Translational Leadership for Organisational Resilience?

What is it and what implications does it have for the ‘training intervention’?

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Those leading organizations today are facing the challenge of needing to respond to an ever-increasing rate of disruption to their business by unexpected events that defy prediction. It is therefore not surprising that they are asking questions about the kind of leadership that best serves their organizations under these circumstances. Based on research into what makes communities resilient, Zolli & Healy (2012) claim that, among a range of factors, it is a form of leadership they describe as ‘translational’; a form of leadership that permeates the organization and may or may not be linked to formal roles of authority in the hierarchy.

Translational leaders play a major role in developing leaders; they strategically educate and connect those within, across and beyond organizational boundaries. The relationships required to adapt to change are in place before they are needed and enable the organization not only to ‘bounce back’ when under stress, but to adapt creatively to new circumstances. This paper describes the concept of translational leadership and identifies the limitations of more common forms of training in developing this capability. It proposes an alternative model which draws from a variety of fields and is referred to as The Target Practice Development Model. This model is directly shaped by the central role played by deliberate practice and feedback in improved performance. It is underpinned by the belief that simple yet powerful tools embraced by leaders can become part of a shared code of practice or discipline which underpins organizational interaction, enhances relationship building and supports sustainability in the face of volatility.
1. Introduction

In the context of accelerating rates of change, it is hardly surprising that resilience, or ‘adaptive capacity’ is emerging as a field in its own right. Drawing on both ecology and sociology, Zolli and Healy (2012) define resilience as ‘the capacity of a system, enterprise, or a person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances’ (p.7). It is the capacity, not only to ‘bounce back’ but also to ‘bounce forward’.

James Martin (1995) reflects on corporate life in the following way:

We are living in a time of profound change. The corporate death rate is increasing. Competition is becoming global and brutal. The corporations of the 1990’s must reinvent themselves or they will sink without a trace. It is clear that the rate of change is too great for many top management teams to cope with. Within a decade or so, fully one half of today’s great corporations may no longer exist … the corporate world has gone from the predictability of floating on calm blue water to a state of rafting down turbulent white water. (p.xi)

In response, and using a similar metaphor, Zolli and Healy (2012) suggest that

If we cannot control the volatile tides of change, we can learn to build better boats. We can design – and redesign – organizations, institutions, and systems to better absorb disruption, operate under a wider variety of conditions, and shift more fluidly from one circumstance to the next. (p.5)

In Australia, as indeed world-wide, we see companies downsizing and re-structuring in an effort to bolster themselves against significant fluctuations in markets. The manufacturing and agricultural sectors talk of ‘rebuilding’. ‘Future-proofing’ has become a buzz word with organizations preoccupied with establishing structures, processes and
systems designed to minimize the size and impact of the unexpected waves that come their way.

However, volatility is not the only challenge. A changing demographic pattern in the Western world means there is an increasing number of employees due to retire and a dwindling pool of younger workers available to replace them. ‘Between 40 and 70% of all senior executives will become eligible for retirement in the next five years at most corporations’ Gandossy & Kao, (2004). ‘The highly-educated professional employee is less a malleable resource for the company and a more mobile investor of his/her own intellectual, social and emotional capital.’ (Blass & Kurt, 2008, p.48)

So the question becomes: What do leaders need to be able to know and do that will enable employees and their organisations to ride the continual, undulating nature of the waves without becoming disenchanted and demoralized (and potentially leaving). How can they be supported to see the possibilities, adapt quickly and capitalize on the changed circumstances which Zolli and Healy (2012, p.7) describe as the ‘new normal’?

Zolli and Healy (2012) claim that, in resilient communities, they have found ‘translational leaders’ who have played a pivotal role in the organisation’s adaptive capacity. These individuals, regardless of their formal roles within the hierarchy, are central to internal capability and organizational sustainability. They become educators, mediators and connectors. Section 2 explores this concept of translational leadership in more detail, examining what it looks like in practice. Section 3 highlights some of the training implications of such a role. It discusses the challenges that exist in developing translational leadership in current organizational environments and the need to re-think the nature of training interventions to maximize the transfer of learning from ‘program’ to the workplace.

Section 4 proposes an alternative model which is referred to as the Target Practice Development Model or TPD. This intervention strategy is designed to address these
challenges. In this model, the individual exercising translational leadership assumes the role of ‘educator and connector’ and becomes the architect of learning – their own and others’ learning. Learning via practice and feedback becomes intrinsic to daily endeavours. Simple, but powerful tools provide structure for and govern organizational interaction. These tools become modeled and shared, enhancing collaboration and trust and hence, the speed and quality of decision making and organizational performance (Covey, 2006). This shared ‘code of practice’ becomes intrinsic to how things get done. This code of practice requires disciplined action supported by systems and processes. Relationships are grounded and developed within an ‘organizational discipline’ that remains secure regardless of how unexpected or turbulent the waves of change and whether or not those at the helm remain in place.

2: Translational Leadership Described

While many will be familiar with the term ‘transformational’ leadership (Bass, 1985), the concept of ‘translational leadership’ is less well known. When studying the important role that leaders play in shaping community resilience, Zolli and Healy (2012) discovered that it was not the typical charismatic, visionary more commonly associated with the transformational leader that emerged as the defining factor. Instead, they found a group of leaders demonstrating

… an uncanny ability to ‘work up and down and across various organizational hierarchies, connecting with groups who might otherwise be excluded, and translating between constituencies. The authority of these translational leaders was not rooted solely in their formal status but in their informal authority and cultural standing. (pp. 239-240)

Hence, the concept of leadership observed by Zolli & Healy is more akin to that of distributed leadership in which individuals assume leadership behaviours by virtue of their
own competencies and attributes. Translational leadership therefore represents a significant shift in orientation from that of the transformational leader. Both are concerned with integrity, trust, staff morale and purpose. However, the transformational leader remains more at the centre. In times of disruption or, indeed, his or her departure, the organization becomes highly vulnerable.

Building on the social network studies by Krebs & Holley, Zolli & Healy (2012) explain how the translational leader is initially at the centre of the network in a hub-and-spoke configuration but then commences building bridges between different constituents for whom they were previously the sole bridge. This reconfigures the structure into a multi-hub social network. It is at this point that the leader shifts from connector to facilitator, teaching ‘those they connect to become connectors themselves’. The ultimate aim is a core of strongly affiliated hubs at the centre of the social network connected to a constellation of people and resources on the periphery with weak ties. ‘The periphery allows us to access new ideas and new information from outside – the core allows us to action them, inside’ (p.257).

Translational leaders do not dispense with hierarchies; they recognize and respect their power. Instead, standing at the intersection of many constituencies, translational leaders knit together social networks that complement hierarchical power structures. Rooted in a spirit of respect and inclusion, these complementary connections ensure that when disruption strikes, all parts of the social system are invested, linked, and can talk to one another. (Zolli and Healy, 2012, p. 255).

When disaster strikes, our intuitive response is frequently to ‘tighten up on the controls’, ‘streamline’ and ‘enforce policies’ in a bureaucratic way. We see this in times of war or diplomatic crises and counter-intuitively this can stifle the very spontaneous innovation required. Zolli and Healy (2012) point to the unique nature of significant
disruptions – by definition, there can be no pre-determined plan. Hence, they see the need to embrace ‘adhocracy’ in which cognitively diverse players work together with trust and goodwill and commitment to core purpose to first create and then orchestrate a plan.

What’s needed is an approach that complements these silos of excellence and works in the white space between them, where resilience (and social innovation) is so often found. That’s what resilient organizations and their translational leaders do: they create the opportunity, connectivity, permission, and encouragement for people to meet in the white spaces (pp. 264-266).

Translational leaders need to know ‘when to let go’; they are seen as …’ connectors, mediators, teachers, behavioral economists, and social engineers’ undertaking their duties with ‘… candor, transparency, generosity, and commitment’ (Zolli & Healy, 2012, p.258). Their task is to build trust amongst different groups of people with different capacities so that they can collaborate effectively and quickly when it counts – they don’t have to build the relationship where there is none in times of crisis.

The work of the translational leader may not come easily. Many of those who have been appointed to formal leadership roles have such a strong investment in their own sense of ‘rightness’ and ‘expertise’, that their modus operandi is developing the vision and ‘calling the shots’. Their organizational knowledge, technical skills and their ability to ‘get things done’ have been all important in their progression to a leadership role. The need to shift from a strong task focus to the quality of the processes that enable the tasks to be completed is challenging, particularly under tight deadlines and KPI’s that all too often reflect short-term outcomes. While growing ‘talent’ is frequently included in the stated strategic priorities for organizations, Gutheridge, Domm and Lawson (2006, pp. 6-9) point to the strong resistance of line managers to the process.
So therein lies the ‘training challenge’. It involves developing a range of key insights about the holistic translational leadership role, the acquisition of linguistic tools supporting coordination of action, skills in supporting the learning of others and techniques for supporting collaboration within a context of diversity across boundaries in the workplace. At a deeper level, it involves understanding and managing their responsibility as caretaker of functional, divisional, or organizational mood in uncertain, ambiguous times (organizational climate) and, possibly the most critical of all, how to earn and build trust.

The program design needs to take into account the active, intentional educator role of the translational leader which prepares others to take up the mantle and to become the foundation for organizational resilience and ongoing performance.

3. Training for Translational Leadership? Re-thinking Design

The strong educative and relationship builder focus of the translational leadership role brings with it new demands. The translational leader needs a high level of emotional intelligence. This, of course, could be said of any leader regardless of role or style. It is essential to building trust, enabling others to respect difference and to work collaboratively within and across boundaries (particularly when it counts and in a time of crisis). Relationship building via quality conversations is at the heart of the work to be done. Leaders need to be mindful of the critical part they play as steward of the emotional health (mood) or climate of the organization and the power of contagion of the leader’s moods (Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2002).

However, translational leaders require additional skills – they are, in essence, an architect of learning. There needs to be a deep appreciation of the critical advantage that can be achieved for the business by attending to the quality of the learning process within the organization – developing and empowering others and enhancing the quality of their performance in the workplace.
These skills, as critical as they are to organizational performance, are frequently referred to as the soft skills of leadership. Zolli and Healy describe the vital role they play in organizational resilience and sustainability, but do not interrogate how they are developed. It cannot, for example, be assumed that an individual will be able to build trust, simply by being made aware that trust is important. Nor can it be assumed that a manager can acquire and improve on the skills of quality conversations without intentional practice and feedback.

It is our contention that translational leaders require a suite of tools or frameworks that are simple and powerful that can be shared within and across divisional or functional boundaries. These become part of an organizational ‘discipline’ and, as with any discipline, they require focused deliberate instruction and practice.

Figure 1 below illustrates the program content that might be included in a training program designed to develop the kind of qualities of emotional intelligence described above and support the work of the ‘learning architect’.
The program content outlined in Figure 1 is built upon a suite of tools or frameworks derived from a variety of fields, but in particular, although not exclusively, from the field of ontology (Sieler, A., 2005). They include:

- Personality profile tools for reflecting on the strengths of self and others.
- The linguistic tools for coordination of action which include Promises, Offers, Acceptances and Commitments.
- Quality Conversation Frameworks which include conversations for different purposes such as conversations for clarity, accountability, possibility or celebration.
- A Moods and Emotions Framework which demonstrates how moods and emotions are based on our assessments of what is and what is not possible, what is open or not open to change and our stance on uncertainty.
• A schema for ‘unpacking’ what trust involves and how trust can be intentionally strengthened.

• Thinking Tools that facilitate critical, creative and caring thinking to support faster and more effective decision making and improved outcomes in different contexts.

Selected for their power and simplicity, these tools are capable of becoming part of the shared language and understanding of teams, and indeed an entire organization. They provide a structure to the conversations and interactions that take place. Leaders who acquire these understandings and skills, and who model and practice them, will build highly performing teams both within functional areas and beyond. The work of the translational leader is supported by a code of practice or a discipline in which relationships are strengthened by a shared clarity related to how to engage with others, including authentic disclosure. Workplace interactions become intentionally multi-faceted; they provide a source of learning about process while getting the job done. Quality processes enhance the speed and effectiveness of decision making, job satisfaction and employee loyalty and generate the creativity that is essential to long-term sustainability. Translational leadership is as much about process and learning as it is about task completion. In times of crisis, established networks and a shared code of practice facilitates relationships amongst diverse players to produce swift, creative responses. They are embedded within the organizational culture and outlast individual leaders that come and go, sustaining relationships during turbulent times.

Let’s assume that the training program of the kind described in Figure 1 is exemplary; that it is conducted externally over a designated period of time and the leader returns to the workplace. At this point, the question of effective transfer of training needs to be addressed: What needs to take place to ensure that, not only are these understandings and skills not lost in the pace and realities of office life, but improved over time? What needs to take place if
the newly trained leaders are to actively ‘develop’ their skills further but also ‘educate’ those around them?

To answer this question, we draw from the literature on effective learning. We know, for example, that the most powerful factor in learning is ‘feedback’ – timely, constructive, relevant feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). We also know that improved performance is highly dependent on practice – not just repetition, but deliberate practice paired with quality feedback (Lemov, Woolway & Yezzi, 2012). The work of Malcolm Gladwell (2008, p.208) in the ‘Outliers’ reinforces what researchers have known for some time – when compared to the role of preparation, talent plays less of a role in achievement than we tend to think.

There are some important messages arising from this research regarding practice. Those working in education, the arts and sports have known the power of practice (and effective feedback) for some time. Lemov et. al. (2012), points out that ‘Deliberately engineered and designed, practice can revolutionize our most important endeavors …’.

However, as the same authors are at pains to point out ‘practice doesn’t make perfect’. …‘You can practice shooting eight hours a day, but if your technique is wrong, then all you become is very good at shooting the wrong way.’ (p.5). Practice makes permanent.

So then we might ask the next question – if the experience of deliberate practice and quality feedback is critical for improved performance, how well are workplaces geared to enable this to occur?

Our response is – currently, not well. Let’s explore this further by reference to the work of Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Romer (1993).

Unlike in the arts or in sport, the workplace is not well placed to maximize learning:

Although work activities offer some opportunities for learning, they are far from optimal. In work activities, the goal is to generate a quality product reliably. In several domains, such as performance arts and sports, there is a
clear distinction between training before a performance and the performance itself. During the performance itself, opportunities for learning and improvements are minimal, although the problems encountered can be addressed during training following the performance. Most occupations and professional domains pay individuals to generate efficiently services and products of consistently high quality. To give their best performance in work activities, individuals rely on previously well-entrenched methods rather than exploring new methods with unknown reliability (Ericsson et. al. 1993, pp. 363-406).

Hence, what we see in workplaces are inbuilt tendencies for individuals not to take risks in the interests of learning, not to try out new behaviours and certainly not to subject themselves to feedback. Even the notion of ‘practice’ is challenging for those in leadership positions who have frequently risen in the ranks by virtue of their knowledge and expertise. Lemov et.al (2012) identifies the enemies of practice as pride, fear and self-satisfaction. They argue that practice requires humility. ‘It forces us to admit that we don’t know everything. It forces us to submit to feedback from people who can teach us. … To practice isn’t to declare, I’m bad. To practice is to declare, I can be better’ (p. xii).

A special feature of the training for the translational leader is to equip participants with the ability to:

- address an inbuilt resistance to practice and feedback; and
- build a learning architecture within the workplace, one which presents opportunities for deliberate practice and feedback.

Our reflections on the role of deliberate practice and feedback in improved performance, has led us to re-consider the underlying assumptions that appear to be implicit in the more common training models which rely heavily on external intervention. An appreciation of the
limitations of ‘one-shot training’ – particularly in the more complex areas such as leadership
development, has spawned designs that not only offer the initial ‘programs’ or ‘residential’
but also include pre-program reading, on-line learning support, pre and post individual
coaching, work-based projects and follow-up program interventions. While these training
components may have considerable merit, the program overall still has a tendency to become
‘an event’ in the life of the organization. Some larger organizations have virtually ‘adopted’
external consultants into their operations, rolling out leadership and other learning
interventions in an ongoing program in order to build shared language and understandings
over time. While no doubt these approaches have added to the effectiveness of external
training, they are costly; they continue to rely on the external intervention; and there is no
guarantee that the responsibility for ‘learning’ and developing talent within the organization
is embraced and owned by existing leaders.

Below in Table 1, we have identified a number of assumptions that appear to underpin the
training models described above and which rely heavily on external intervention for
continued program support. We have also identified the kinds of assumptions we believe
should guide the development of our proposed approach to training and one which is
described in Section 4 below. A key point of differentiation between the existing models and
the proposed TPD model are the assumptions made about the capacity of the learner to
acquire the learning, practice constructively in the workplace and model the skills for others.
The existing models place heavy reliance on the continued presence of the ‘trainer’ as the expert. In contrast, the TPD model assumes that the participants in the process can and do acquire the requisite skills and behaviours that are the focus of the training intervention and that they develop them further by intentional design of practice and feedback opportunities in the workplace. Modeling is an integral part of the process – first modeling by the external trainers and then by the participants themselves.
Table 1

Assumptions Underpinning Training – Existing Models Versus Proposed Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Existing Training Models</th>
<th>Target Practice Development Model</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conceptualisation of Learning</td>
<td>Learning occurs during ‘training’ and via exposure to external experts in discrete training contexts</td>
<td>Learning commences during ‘training’ but is intentionally developed and refined in the workplace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of Practice &amp; Feedback</td>
<td>Rich opportunities for deliberate practice and feedback are confined to the ‘safe holding place’ of the training environment and cannot be recreated in the workplace.</td>
<td>Rich opportunities for deliberate practice and feedback are not confined to the ‘safe holding place’ of the training environment. They are extended into the more high risk context of the workplace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capability of Participants</td>
<td>Participants either lack the skills, motivation and/or time to create their own opportunities for deliberate practice and feedback to continue the learning in the workplace. Follow-up to initial training is best undertaken in structured sessions run by external experts.</td>
<td>Once empowered by the training, participants can be expected to create their own opportunities for deliberate practice and feedback to continue the learning in the workplace. Participants become ‘architects’ of their own learning opportunities and those of others around them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of the Workplace</td>
<td>Workplaces are not amenable to ongoing learning.</td>
<td>Workplaces can be structured to support on-going learning.</td>
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4. Training for Translational Leadership: TPD Model

Figure 2 portrays a simple three-phase model in which deliberate practice and feedback plays a central role in learning – both in the workplace itself and in the ‘safe holding place’ of the more formal external training program. It represents a shift from the conceptualization of the external trainer remaining the primary ‘agent of learning’ in the development process to where the participants are empowered in the development process to orchestrate their own learning and the learning of others. It is a model where practice and
feedback can occur in the workplace ‘while the work gets done’ and hence, is a model which reduces the reliance on the external trainer over time and doesn’t depend on large ongoing amounts of ‘downtime’ when participants are taken away from their roles on successive occasions. It is a model which is presumes a high trust, highly collaborative relationship between trainer and participant. Unlike many external training interventions, the client (or participant) has a much greater stake or ownership in the process.

In order to capture this shift in perspective on the training intervention, we are describing this model as the ‘Target Practice Development Model (TPD) where skills and/or behaviours, are negotiated, targeted and developed in the course of training and practice occurs both within the formal training intervention and in the workplace. The TPD Model consists of three phases: Phase 1: Learner Engagement, Phase 2: Code of Practice (the Discipline) and Phase 3: Target Practice.
Phase 1: Learner Engagement

The Learner Engagement Phase (see Figure 3 below) represents a small-scale intervention with the individual manager in which the benefit of the ‘input/deliberate practice/feedback process’ is demonstrated in the workplace supported by an external consultant. Its primary purpose is to actively engage the manager in key aspects of the learning program which follows in Phase 2. It involves modeling the use of relevant tools or frameworks depending on the imperatives for action in the participant’s workplace.

A range of workplace interactions, both formal and informal, could potentially become the focus for attention in this first phase of learner engagement. For the purpose of this discussion, we use ‘meeting design’ as an example, as meetings present frequent and powerful forums for deliberate practice and improved performance. It is via conversation that things get done (Sieler, 2005 Ch. 9) and much of this conversation occurs in meetings. In the Phase 1 intervention, the focus might be derived from the manager identifying the need to find a creative solution to an enduring problem. The external consultant and manager agree on this as a point of focus for the meeting; the external consultant proposes and models the
use of a creative thinking tool and debriefs the quality of the meeting process with the manager and/or the team.

Figure 3.

*Phase 1: Learner Engagement*

This Learning Engagement phase brings with it a number of advantages:

- It is small-scale and low risk. Managers can gain some insight into the nature of the training intervention and the benefits of deliberate practice and feedback. It assists in building engagement.

- While the pre-work does require a planning design meeting, there is minimal interruption to the work to be done. Hence, it doesn’t loom large as taking significant time away from the task but begins to direct participants to the importance of well-planned processes and the rich opportunity for learning such processes provide in the workplace environment.

- The manager will be seen by their direct reports as ‘willing to learn’.
**Phase 2: Code of Practice (the Discipline)**

The Code of Practice is a learning program conducted outside the workplace context. It provides individuals with the opportunity to take time out to reflect, gain new insights, practice new skills and gain feedback in a ‘safe holding place’ where taking risks in the interests of learning is actively encouraged. Figure 1 above has captured the kinds of content areas (examples only) that might be included in such a program designed to develop translational leadership and the concept of leaders developing leaders via the intentional design of learning opportunities.

The actual design and delivery of these content areas is heavily informed by the field of ‘ontology’ or study of our ‘way of being’ which is the study of and interaction between language, moods/emotions and body. In addition, it allows participants to think through how learning experiences can become an integral part of the fabric of their organizational functioning without undermining the need to complete tasks and ‘deliver on time’. The Code of Practice is designed to enable participants to:

- gain an understanding of and experience with key tools and frameworks that can be directly used to improve their own leadership and their development of others; and
- develop their own strategies for transferring the learning into their environment (learning architecture).

**Phase 3: Target Practice**

Upon entering the Target Practice phase, the manager has a rich repertoire of tools and frameworks acquired in the course of the Code of Practice program as shown in Figure 1. The Target Practice phase provides an opportunity for deliberate practice and feedback on what has been learned by the participant in the safe holding place of the training context, but this time, in the real world where the stakes are higher.
Target Practice also provides an opportunity for participants to further explore their design for their workplace *learning architecture* with the external consultant. While learning activities and contexts will vary from one workplace to the next and over time, examples where managers might leverage the skills and frameworks gained in the course of their training program might include:

- Seeking feedback on staff presentations or proposal presentations to clients. This could involve both ‘rehearsal’ and feedback.
- Designing meetings using different ‘thinking tools’ and eliciting feedback from the teams involved.
- Asking individual members of the team to run a meeting using an identical or similar tool with their own team and providing them with feedback.
- Designing a follow-up session with a group or team within the organisation with the external consultant in which content is expanded with further opportunities for practice and feedback.

In the Target Practice phase, normal workplace interactions become vehicles for learning. With minimal effort, they can be tailored to have two distinctly different agendas, albeit they are both designed to achieve maximum efficiency, quality outcomes and organizational resilience. One agenda is to complete the task at hand; the other of equal importance, is to intentionally use the opportunity to enhance leadership skills, build relationships and support others’ learning.

5. **Concluding Remarks**

The concept of translational leadership with its focus on developing leaders and relationships across boundaries and constituents to build organizational resilience has prompted us to re-think existing ‘training’ models and challenge their underlying assumptions. In proposing an alternative model, we have returned to some of the basic
requirements of effective learning and improved performance and developed a three-phase training intervention, The Target Practice Development Model, which embeds deliberate practice and feedback into the workplace.

For some leaders, this model will be threatening – they have not been schooled in the art of facilitating the learning of others; they rely on the practices that have got them where they are now, practices which have more to do with command and control than educating others. However, there is evidence that leaders have recognized the immense power of spending the time to undertake this kind of role. For example, Lex Werner of The Limited, a chain of fashion retail outlets, found that the company’s results improved dramatically when he spent half his time on people rather than half his time on finances (Handfield-Jones, Michaels, & Axelrod, 2001)

We conclude with a quote from Jeffrey R. Immelt, General Electric (CEO), who when interviewed for the article in the Harvard Business Review (2009), was asked the question … “At your level of the company, what does a leader do? Immelt responds simply by saying … “Drive change and develop other leaders” (Prokesch, S. 2009, p.104).
References


