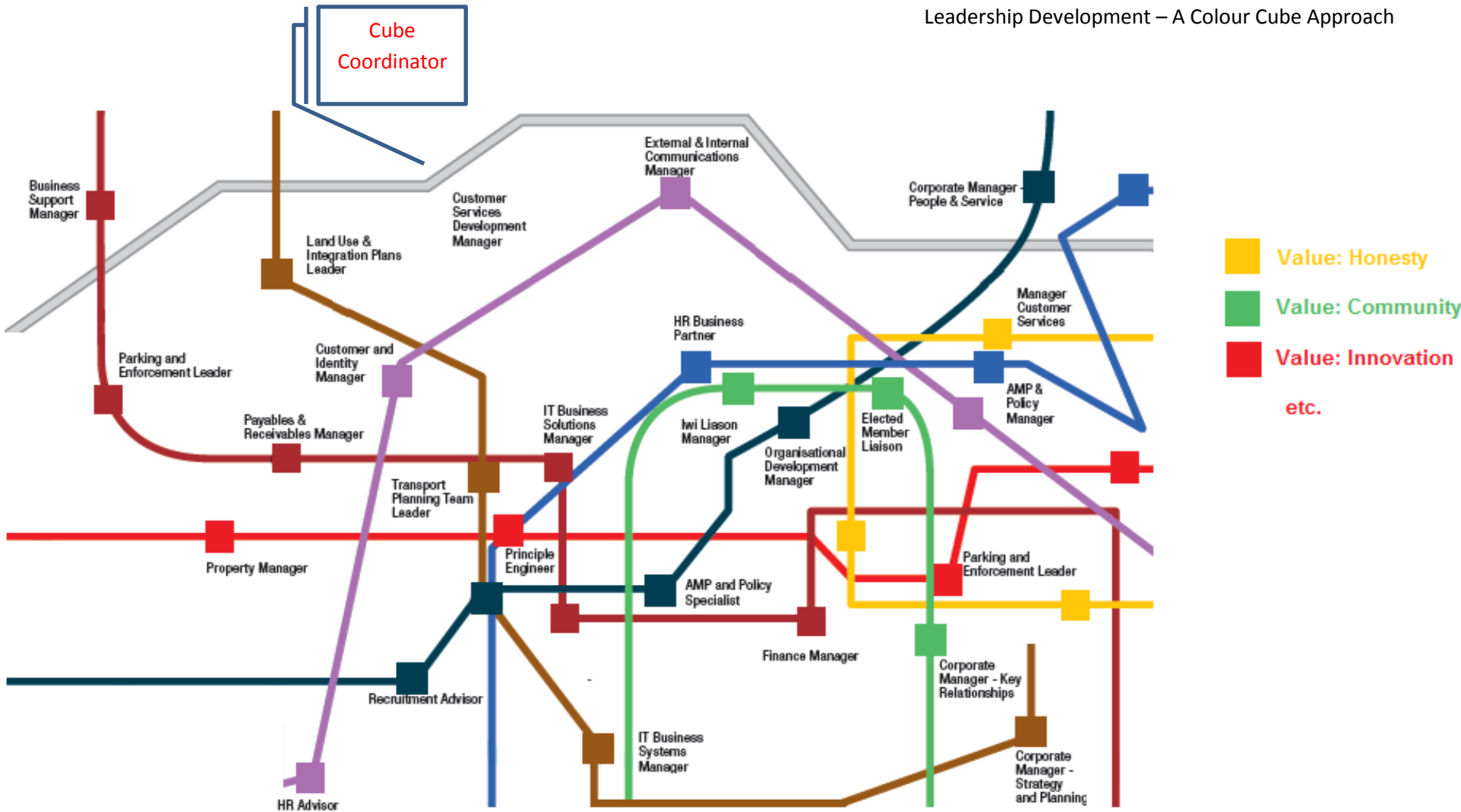


Fig-2: A 2D view of Colour Cubes in Organisation

[Note: The roles in this diagram are taken from Auckland Transport’s Organisational Chart.]

## Benefits of Colour Cube

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- Colour Cube leadership development program serves a dual purpose: Building Leadership Talent and Value Congruence. With the leadership development activity aligns with organisational values, a pool of leaders are developed with skills, commitment and involvement.
- The team can have a group leader, but he is often treated a peer. Therefore, it transforms leadership based on position to the leadership based on capacity.
- The Colour Cube group helps to engage dialogue across different functions and levels of the organisation. This helps the people to develop cohesion and understand the organisation's larger vision and values.
- In the Colour Cube approach, since the team is purposely created by breaking the team boundaries, there is no concept of incremental transition of position. The core concept is the incremental transformation of people.

## Success Factors

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- Establish commitment and support from the top-leadership team. Make this visible and early enough to get the buy-in.
- A common Cube objective. Association of Colour Cubes to Organisational Values help to achieve this.
- A time bounded, tangible and valuable outcome. The Cube Coordinator can work with the cube members to put together an action plan.
- Self-awareness as well basis knowledge of other Cubes. Cube Coordinator can assist the team on this by interacting with other Cubes.
- Regular social activities to develop trust within the cube and to reiterate the organisational values



## Challenges

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Colour Cube program will have members concurrently working on multiple teams. Time management for this activity can be a problem for many. To combat this, Leadership buy-in is required to officially allocate 5-10% time every week for this program.

Diversity in the team can be an issue when it goes through the team life cycle - Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing. Flexibility is the key to solve this issue. If one member wants to move out, allow that to happen. There are no formal structures or reporting lines in Colour Cube which makes it easy to do it.

Colours have different meanings in different culture. Assuming a narrow perspective to colour and applying it universally can lead to failures. Selection of colours representing the organisational values needs to be selected with careful analysis especially in culturally rich organisations.

Colour makes more sense for sighted people. When an organisation has visually challenged people, this idea needs to be carefully crafted to suit them. Extra measures should be taken to empower of them through education to ensure they don't feel demotivated.

## Conclusion

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When the world is moving rapidly, the conventional top-down approach is not enough for organisations to move forward. Each employee needs to be a leader regardless of their position. Under traditional leadership, most of the leadership development programs are still focused on the incremental transition upwards.

In the Colour Cube approach, leadership development activities make the best of employee's talents as well as their energies. Colour Cubes programme forms different Cubes across the organisation in different levels and functions. Linking the Cubes to organisational values, the programme helps the organisation to develop visionary leaders.

The Colour Cube program is not a silver bullet to develop future leaders; it's an enabler for nurturing leadership talent. The programme gives more opportunities for people to exhibit and develop their leadership skills. Once the organisation develops pools of talent, it starts to contribute to the organisation's success by having leaders at all levels.

It should be noted that the Colour Cube program is not a one-off event. It should be executed on a continuous basis to develop a nurturing culture within the organisation. With proper execution, the program delivers collaboration, networking and leadership development opportunities for everyone in the organisation.

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