SPRING 2008 VOL.49 NO.3

MIT Sloan Management Review

Robert J. Thomas

Crucibles of Leadership Development

REPRINT NUMBER 49308

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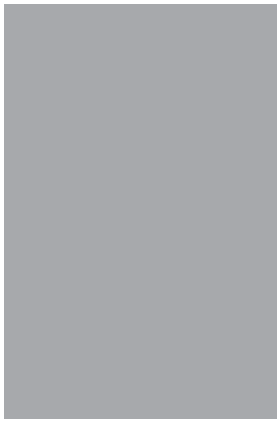

Leaders learn how to lead from experience. Formal training can help, but it's no substitute for learning on, and off, the job. While that insight makes intuitive sense, a wealth of management writing confirms it. Pioneering scholarship by Warren Bennis, Edgar Schein, Chris Argyris, Donald Schon and Morgan McCall has helped make possible a sophisticated understanding of experience-based leadership development.

Some organizations have taken this idea to heart. For example, Toyota, Boeing, General Electric and MIT (through its Leaders for Manufacturing program) have put programs into place specifically to take advantage of experiential learning. But they, and a few others, are the exceptions.

Most companies stay within a narrow comfort zone. They certainly encourage aspiring and emerging leaders to "get experience," to take on "stretch" assignments and to take risks. But they provide precious little guidance on how to learn from experience — how to mine it for insight about leading and adapting to change over the course of one's life. Organizations generally don't look outside their industry, or business itself, for new approaches. Instead, a banking model of learning predominates, that is, a semi-industrial process in which cost per unit is the key performance measure and knowledge is something deposited in aspiring leaders' heads for later use.

That's unfortunate, because organizations are missing the opportunity to develop leaders by integrating their life and work experiences, especially those experiences I call "crucibles." The reference is to the vessels in which medieval alchemists attempted to turn base metals into gold. In *Leading for a Lifetime* (2007), Warren Bennis and I speculate about the process through which crucibles teach leadership lessons. For that project, I interviewed 70 leaders in business, the performing arts and sports (and analyzed stories from dozens more) in order to understand better the dynamics of experiential learning. I discovered that outstanding performers, no matter what their field of endeavor, evolve a "personal learning strategy" — a recipe based on heightened awareness of individual aspirations, motivations and learning style — that enables them to confront challenging situations and extract from them valuable lessons about what it takes to be an effective leader.

Crucible experiences can be thought of as a kind of superconcentrated form of leadership development. Surprisingly, the best examples of organizations that deliberately employ such alchemy do not come from the business world. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, better known as the Mormons, and the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club have mastered the art of turning crucible experiences into leadership gold. And these two otherwise radically different groups have important things to teach business. Think of it as leadership development from heaven and hell.

The Shape of a Crucible

Crucibles can occur on and off the job. Some take the form of reversal — a death in the family, a divorce, the loss of a job. Others involve a suspension, an in-between period that people go through while in graduate school, boot camp, unemployment — even jail. A third form is the crucible of new territory, in which the individual is thrust into a new social role or asked to take on an overseas assignment in an unfamiliar country.

Consider these examples:

- The death of an employee at a chemical plant

For those learning to lead, experience trumps formal training. But some experiences matter more than others, as two unconventional but highly successful organizations — The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club — have recognized.

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that Jeff Wilke was running prompted deep soul-searching. Although Wilke had always prided himself on his analytical skills, he recognized that he and his coworkers faced events that could not be resolved through detached calculation. "At the end of the day," he later reflected, "leadership is about people, and you can't separate their lives from their work or your work." Today, Wilke is senior vice-president, North American retail, of Amazon.com and is widely regarded as both people savvy and numbers driven, a rare combination.

■ Decades later, a top executive still remembers the panic he experienced when left alone in the middle of a forest on a pitch-black night as part of a hazing ritual. That experience — both the panic and the calm that followed — has stayed with him through the years. What type of work has he pursued? He's a corporate turnaround leader, someone who deliberately walks into unfamiliar companies, in effect blindfolded and in the dark, and leads them out of the forest.

■ A young woman in the U.S. Army Reserve, trained as a medic, discovered depths in her resolve at a field hospital in hostile territory on the border of Nicaragua. In the wake of a hurricane and with her superior ailing, Sgt. Ling Yun Shao was left to run a battalion aid station alone. People lined up for a mile seeking first aid. Far from buckling under the pressure, she later called it "the best leadership experience I've ever had." How is she drawing on this experience? Her next plan is to start a clinic for immigrants who lack health insurance.

Let me be clear: Like all crucible experiences, these stories are highly specific to the individuals in question. I'm certainly not suggesting that companies should engineer frightening or tragic experiences for their upcoming leaders. However, I am saying that some crucibles can be deliberately set up, managed and exploited to help produce leaders.

Thinking Outside the Corporation

The Mormons and the Hells Angels follow that approach with crucibles of leadership development. And despite their manifest differences, they share a variety of other similarities.

Both organizations are large, durable, complex, multiunit, multinational entities that have grown rapidly in the past three decades. Both have closed borders and engage in selective recruitment of new members, and they rarely admit converts into the top leadership ranks. Yet neither suffers from a weak leadership gene pool. Each group uses a particular activity as a crucible experience for leader development.

For the Mormon Church, the most visible crucible is the missionary experience, a test of faith, identity and leadership talent that also serves as the principal growth engine for church membership. For the Hells Angels, it takes the form of the motorcycle "run" — an event remarkable in its functional similarity to that of a missionary tour of duty. A brief analysis of these organizationally instigated crucibles shows how they contribute to experience-based leader development.

The Missionary Experience With 12 million members, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is well on its way to becoming a world religion. Church membership has grown robustly since 1945; it doubled between 1985 and 2005. Missionary work is the principal mechanism of that growth. In 2005, the Mormon Church had more than 52,000 men and women serving as missionaries in 162 countries. Since missions last two years for men and 18 months for women, nearly 30,000 new missionaries must come forward each year to maintain that level of outreach.

Mission work — in the form of teaching, service, conversion and baptizing — is a critical component of a Mormon's spiritual obligation. But it is also a critical organizational function, a rite of passage for young men and women between the ages of 19 and 26, and a leadership crucible. It is a time of trial from which individuals emerge with a new or altered sense of identity — and from which future leaders of the church emerge.

Mission work can be compared to a corporate executive's international assignment. Individuals are selected and assigned, introduced to the culture and the unique requirements of the job, deployed and managed while on site and renewed or reincorporated with new skills and perspectives. Yet the Mormon process goes deeper on every level.

In each phase, the church emphasizes the acquisition of technical skills and learning skills. For example, before they leave for their particular postings, missionaries get intensive training in language, culture and pedagogical technique. These are not one- or two-day etiquette seminars intended to prevent faux pas. Instead, members are steeped in methods for reading situations, for judging the sincerity of someone on the journey to conversion, for resolving conflicts and maintaining productive relationships with their missionary companions (with whom they

will live and work for up to six months) and for developing the personal resilience necessary to withstand frequent rejection. Many missionaries keep journals during their time away and record their impressions, insights and lessons learned for future reflection.

An individual's missionary experience is a time not only for using new skills but also for testing, exploring and shaping his or her identity. Given the nature of the task, it's easy to see why. As one missionary explained, "You go to the door and for the 10,000th time you're greeted with 'Oh, you guys are crazy' or 'No thanks, I'm all set' and the door slams in your face." Missionaries quickly have to learn how to turn bad days into good ones and how to turn a negative into something positive. Support, in the form of senior companions, enables missionaries to navigate through uncertain situations and to weather the inevitable homesickness.

Return from the mission is a time of renewal for the individuals and for the organization. Special parties are organized to welcome missionaries home. Families are counseled to give returning members time and space to reenter an environment that will appear to have changed dramatically. Returning missionaries form alumni networks, often composed of church members who went through the Missionary Training Center together. The period after return also is recognized as an opportunity for reflection. The missionaries take the time, in essence, to compose a story that encapsulates the experience and serves as a "pocket guide" to help them deal with adversity and new situations in the future.

As a result of the mission, then, the organization has new members and a fresh supply of dedicated individuals who represent the pool from which the next generation of leaders can be recruited. The Hells Angels gets similar results from its own method of experience-based leader development.

The Motorcycle Run Alternately reviled and mythologized, the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club is perhaps best known for two things: its violent past — including murders, drug wars and gang fights — and its longevity. As an organization, it is a paradox: a group dedicated to anarchy that maintains a strict code of conduct.

Begun in 1948 in San Bernardino, California, the Hells Angels today claims upward of 2,500 members spread across 227 chapters around the world. Like many network-based organizations, the Hells Angels maintains a strong core leadership but a relatively flat structure. Each chapter has a charter and a clearly defined division of labor between the international organization and the chapters. And because many of its ventures are secretive and subject to external surveillance, it works to prevent organizational decapitation by maintaining a leadership pipeline. As the group has grown in number and complexity — it sells dozens of branded products, for example, and recently had to sue Walt Disney Co. for copyright infringement — it has demonstrated remarkable flexibility and stability. No mean feat, considering that large fractions of its leadership have been arrested periodically.

The Hells Angels shares certain core attributes and practices with the Mormon Church. Leaders are rarely recruited from the outside, and candidates undergo both a careful screening process and critical crucible experiences. The most relevant test? Demonstrating the ability to organize and successfully manage a motorcycle run. Sonny Barger, a founding member of the Oakland, California, Hells Angels chapter, explains the significance of the run: "It's a real show of power and solidarity when you're an Angel. It's being free and getting away from everything. Angels don't go on runs looking for trouble; we go to ride our bikes and to have a good time together."

Organizing a run is no simple affair. Runs typically stretch hundreds of miles along public thoroughfares. The extraordinarily loud and deep rumble of dozens (occasionally hundreds) of unmuffled Harley-Davidson motorcycles can be heard for miles — no small source of delight to the riders. Though legal in most jurisdictions, a planned run nevertheless attracts a great deal of attention from local law enforcement agencies and civic officials eager to divert the event if possible. Moreover, runs invariably cross territorial boundaries between different clubs, many of which are hostile. Fertile ground, then, for developing leaders.

A Hells Angel chapter leader explained this to me in vivid language: "The run organizer's got to figure out the route and who we're going to have to negotiate with to get it done. Sometimes it's cops who've got it in for us and don't want us near their town. So he's got to figure out if it's worth it to challenge them or whether to take a detour. If the guys in the chapter smell a little fear or whatever, they might push back and say, 'Hell, let's scare them!' So, he's gotta balance

a lot of things. Keep in mind, it's gotta be fun but it's serious, too, because we got guys that are on parole so they can't be outrageous. Unless they want to."

A successful run requires imagination, negotiating skill, a surprise or two (such as the selection of an unusual camping spot or night of entertainment) and attention to history. Veteran members recall past runs and judge current ones accordingly. Run organizers benefit from building on legend and venturing to create their own. For example, when two towns refused to allow parade permits for a planned run, one chapter leader discovered that bicycle paths could be used for legal passage.

A leader allocates responsibility for organizing and managing the chapters' motorcycle runs to men he considers leadership material. He counsels organizers to talk with veterans about what lessons they've learned from previous runs and to prepare themselves for contingencies, including accidents, brushes with the law and bad weather. The chapter leader shared his own crucible lessons with me: "It never occurred to me how organized we had to be in order to appear *disorganized.* We have rules about lots of things — like when we carry guns and what time of day it's allowable to shoot them. But you have to know town rules and laws, you have to be a lawyer to know whether crossing some county lines will violate a guy's parole or something. It opened my eyes even more to what it takes to keep your freedom to do what you want."

As the Mormons do, the Hells Angels make sure to capture the lessons from their crucible experiences by meeting after the events. Writing in *The Nation* 40 years ago, Hunter S. Thompson observed that the candor expressed in a postevent meeting was like that of a "group-therapy clinic." These meetings, according to one chapter president, are "an important part of a guy's education. Who else is going to tell him that he [messed] up but his family? We're his family."

Paradoxical as it may seem for an organization widely regarded as anarchic, the Hells Angels is exemplary in its use of critical experiences to grow leaders.

Lessons From Beyond the Fringe

Neither the missionary experience nor the motorcycle run is the first (or 21st) approach that comes to mind in thinking about how to improve leadership development — and that's precisely why considering them is valuable. The point isn't to replicate these experiences exactly, although clever strategists may want to think more about that. The key is to recognize that these two "fringe" groups (or "formerly fringe," in the case of the Mormons) provide several lessons about leader development that businesses should note:

- First, both the Mormons and the Hells Angels demonstrate how it is possible to craft or convert core activities to serve as practice fields for leaders.
- Second, they engage in elaborate preparation before sending would-be leaders out into the field. They teach technical skills, certainly, but also critical leadership intangibles such as a sense of the rules of the road, how to spot oncoming trouble and ways to preserve one's identity and sense of wholeness while engaging with others.
- Third, they provide a supporting infrastructure while members are in the midst of a crucible. Seasoned senior companions and supervisors are on the scene who know how to encourage and when to say no. Their role is not just a job: It's a statement of commitment to the individuals in need and to the organization's mission.
- Finally, they recognize the need for renewal in individuals and the organization. They invest in crucible events to foster a new generation of leaders, to enable the organization to replenish itself and even to expand its ranks.

These are not esoteric or hard-to-implement lessons. They will require, however, an openness to experimentation and risk taking in the area of leader development — perhaps the biggest hurdle of all. But as businesses continue to need a well-stocked pipeline of future leaders, and as more begin to recognize the power of experience-based leadership development, the necessary change in mind-set is more likely to occur. Crucible experiences, when properly set up, managed and mined, can help aspiring companies develop their next generation of outstanding leaders.

Robert J. Thomas *is the executive director of the Accenture Institute for High Performance Business in Boston and John R. Galvin Visiting Professor of Leadership at the Fletcher School of International Affairs at Tufts University. He is the author of* Crucibles of Leadership: How to Learn From Experience to Become a Great Leader *(Harvard Business School Press, 2008), from which this article is adapted. Comment on this article or contact the authors through smrfeedback@mit.edu.*

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