CIPD

Report
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Role of HR in selecting and developing senior leaders

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Report

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Contents

Acknowledgements

Publication information

Introduction

Good senior leadership is vital in providing organisations with the right strategic direction and oversight. But what are the skills, capabilities and knowledge that senior leaders should be equipped with? Specific contributions required from senior leaders can depend on context, so senior leaders are expected to take a longer-term perspective, set strategic direction and play a broader role in motivating people, more so than other leaders.

To support HR professionals tasked with selecting, developing or advising on senior leadership positions, we have taken an evidence-based approach to understanding current practices, drawing on academic research and practitioner experience to answer the following questions:

- What does good (and poor) senior leadership look like?
- What is the link between effective senior leadership and organisational outcomes?
- What practices are most effective in selecting and developing senior leaders?
- How can HR best support the selection and development of senior leaders?
- What organisational structures best facilitate this?

For the purposes of this research, senior leaders have been defined as those at an executive level in an organisation (such as a chief executive officer or chief people officer), and those senior leaders who report into these roles.

1 What is 'good' senior leadership?

'Good' leadership is a topic that has generated much debate and research. For an HR practitioner approaching the selection or development of senior leaders, it is important to reflect on what leadership looks like at this level.

Views of what good looks like are shaped through education, experience and context

Perceptions of good leadership come through exposure to different examples and theories, with leader and follower identities impacting these perceptions.

Exposure to theories

An individual's understanding of leadership can come from leadership development training, during study (eg study of leadership specifically or HR or a related discipline), through reading, social media content or academic sources.

Participants highlighted how learning about leadership theories (eg transformational leadership) through training exposed them to ways of thinking about leadership which subsequently shaped their views and the ideas they shared within their organisations. The academic literature reflects the leader archetypes mentioned by

the participants in more detail, though often these relate to leadership more generally rather than explicitly senior leadership.

Given that there are both a wide range of leadership theories and no single agreed-upon definition for 'leadership', different theoretical models produce different definitions of 'good leadership' (Barends et al, 2023; Alblooshi et al, 2021).

Table 1: Common leadership theories mentioned

Style	Definition	Study
Servant	Leader works in service of their employees and puts their needs and the organisation's before their own.	Eva et al (2019)
Collective/distributive	Leadership responsibility is shared among employees, with decision-making not relying on one individual.	Bolden (2011)
Authentic	Leaders prioritise being grounded in their values and operating with an authentic sense of self.	Luthans and Avolio (2003)
Transformational	An inspirational and motivational leadership style which cultivates creativity and a shared vision for employees.	Bass et al (2003)
Inclusive	Focuses on ensuring all voices are sought and heard, valuing and promoting diversity, modelling inclusive behaviours for the organisation.	Moss (2016)
Reflective	Leaders prioritise self-reflection and awareness through creating open communication channels where they can gather feedback from their employees.	Castelli (2016)
Purposeful	Leader has a strong moral self, a vision for their team, and takes an ethical approach to leadership marked by a commitment to stakeholders.	Bailey et al (2017)
Paradoxical	Leaders that can work within paradoxical needs by operating with an 'and' rather than a 'this or that' mentality. Sometimes linked to the yin–yang philosophy.	Lewis et al (2014)

Positive and negative role models

Participants said they had learned from observing other senior leaders they considered to be effective or ineffective, providing examples to learn from in terms of specific attitudes, behaviours and skills. One described the behaviour of two chief executives who addressed organisations during a challenging period:

> "One came into the room with very negative body language, shuffled onto the stage, looking physically deflated and talked about how difficult things were. The other approached this in a completely different way – they were positive and supportive, saying that they believed in the organisation and providing reassurance that together everyone could succeed."

The literature also reflects the importance of leading by example as a key part of good leadership (Bailey et al, 2017). Real-life exposure to different leaders can also be particularly important when guiding perceptions of female leadership efficacy. Literature shows that stereotypical perceptions of female leaders are less likely to be held the longer someone works with a female leader (Buss et al, 2024). This pattern further emphasises the importance of having diverse leadership teams where employees can experience a variety of leader role models and avoid negative biases.

Leader and follower identity
While research shows that followers' implicit beliefs about good leadership impact how they perceive a leader's behaviour (eg Liu, 2019), this often isn't examined in the context of diverse identities. Dr Nancy Doyle explains in her book, *Learning from neurodivergent leaders* (Doyle, 2025), that these implicit beliefs are often embedded within leadership theories, and that dominant theories don't consider the behaviour through the lens of diversity.

One example from our literature review demonstrates how servant leadership can be perceived by followers as less impactful when practised by leaders from minority ethnic groups. In this case, positive servant leader traits demonstrated by an Asian senior manager in an Australian corporate context were not perceived as effective because the manager's heritage was stereotyped as not one of power (Liu, 2019). Another example explores the experiences of black immigrant women leaders in higher education settings. It highlighted a tension between wanting to show 'relational authenticity' while in an environment where stereotypical perceptions require the need to repeatedly prove ability (Ngunjiri and Hernandez, 2017). This emphasises how perceptions of good senior leadership can, in part, depend on the identities of the senior leaders and followers in question, and that this can be impacted by intersectionality.

Considering gender, there are conflicting findings around the various impacts of good leadership. One systematic review focusing on female leadership saw that despite women underestimating their self-reported leadership ability compared with male peers, certain traits have a stronger positive effect for female leaders, for example extraversion, conscientiousness and openness to experience (Buss et al, 2024). Female leaders were also seen as having a 'qualified advantage', being seen as exceptional when showing levels of success compared with male peers at the same level (Buss et al, 2024).

Good senior leadership is grounded within strong relationships
Participants saw it as vital that senior leaders bring people together towards a common goal, so strong relationships at several levels with peers and stakeholders were key.

Literature suggests that female leaders are more likely than male leaders to adopt leadership behaviour which prioritises interpersonal relationships and a participative approach, though these differences are not always large (Buss et al, 2024). However,

for our participants, prioritising interpersonal relationships and taking a participative approach was seen as a key factor for good leadership across the board and they said a range of factors are key in developing these relationships.

Open communication
Participants said that being appropriately transparent through open communication was key to establishing honest relationships and building confidence among employees. This involved being open about goals, how decisions are made, and the expectations of others. Some mentioned authenticity, noting that leaders who displayed integrity and consistency were more able to build effective relationships.

Building trust
Participants saw trust as a critical part of building and leading effective teams, as argued in the five dysfunctions of a team model (Lencioni, 2002). Relationships with other leaders were noted as important, as trust and confidence underpin organisational collaboration. Previous CIPD research has discussed how good leaders are seen as trustworthy through being human (owning both their strengths and weaknesses), relational (consciously building and maintaining relationships) and personal (supporting the development of those around them) (Hope-Hailey and Gustafsson, 2014a, 2014b).

Emotional intelligence
Participants valued emotional intelligence and the interpersonal skills of leaders. This applies on a broad level as well as in having the ability to present a vision in a compelling and inspirational way, and at an individual level as leaders need to create genuine connections with individuals.

Emotional intelligence as a metric was included regularly in senior leader recruitment, as measures of emotional intelligence were used by many participants. Some literature shows that emotional intelligence is seen to be a particularly important trait for female leaders in enabling them to manage the paradoxical tension between their gender role and leadership role (Buss et al, 2024).

The literature also explains how undesirable interpersonal characteristics (eg lack of sensitivity, coldness) can be linked to derailing leaders, reducing their effectiveness (Conger, 2024). Leader derailment is where a previously effective leader demonstrates a large drop in performance (Conger, 2024).

Good senior leadership requires a range of skills
The evidence collected as part of this research highlights skills that senior leaders need to influence organisations and make an impact.

Technical expertise
Participants' opinions differed on the importance of technical expertise for senior leaders. For some, technical skills were seen as a foundation for senior leadership but would already be developed; therefore, more focus should be given to leadership skills. Others argued that technical skills were not important, as the role of the leader

would be to lead teams with technical skills and bring them together effectively. There was consensus that good leadership is distinct from technical skills and people should not be promoted solely on the basis of technical skills. How important technical skills are depended on the context of the organisation and the specific senior role:

> "[We] check you've got the relative qualifications. [But] it's more about how you how you lead… how you deliver, how you work with stakeholder[s]. So, we're [focused] less on the technical and more on the how." Kelly Angus, Regional Director of Workforce, Training and Education and Chief People Officer, NHS England – North East and Yorkshire & North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB)

Positive behaviours

Participants said senior leadership should be based on how people achieve their goals, rather than based on achievements to date. This included role-modelling positive behaviours (such as managing self, collaboration, taking an empathetic approach), demonstrating a values-based approach and commitment to the organisation, and ensuring that poor behaviour was not tolerated.

Participants felt senior leaders then could shape organisational culture as role models, so their behaviour is critical to their leadership impact:

> "Behaviours and leadership are a service… you're in service to other people… to those that you have the responsibility of leading. And actually, how you do it is all about you, because at the end of the day your behaviours are a reflection of who you are and what you are."

Strategic focus

To achieve the transition to senior leadership, participants argued individuals needed to make the shift from a focus on tasks to a focus on strategy. Instead of delivering specific tasks and managing teams, the required abilities of good senior leadership were based around looking at the longer term, understanding a holistic vision for the organisation. In certain contexts, this can also take on a more externally focused dimension, as senior leaders require a strong awareness of political and societal changes as they manage relationships with stakeholders, or work in a broader context.

Understanding of context

Broadly, participants agreed that understanding the unique leadership characteristics needed for a specific organisation is essential as organisational constraints and parameters may limit the usefulness of certain behaviours. This also highlights the need to recognise what would work, and when. Certain leadership behaviours were also more prevalent in specific contexts; for instance, participants from the public sector more commonly talked about servant leadership, collective leadership and distributed leadership.

> **Key takeaways**
> - Ideas about what makes up 'good' senior leadership are shaped by the theories and examples individuals are exposed to, meaning practitioners can shape these ideas through role-modelling and sharing ideas.
>
> - Considering diversity and the impact of intersectionality is key, as recognising 'good' senior leadership depends on followers' beliefs.
>
> - Leaders need to be selected for and encouraged to develop interpersonal skills that lead to strong relationships, as leadership is highly relational in nature.
>
> - Senior leadership requires a range of skills and competencies, but the precise make-up of this depends on organisational context, so practitioners need to consider how applicable models and concepts are to their circumstances.

2 Link between effective senior leadership and organisational outcomes

While demonstrating links between leadership and organisational-level outcomes is challenging, insights from both participants and the literature are shared.

Making the case for good leadership

Participants said good leadership led to improved engagement, productivity, retention and performance within organisations. This view was justified through examples of specific leaders, including those who had successfully turned organisations around.

For setting culture, participants also felt that senior leaders who 'set the tone' could enhance psychological safety or reduce levels of bullying and harassment. Participants felt that while there was evidence to demonstrate these links, HR was not always as explicit as it could be in building or communicating the business case for this in practice:

> "Without a question, you know that there is clear correlation… But sometimes trying to demonstrate [it] in a business can be tricky. But if you've got a good culture of trust, and open, honest… communication in turn, people are going to… feel more engaged in the business. And that connection then between engagement, motivation and discretionary effort and the work that people do, all of that… contributes [to] productivity". Nebel Crowhurst, Chief People Officer, Reward Gateway

Understanding the evidence base

In the academic literature there are clusters of research which consider the different theoretical leadership styles and their links to outcomes. This area spans a vast field of more general leadership research (not specifically senior leadership), and our literature review highlighted a small selection of examples (Table 2).

Table 2: Leadership styles and organisational outcomes

Style	Employee, team and/or organisational outcomes	Study
Servant	• Organisational citizenship behaviour • Engagement • Job satisfaction • Team performance	Canavesi and Minelli (2022)
Inclusive	• Business model innovation • Inclusion climate • Inclusive culture • Perceived effectiveness of cooperative problem-solving strategies • Project success	Moss (2016); Korkmaz et al (2022)
Reflective	• Workplace belonging	Caminong et al (2023)
Paradoxical	• Business unit level performance	Chang et al (2024)
Purposeful	• Job satisfaction • Work meaningfulness • Willingness to go the extra mile • Intent to quit • Sales performance • Lower organisational cynicism	Bailey et al (2017)
Transformational, transactional, paternalistic, entrepreneurial, cluster, developmental, strategic, integrative, political and CEO	• Organisational innovation	Alblooshi et al (2021)

The studies included in this review reflect a low quality of evidence overall due to the prevalence of cross-sectional and mixed-methods research (Snape et al, 2017). Despite there being a wide range of leadership styles, there are few studies consolidating and comparing general leadership styles and their impact on outcomes, which makes an overview of the most effective leadership style difficult to achieve.

One study considers authentic, ethical and servant leadership styles compared with transformational leadership (Hoch et al, 2018) and saw that each leadership style was related to individual outcomes such as job performance and trust in managers. It also found that where transformational leadership had a stronger relationship to job performance, the other leadership types had stronger relationships to trust (Hoch et al, 2018).

There is ongoing theoretical debate within the academic literature on description of leadership styles suggesting a conflation between the behaviours in characterising them (displayed by the leader) and in the evaluation of the behaviours (perceived by

the follower), which can make them vulnerable to subjectivity (Fischer et al, 2024). This highlights how intersectionality interacts with perceptions of leadership and raises questions as to the types of links which can be made between training or developing positive leader behaviours and their impact on outcomes (Fischer et al, 2024).

Key takeaways
- While there is research evidence to show the impact of different leadership styles and behaviours, these are divided up by the specific leadership theories studied rather than providing comparisons or a consolidated view.

- Understanding each leadership style can help to define the leadership desired in an organisation and map this to internal leadership competencies and desired outcomes.

- In practice, articulating a logical chain of outcomes from the leadership behaviours desired in an organisation to expected desirable outcomes can be shown through specific evidence, though the quality of this is limited.

3 What practices are used to select senior leaders?

Selecting individuals for senior leadership roles was recognised as being of critical importance to organisations. Our research identified several key practices.

Establishing clarity on the brief
Participants noted the importance of establishing clarity on the requirements for a senior leader:

> "These people set the direction for the organisation and the way the organisation operates – being clear about the kinds of people we want is disproportionately important." Toria McPhaden, Head People Services, RAF

Identifying missing skills
Participants highlighted that the process of setting out a clear brief on what gaps a leader could fill should be considered collectively by understanding what skills are missing within the current cohort of senior leaders and considering how a new hire could add value to the leadership team. Literature suggests both decoupling the attributes of the current leader and the needs for the future leader and completing a needs assessment or job analysis (ideally by an independent party) to gather information on the actual requirements and competencies of the role, both now and in the future (Biggs et al, 2023; Blankenship, 2022).

Understanding behaviours needed
Participants also felt understanding the desired behaviours was important. Being clear about both a leadership style that meets what an organisation needs and doesn't need, and selecting methods, questions or techniques that could be used to draw out those behaviours was key. An example of exploring behaviour in selection was discussed:

"When recruiting for director roles, as part of the process we involved members of the team the director would manage. While the staff panel wasn't a formal interview, it did give them the opportunity to ask questions of the candidates and provide input to the interview panel. We had some candidates express discomfort or withdraw because they weren't comfortable being questioned by people who would have been their subordinates. Straight away that helped us to identify that these individuals wouldn't be a good fit for the leadership behaviours expected."

Defining assessment criteria

Developing a clear brief helps define assessment criteria. To choose appropriate selection tools and to judge the results of the process, these criteria can be built from the desired skills and behaviours for the particular senior leadership role. These assessment criteria also allow for greater transparency for organisations with more structured processes.

Briefing headhunters

Headhunters are commonly employed when recruiting at a senior leader level. Participants recognised that a headhunter's ability to provide appropriate candidates depends on the quality and clarity of the brief. Furthermore, participants acknowledged that if an organisation were looking to establish a diverse pool of candidates, or wanted to prioritise representation from certain groups, an important part of the process was to ensure headhunters could meet those expectations.

Regardless of what criteria are deemed as most relevant for the organisation, literature highlights how alignment and shared understanding between involved parties is key for successful selection of senior leaders (Biggs et al, 2023). For example, it is recommended that selection teams openly discuss their personal agendas for the hire so that this is clear and does not impact decision-making further down the line (Biggs et al, 2023).

Building a holistic view

Participants said a holistic view of a leader's approach was important to assess their suitability for a role and gave varied recommendations on how to do so.

Using a range of tools

Participants used a combination of different selection tools as part of their senior leader recruitment. While formal and informal interviews were the most commonly used tool, psychometrics, presentations and job simulation activities were often used as part of the overall process. These methods were seen to be best in combination. For example, participants said using psychometrics, while generally not used to rule candidates in or out of a process, were a useful way to start in-depth conversations on their leadership approach and behaviours.

Literature supports that using multi-dimensional assessment and tools is considered good practice (Blankenship, 2022). They also have the added benefit of spotting negative behaviours, such as narcissistic behaviour, which don't always present themselves in interviews (Conger, 2024). Further, asking candidates to complete a written task may be a way to determine how clearly the candidate can communicate their message in different ways (Biggs et al, 2024).

Involving a range of people

Participants said they typically involve a wide range of people in senior leader recruitment processes, including key stakeholders and employees from different levels of the organisation. This introduces a range of perspectives, along with a combination of vested interests (such as considering what it would be like to work with or for a candidate and what they can gain from this).

Generally, participants felt acknowledging a vested interest due to roles can be a part of the decision-making process, so that involving a range of people still helps to build a rounded view of the candidate and how they might fit into the organisation. The most common method was therefore to involve peers within selection panels.

The literature shows that having a selection panel spreads the responsibility and reduces the potential bias which is present when one individual is responsible for the decision (Biggs et al, 2023) and can improve hiring decisions (Biggs et al, 2024). Ideally this panel would include an independent assessor as well as representation from more junior members of the organisation (Biggs et al, 2023). But our participants voiced experiences where involving people who would be managed by the individual has not always worked in practice. The literature reflects that practices like this can complement each other and minimise biases to ensure that the right leader is selected for the role (Biggs et al, 2023).

Assessing real-life application

Participants explained how simulations and presentations (with a plan for the first 90 days in role being a common task) helped to preview how a candidate was likely to behave and perform in role. By giving as realistic a test as possible, participants felt they could gain an insight into how the candidate would approach a senior leadership position, to supplement the more managed impression that they put across in an interview. The literature also recommends assessments which allow real-life observations of behaviour (Blankenship, 2022).

Understanding the personal connection

Participants described the importance of getting to know the person during senior leader recruitment and establishing a more human connection with individuals, as they contributed to the assessment factors.

Assessing chemistry

Participants felt an important part of recruiting senior leaders is to understand if there is the possibility of creating a positive relationship between the hiring manager, candidate and wider leadership team. Although this is a less measurable and tangible part of the process, the potential to work together effectively was critical.

Participants shared how informal stages of selection processes were often included, for example non-structured conversations to encourage a two-way dialogue. Participants felt that in a more relaxed atmosphere, they were more likely to see how a senior leader would behave in the organisation.

Understanding cultural fit

Another informal element of the selection process was understanding whether a candidate would suit the culture of the organisation. Based on a clear understanding of the kind of leadership behaviours that are both welcomed and effective in the context of the organisation, the selection process provides an example for assessing

whether a candidate can demonstrate these behaviours. It is worth highlighting that though deemed important for hiring senior leaders, <u>CIPD research</u> shows that seeking to understand what cultural fit looks like can lead to biases and diversity concerns in the hiring process.

Managing the tension with formality and structure

Reliance on personal connection highlights the informal nature of some aspects of senior recruitment. This contrasts with themes seen in the literature that say good practice in selection incorporates structure and formality, for example use of tools, competencies, assessing traits such as integrity and so on. There is less discussion on topics such as 'chemistry'. A CIPD report from 2014, *Cultivating trustworthy leaders*, explained how with the advancement of tech-led recruitment practices, HR practitioners were concerned about the overreliance on data and less on the 'personal', highlighting the importance of maintaining the relational element. One way to tackle this is for hiring teams to acknowledge the difficulty with assessing 'soft skills' or similar concepts, and agree on how they may deal with this up front (Biggs et al, 2023).

Challenging biases and adopting inclusive practices

More broadly, participants recognised the potential influence of bias in selection processes, and the need to challenge this. Participants noted this as particularly important during the relational elements of the process and informal stages, where they recognised that the tendency to look for someone who is like existing leaders or has stereotypical traits associated with good leaders (whether consciously or unconsciously) is a strong influence on selection processes.

Participants discussed tackling this at each stage of the process. For example, when clarifying the brief, actively questioning the assumptions of all contributing parties could help to identify and reduce the risk of bias. Later in the process, ensure panel members at an interview are briefed on the requirements of the role and charged with assessing against several specific criteria. Similarly, gathering feedback from exercises and even informal meetings could also be structured against the success criteria for the role.

Moreover, research suggests that as leadership teams become more diverse, these biases reduce in influence. For example, research shows that having female leaders in top positions increases the number of other female leaders emerging at the top and middle leadership roles, though the findings on the impact of quotas to ensure this is mixed (Buss et al, 2024).

> **Key takeaways**
> - When selecting senior leaders, first establish a specific brief on what the role requires and any other important considerations such as diversity goals. Second, it is important to ensure all parties involved are clear on this, including independent parties such as headhunters.
> - Using a range of selection tools helps to build a rounded view of a senior leader, including gathering views from a range of stakeholders, as well as using tools which are realistic previews of performance of job-specific tasks.
> - Establishing a personal connection and using more informal methods to build a better understanding of someone's natural style is recommended by HR professionals in practice.
> - Challenging biases throughout the process is key to ensuring equitable and inclusive outcomes.

4 What practices are used to develop senior leaders?

Research shows that preparing individuals within an organisation to move into leadership roles can allow current leaders to increase their impact while securing quality leaders for the future (Zheltoukhova, 2013). Participants also spoke about how development support and organisational planning can benefit both individuals and groups of leaders.

Developing individual leaders

Participants explored different ways to invest in the development of individuals for senior leadership positions. While this included structured development programmes, a range of wider opportunities was identified.

Establishing career goals

Many participants highlighted that it was important initially to establish what an individual's career goals were, and to consider the kinds of roles they were suited to, understanding earlier on if someone preferred a non-leadership progression path. Therefore, participants and literature agreed that establishing suitability for and aspiration to senior leadership was a necessary first step for development, rather than simply focusing on performance in their current role (Zheltoukhova, 2014).

Some participants expressed the opinion that certain individuals are 'born to lead', though they recognised this was a controversial view. Literature shows that this perception can carry risk, as stereotypes of leadership can exclude women and members of minoritised communities who may not display these narrowly defined traits of leadership (Doyle, 2025).

Building experience

Participants felt that for developing individuals for senior leadership, providing them with experiences to practise required skills – such as allocation to lead on projects,

secondments and participation in voluntary or additional activities that allowed for exposure to the wider organisation and stakeholders – was effective. Importantly, these experiences allow individuals to learn from both success and failure. Participants reflected that projects that did not go well provided as much opportunity for growth as those that achieved their goals.

Providing coaching and mentoring

Participants shared how coaching and mentoring were common tools for more individualised development support, providing a safe space which allowed for honest dialogue and a creative exchange of ideas. This included internal and external provision of this support to current and potential senior leaders, though use of external coaches was more common:

> "One of our senior leaders has had an executive coach for a few years now, and as they have developed a good relationship, the coach has helped them to cut through the noise, provided additional support when they have been overwhelmed and given them an alternative perspective. I honestly think that without that coaching they would not be on our CEO succession plan now."

Participants said identifying an appropriate coach or mentor (considering, for example, demographics of both parties) was key. Literature discusses the benefits of 'matched coaches' for underrepresented groups, such as offering female leaders mentoring and coaching with and by other female leaders (Buss et al, 2024).

Participants said it was important to be clear on the purpose of the coaching, and how the individual and the organisation would benefit from the investment of resources. Practitioner literature suggests that coaching and mentoring can build competence in emotional intelligence, self-reflection, systems thinking, managing change and working with complexity, and can be a beneficial source of feedback for senior leaders (Friedman and Psek, 2024; Institute of Directors, 2024a).

However, there is limited evidence for the use of coaching to reduce the derailing tendencies of senior leaders (Conger, 2024). Development work to mitigate derailing behaviours may work best with succession planning discussions or before employees step up into internal senior leadership roles – essentially, to be used as a preventative measure before the derailing behaviours occur.

Sharing feedback

Participants highlighted the impact of feedback, particularly in relation to structured approaches such as 360 feedback tools. Often used as part of wider development programmes, feedback tools were seen to be an impactful element:

> "One of my colleagues was technically strong, but very task-oriented and dictatorial, which meant there was a lot of fallout from their approach. As part of a leadership programme, we used a psychometric tool, which incorporated feedback from the team. For this individual, the feedback was devastating, and they were genuinely shocked at how people saw them.
>
> I remember the next Monday morning, back in the office I was shocked to see them stood up on a desk, talking to their whole team. They thanked the team for the feedback and acknowledged the impact their behaviour had had on everyone. This transformed them as a leader – from that point they

used that feedback to make a fundamental change to how they led their team and showed people a lot more respect."

Developing groups of leaders

Developing senior leaders often occurs in the context of supporting a group of individuals, whether this is an incumbent senior team or investing in a group of potential future leaders. Literature finds this allows for investing in the broader leadership capability of the organisation (Zheltoukhova, 2014), creating further impact from development initiatives.

Providing immersive programmes

Participants commonly mentioned intensive in-person development programmes, with some feeling strongly that this was a requirement at this level. These types of programmes provide opportunity for reflection, allowing leaders to critically consider their own behaviour and leadership development journey. While participants said this was not a guarantee of success, many related examples of immersive programmes that had supported development of new capabilities.

Some participants cautioned against putting all leaders at certain levels through the same training course, the so-called 'sheep-dip' approach (see Heery and Noon, 2008), while others suggested this was useful in some circumstances – for example, for someone looking to develop a particular skill across a leadership cohort or trying to create a change in culture. It was also argued that by creating shared experiences, groups of leaders could build better relationships through this sort of programme.

The literature discusses external university-led programmes for developing leaders and questions their efficacy. One paper (Leroy et al, 2024) suggests that it is unclear through which pathways these programmes successfully develop leaders, citing a reliance on positive student feedback rather than actual change in leadership or career path to determine efficacy. Vongswasdi et al (2024) argued that these programmes are not effective through developing the leadership capability itself but through a 'placebo effect', where the benefit of these programmes may come from giving leaders the space and time required to focus on their growth.

Defining multi-tiered leadership pathways

While this research focused on development for senior leaders, many participants highlighted that often this occurs in the context of a more integrated leadership approach. Providing a 'golden thread' of the leadership behaviours and style expected at all levels also created transparency of expectations on leadership. This related to development solutions, as some organisations had specific programmes aligned to different levels. Differing in scope between organisations, for those with an internal talent development approach, this allowed for an investment in leadership capacity across the organisation and an opportunity for individuals to work towards progressing through a defined leadership structure.

Coaching teams

As well as individual coaching, participants highlighted benefits of group coaching for teams at a senior level, being seen to support senior leaders in working together, facilitating collaboration across the organisation, and ultimately improving organisational performance. This form of coaching was seen to improve cohesion and ensure that within groups everyone had a voice and was used to solve problems, helping leadership teams work through specific issues.

Succession planning

Senior leader development formed part of an overall strategic approach to succession planning. Participants said the development of senior leaders was a consequence of an overall approach to build an internal leadership pipeline and supporting individuals with potential to progress. This was preferable to external recruitment across many organisations, as leaders developed internally had the knowledge and skills to succeed in the specific context. Therefore, participants said development of senior leaders was a consequence of taking a planned approach to supporting the progression of these individuals. This included in-depth work with specific individuals, as shown in the following example:

> "We were preparing for the CEO succession. We identified the CFO [chief financial officer] as a potential candidate and worked with an external company to run a development centre for them – looking at their leadership style, psychometric profile, gathering feedback from all of the senior team and running a strategy session. The CFO was blown away by the insight and came away with five specific things to prepare for the role. They have now been in post for two years and have been a very successful CEO."

Literature supports the use of succession planning (Hayat and Ahmad, 2024), noting that it can reduce issues with business performance and employee nervousness through changing leaders (Abernathy, 2024). Suggestions for this are similar to those mentioned for selection, for example:

- defining the ideal profile of the leader

- understanding future strategy and the prospective leader's capability

- assessing employees with the leadership profile defined to determine potential leaders

- supporting with understanding unhelpful leadership behaviours

- comparing internal prospects with skills outside the organisation to highlight any gaps which may need developing internally

- providing regular feedback and support (Abernathy, 2024).

Key takeaways
- At an individual level, development of senior leaders allows for a tailored approach focusing on understanding individual goals, facilitating the building of relevant experience, providing third-party support through coaching or mentoring and allowing feedback opportunities to create an environment for personalised learning.

- At a group level, senior leader development can bring groups of leaders together, whether through immersive training programmes or team coaching, both of which can have wider benefits than individual development.

- At an organisational level, leadership development can be integrated to create a clear pathway that offers structured development and facilitates succession planning as organisations can build their own talent pool for senior roles.

5 Role of HR in selecting and developing senior leaders

Throughout their experiences of selecting and developing senior leaders, participants were clear that HR had a key role to play in both delivering and supporting the process. Research also shows how HR practices can impact outcomes in this area (see CEBMa, 2025). Participants provided practical considerations and principled approaches, deliverable in different ways in different organisational contexts.

Promoting good practice

One role of HR was to encourage organisations to adopt good practice in selection and development processes, upskilling colleagues and helping the organisation to learn from positive examples.

Shaping a clear brief

Participants said a key contribution of HR professionals is creating and defining clear selection or development criteria. Recognising a general tendency to recruit leaders who were already similar to what had come before, HR were seen as a counter to this by supporting the definition of clear role or success profiles or developing competency and assessment frameworks that open senior roles up to new people who could deliver them in different ways, while achieving organisational goals.

The literature highlights HR's role in being responsible for providing complete and clear briefs for both internal selection committees and external consultants involved in the process of selecting and developing senior leaders (Blankenship, 2022).

Sourcing and working with external vendors

Senior leader selection and development can be more likely to include outsourced solutions (headhunters, coaches or trainers, etc), meaning a key role for HR is in selecting and managing these suppliers. However, participants felt that these relationships could only be successful if HR clearly communicated what the organisation was looking for and then managed this closely. Some participants stressed that headhunters needed to be encouraged to search more broadly and conduct inclusive searches, rather than relying on existing contacts.

Training and upskilling peers and leaders

With wide numbers of colleagues and stakeholders involved in selection and recruitment processes, participants shared that a contribution of HR was in ensuring that everyone was appropriately trained and prepared for their role. This included ensuring that recruiting managers were aware of good practice and would know how to conduct inclusive recruitment, as defined through CIPD research in this area. Similarly in development processes, to successfully identify talent, leaders and managers require support to have positive development conversations with individuals and need to keep an open mind on who could have the potential to progress.

Joining things up

A further role for HR was seen to be in taking a broader view – looking across the organisation and across the employee lifecycle to achieve the best outcomes.

Connecting departments

To secure good development opportunities for individuals and build a robust leadership pipeline, participants explained how HR plays a key role in looking across departmental boundaries. Allowing high-potential individuals to gain experience in other areas of the organisation and be considered for roles beyond just those they report into allows for knowledge-sharing across organisations.

Overseeing people processes

In larger organisations, participants recognised that the delivery of people processes is often delegated, particularly to line managers. Therefore, a key role for HR is overseeing these processes and maintaining a level of consistency. This is vital for longer-term processes such as succession planning, and in ensuring that development conversations and performance appraisals will ultimately support the development of leaders at all levels.

Creating a stream of great and innovative leaders, being in the loop of the social network of higher-level leaders, keeping in touch with employees, and implementing the design and delivery of succession plans are mentioned in the literature as being important for HR professionals to engage in (Hayat and Ahmad, 2024).

Delivering a good candidate experience

For selection in particular, participants highlighted the impact HR has as the owner of the candidate experience throughout the process. Certain elements may be delivered by recruiting managers, but in some circumstances HR speaks to a candidate the most. Therefore, at a senior level, the HR team has an opportunity to enhance the organisation's employer brand by dealing with candidates positively.

Bringing the challenge

Participants felt that part of the HR role was to be prepared to sensitively but effectively challenge colleagues throughout these processes.

Building in inclusivity

Throughout the process of selecting and developing senior leaders, bias can influence results, meaning leadership can remain only available to particular groups. HR can ensure that assumptions, bias and discriminatory practices are challenged, whether through implementing more objective processes and procedures, or challenging this with individuals directly.

Being a counterbalance

During selection and development, participants felt that HR added value by being a more impartial voice. As a slightly more neutral stakeholder in many decisions, they felt that HR was able to offer alternative views that considered other factors, such as what the organisation wanted to achieve in the longer term or looking for new ways of doing things:

"I'm often a challenger and counterbalance, especially when you've got differing views. If you have got down to two final candidates and views… may be differing, I am the one who asks what's the differentiator between them? I can encourage colleagues to have a look at their assessments and just see how they're going to show up as a leader."

Promoting accountability
Participants also felt that HR plays a role in holding colleagues to account. If selection and development processes were failing to deliver the desired change or goal, they felt HR should challenge this at a board level, encouraging honest discussion and critical reflection on why the organisation's way of working was not creating the change required.

Key takeaways
- HR has a crucial role to play throughout the selection and development of senior leaders, particularly in promoting good practice and enabling colleagues and external suppliers to achieve desired goals.

- HR's key role is creating an integrated approach, working across departments and processes to ensure prospective and current employees have the desired experience.

- HR adds value to processes by challenging in a sensitive and appropriate way, to encourage a balanced and inclusive approach.

6 Organisational structures and characteristics required

Selecting and developing senior leaders does not occur in a vacuum, with participants recognising that a range of structures need to be in place to facilitate this effectively.

Ensuring joined-up HR thinking
Linking together succession, recruitment and diversity
Participants shared a range of experiences and, in some organisations, different teams and professionals were also involved. They said larger HR departments needed to effectively collaborate across team boundaries to ensure that processes were aligned. In smaller organisations, this may be easier, but joined-up thinking is still required to ensure that succession implications are considered, for example, during recruitment.

Defining wider career and development pathways
Participants felt that effective senior leader development required wider career pathways to be established, allowing for progression through the organisation. This would allow for the development of future leaders, both within and across different

areas, facilitating skill development and critical experiences for the broad capabilities required at a senior level.

Creating flexible structures that give alternatives to people leadership
Participants also recognised that career pathways should also provide opportunities for development outside of leadership where possible. It was recognised that for those who were technically excellent but not suited to or interested in people leadership, having alternative pathways for advancement was the best way to ensure senior leaders could be selected for their leadership capability, rather than it simply being the destination for any employee who was valuable and wanted to find progression within the organisation.

Developing a positive leadership culture
Organisational culture which creates good relationships among leaders, demonstrates openness to feedback and promotes learning are most helpful for effective selection and development of leaders.

Fostering openness
Participants said having a culture where leaders were trusted to share honest feedback and facilitate two-way conversation was seen as helping to create a positive view of leadership, meaning more people aspire to leadership positions and see it as an achievable goal. Previous CIPD research has explored the creation of trustworthy leadership, sharing how the ability for mutual vulnerability between leader and colleagues is key to creating this culture (see Hope-Hailey and Gustafsson, 2014a, 2014b).

Fostering good relationships in the C-suite
Participants saw good relationships between existing senior leaders as a key precursor to effective selection and development of senior leaders. Being able to debate issues and call out problems was seen as key to creating more diverse senior leadership teams and processes.

Establishing a learning culture
Participants also felt that it was important in this context to be prepared to fail. This was seen as important in selection, so when a new hire was not successful, it can be acknowledged and learned from, and in development, to ensure that senior leaders could role-model how to learn from less successful endeavours:

> "[We call it] FAIL, first attempt in learning. You know, nothing's a failure. It's a learning opportunity and I'm trying to create the conditions where people are prepared to put their head above the parapet." Damian McAlister, Chief People Officer, Ulster University

Maintaining an open and flexible mindset
Organisations which are agile, open-minded and aware of future needs are most conducive to effective senior-level selection and development.

Looking to tomorrow's needs
Participants felt that it was important to consider the future needs of organisations and continually challenge thinking by looking at what leadership style and general capabilities would be required in the future.

Seeing what's possible

Participants said some organisations may feel unable to invest in leadership development, as there is a perception that these are high-budget activities that are only open to larger organisations. However, participants were keen to highlight that the principles and core activities were possible for organisations of any size, for instance through facilitating deliberate experience-building and coaching conversations. In fact, the literature shows that, as with other issues, the agility in smaller organisations and ability to take a more holistic approach can be seen as an advantage in this area (Zheltoukhova and Suckley, 2014).

Being prepared for individual surprises

Participants stressed that while many elements of senior leader selection and development followed a structured approach, it was also important to allow for individual surprises. Thinking about succession planning, this may mean that employees are capable of making bigger jumps through a leadership pathway, or that those who have not been picked out as having potential may be interested and prove to be the best candidates in a selection process.

Key takeaways

- It's important to take a joined-up approach across the HR function, and facilitate development pathways for all employees, including development into non-people leadership roles.

- Broader leadership culture will help to foster leadership development, including openness, collaboration and a learning approach.

- Taking a flexible and open approach will allow for greater adaptation to changing requirements and allow you to proactively invest in your leadership, no matter the size of an organisation or HR budget.

7 Recommendations

'Good' senior leadership is defined by context. Therefore, the foundation of selecting and developing senior leaders is to develop a clear brief on what the organisation requires of its senior leaders. As this can be influenced by assumptions based on identity, cultural values and personal experiences, challenging these to establish an inclusive and open-minded approach is an important step to avoid building a homogenous leadership cohort.

HR can play a key role in ensuring these processes work effectively and equitably, by taking a strategic approach to build leadership skills over time, supporting career development and bringing regular and effective challenge to these processes. HR also plays a key role in balancing the more relational approach that is needed both during the selection process and in creating tailored development plans, with the need to identify and manage bias and ensure that managers and leaders don't simply hire and nurture other leaders who duplicate current leaders and their approaches. Promoting good practice in this area is undoubtedly a challenge, but as argued by the participants in this research, it is a vital question to get right given the impact of leaders in these roles.

When selecting senior leaders:
- Create a clear specification of what the organisation needs from its leaders – and be prepared to challenge previously held assumptions.

- Consider the specific requirements of the organisation – leadership is about context, so what works for others may not be appropriate.

- Be prepared to take an informal approach and build a rounded view of candidates through a combination of methods.

When developing senior leaders:
- Be transparent about what is wanted from leaders – this helps individuals plan their careers and inform targeted development activities.

- Take an individual approach where possible – building experience, utilising targeted feedback, and good connections with coaches and mentors will provide more targeted solutions without needing a large financial commitment.

- Take a strategic approach and bring together succession planning with development activities to create the talent pool needed for the organisation's future challenges.

To establish supporting structures:
- Plan career pathways more broadly, including other pathways for advancement, so that leaders are selected for their ability to lead, while others still have opportunities to progress.

- Create joined-up thinking in HR and more broadly, supporting others in the organisation to play their part effectively – challenging them where necessary while encouraging good practice.

- Be prepared to challenge – changing culture, building inclusivity and adapting for the future will all require open and honest conversations and a safe environment to discuss.

Methodology

These report findings were generated by conducting interviews, a focus group and a literature review.

The literature review focused mainly on research published in the last five years and considered both academic and practitioner literature (24 articles: Abernathy, 2024; Alblooshi et al, 2021; Biggs et al, 2023, 2024; Blankenship, 2022; Buss et al, 2024; Caminong et al, 2023; Canavesi and Minelli, 2022; Chang et al, 2024; Conger, 2024; Friedman and Psek, 2024; Giubertoni, 2024; Haslam et al, 2023; Hayat and Ahmad, 2024; Hoch et al, 2018; Institute of Directors, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c; Kebe et al, 2025; Korkmaz et al, 2022; Leroy et al, 2024; Liu, 2019; Ngunjiri and Hernandez, 2017; Vongswasdi et al, 2024) as well as reviewing 11 previous CIPD reports (Bailey et al, 2017; Barends et al, 2023; CIPD, 2013, 2014, 2019; Hope-Hailey and Gustafsson, 2014a, 2014b; Hope-Hailey and Jacobs, 2022; Zheltoukhova, 2013, 2014; Zheltoukhova and Suckley, 2014).

In addition, we carried out 10 interviews with senior members of HR covering a range of sectors (eg aerospace and defence, construction, consumer services, education, tech, healthcare). Finally, one focus group was conducted with four attendees (covering public, private and SME perspectives). Key themes were generated from the analysis of the interviews and focus groups, which were supplemented by the literature found in the search.

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