INSIGHT ARTICLE NO. 1 · LEADERSHIP

Why Leadership Development Matters More Than Ever

Institutions rise and fall on deliberately developed leaders, and the federal government has largely stopped developing them.

CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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Consider two twenty-three-year-olds entering public service in the same month. The first is commissioned a second lieutenant. From that day forward, his employer treats his development as a mission: a basic officer course, then sequenced schooling at every rank, commanders formally rated on how well they grow him, and a curriculum, codified in statute, that assumes he may one day hold command and builds him accordingly.[1] The second joins a civilian agency as a GS-7. If he is fortunate, he receives an orientation, a mandatory-training checklist, and a supervisor too busy to supervise. Twenty years later, both may lead organizations of consequence. Only one of them was ever prepared to.

The difference between those two careers is the argument of this article. Institutions rise and fall on deliberately developed leaders, and the federal government, an enterprise of more than two million civilian employees, has largely stopped developing them. It promotes for technical longevity, trains when budgets permit, and then expresses surprise when organizations led by accidental leaders fail in unaccidental ways.

Leadership failure is system failure

When federal failure makes headlines, the coverage names the system: the breached database, the missed backlog, the collapsed program. Trace any of them upstream and the story changes character. The 2015 breach of the Office of Personnel Management's systems exposed the security files of more than twenty million Americans, and the congressional investigation that followed did not primarily fault technology. It documented years of ignored inspector-general warnings, unfilled security leadership, and executives who failed to act on known vulnerabilities.[2] The database was breached because the leadership chain above it had already failed, quietly, for a decade. Every federal failure that reaches the front page traces through a leadership chain, and the chain was forged, or left unforged, years before the failure it produced.

This is why leader development is a system property rather than a personnel perk. An organization's resilience is the sum of the judgment distributed through its supervisory tiers. Where that judgment was deliberately built, problems are caught at the level where they are small. Where it was left to chance, small problems ride the escalator upward until they are large enough for Congress to notice.

What serious institutions spend

Institutions that cannot afford leadership failure do not leave leaders to chance. The military's professional education pipeline, from precommissioning through the war colleges, is written into Title 10 and treated as force structure rather than overhead.[1] Elite private firms behave the same way for the same reason: partners and executives are grown through deliberate progressions of responsibility, feedback, and formal instruction, because the firm's product is ultimately its people's judgment. Across the private economy, organizations spent an average of roughly $1,254 per employee on workplace learning in 2024, and the most demanding sectors spend multiples of that on their leadership tiers.[3]

Now place the federal government's practice beside that standard. Civilian leadership development is thin, optional, and budget-cut-first: a patchwork of aspiring-leader programs with limited seats, executive courses that reach a fraction of those promoted, and supervisory training that in many agencies amounts to hours, not months, before an employee assumes authority over other people's careers. Training is classified as overhead, and overhead is what appropriations pressure consumes first. The government's own watchdog has kept strategic human capital management on its High-Risk List since 2001, with leadership and skills gaps among the standing reasons.[4] The taxpayer funds a two-million-person enterprise led disproportionately by people promoted for technical longevity and never developed for command.

> *Promotion transfers authority. Only development transfers the ability to use it.*

The formed leader

The American tradition has always understood leadership as formation rather than talent. Washington was not born the man of the Farewell Address; he built himself deliberately, copying out rules of civility as a boy and studying command his whole life, and his contemporaries trusted him precisely because the discipline showed. Eisenhower spent decades as a preparing officer, tutored by Fox Conner through years of directed reading and argument, before history handed him the command those years had constructed. The classical tradition behind both men held that virtue is habit: character and judgment are cultivated by repetition under guidance, never conferred by promotion order. This is the conservative case for leadership development, and it is simply virtue ethics applied to organizations. An institution that wants formed leaders must run a formation.

The objection worth taking seriously

The strongest objection holds that leadership cannot really be taught: the qualities that matter are selected, not built, and the corporate leadership-development industry is a well-documented graveyard of expensive courses that changed nothing. There is truth here worth conceding. Much of what is sold as leadership development is theater, a few off-site days with a workbook, and theater changes no one. But the objection proves the wrong conclusion. The institutions with the best leaders are precisely the ones that invest most heavily in developing them, and what distinguishes their programs from the theater is structure: sequenced responsibility, real stakes, sustained mentorship, and accountability for developing others. The military does not run seminars; it runs a twenty-year apprenticeship. The failure of shallow development is an argument against shallowness. It is the case for the deep version, and the deep version is exactly what the government declines to fund.

What follows

The prescription is not mysterious, because the model is standing in plain sight wearing a uniform. Supervisory authority preceded by serious preparation rather than followed by an apology course. Leadership progression sequenced across a career, with development a rated duty of every senior leader. Training funded as force structure, not overhead, and reported publicly so that cutting it has a visible cost. This institute's companion study, Foundational Paper No. 3, addresses the mentorship half of this architecture; the argument here is the premise beneath it. Every organization is a bet on its leaders. The federal government is the largest organization in the country, and it is currently placing that bet unhedged, every day, with the public's money. Promotion transfers authority. Only development transfers the ability to use it.

NOTES

1. 10 U.S.C. ch. 107 (professional military education); Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-433 (joint professional military education requirements).
2. U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, The OPM Data Breach: How the Government Jeopardized Our National Security for More than a Generation (Sept. 2016).
3. Association for Talent Development, State of the Industry (2025), reporting average direct learning expenditure of $1,254 per employee for 2024.
4. U.S. Government Accountability Office, High-Risk Series: strategic human capital management, designated high risk since 2001.

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