



Developing future leaders – some experiences and advice

OPINION

STEPHEN ALLAN, WORLDWIDE CHAIRMAN & CEO. MEDIACOM 30 OCT 2018

How do you find and develop future leaders? Stephen Allan, MediaCom Worldwide Chairman & CEO, shares his advice

Throughout my career, I've had the honour of working with some of the brightest minds in business.

Some of these people I have reported into or sat alongside on boards or committees. But as my own career has progressed, and especially during my time as MediaCom CEO, some of the most inspirational people are those I've had the opportunity to hire and watch develop.

Some have become leaders within our business such as, to name a few, Aileen Lagman,

Managing Partner – Head of MBA in the Philippines, Costin Mihaila, MD of MediaCom EMEA, Kate Rowlinson, MD of Worldwide Hubs, our Poland CEO Jakub Kossut, UK CEO Josh Krichefski and Andreas Vretscha, CEO of MediaCom Austria. All of whom have driven significant success around the world.

Some are now also becoming societal and cultural leaders such as Karen Blackett, who has been with MediaCom for almost 20 years, recently took on the UK country manager role at WPP and has just been appointed [race equality business champion](#) by the UK government.

These are the people who will define our industry for years to come. They will launch new services, create brilliant work, establish new initiatives and bring positive change to the global business community and in many instances, society as a whole.

They will have a huge impact and I'm excited to watch it unfold.

Nurture and unleash

It's an incredible thing to help nurture future leaders. In my opinion, it is one of the most important skills a business leader can have.

Building and running a successful business as CEO is a great achievement. But to maintain that, you need a great team around you and you need to know that when you move on or retire, there are people in place that can carry on where you left off.

Without that, can a CEO really be considered a huge success? I'm not so sure. I believe a truly great leader is someone who positively impacts the business now and in the future. Future leaders are the way to ensure that. Over the years there are a few key learnings and observations I've taken from my experience in working with them.

1. Provide them with the skills and knowledge needed

A common mistake is assuming that if someone has a certain amount of years under their belt, they will have the knowledge and skills needed for the next level. The more senior you

get, the more it is expected that you will know all the answers.

The reality is no-one does. To develop a leader, they need coaching and mentoring, as it will give them the foundations they'll need to lead. They may well have some of the skills already but finessing and building on them is vital.

Based on my experience at MediaCom, I'd recommend supporting leadership development with coaching such as [Chrysalis](#), which we supplement with training for all managers at all levels via our Mosaic training programmes and 24/7 learning via our company's internal Learning Hub. These are available globally and are consistent programmes that are prioritised across the business.

We also encourage people to step out of their comfort zones and broaden their horizons, and thus their skill set. Over my time as CEO, we've offered 700+ members of the team careers without borders by moving them around the world through our Pathway mobility program. The knowledge they pick up by doing this is often invaluable and helps them to lay the foundation for their step towards leadership.

Once they have spent the time developing the skills and their knowledge, we then mentor people to ensure they know how to put them into practice. It is a continual learning process.

2. Allow them to actually take the reigns

As a business leader, the instinct is rarely "let go of responsibility and relinquish control".

But to develop future leaders, it's vital we do this. It's a mindset shift that will empower the people and help to nurture them into MD, CEO or whatever form of leadership they're aiming for. The level of control handed over depends on the specific situation, but people need to be given something to lead or they will get restless and development will stall.

We have a few initiatives within MediaCom that help with this including our "Find, Keep, Grow" employee journey planner which maps out each employee's development. The idea

is that everyone at every level understands the opportunities open to them and how they can achieve that.

We then also support succession planning with annual 360 reviews and objectives setting which clearly lay out what that plan is. That will include giving people responsibility for certain areas to help them develop into our future leaders – whether that's leading a CSR initiative, taking charge on a certain client or building a team around that person. The point is that, as a leader, you need to think about the future and start to relinquish control to the brilliant people around you.

3. Believe in their decision making

If you've trusted someone to lead, it's vital to respect and trust their judgement. You need to believe in them and demonstrate that to them, and the people around them.

By all means, advise and guide them. As an experienced leader, this kind of mentoring should be invaluable to them. But ultimately, you cannot step on their toes and overrule.

That sounds easy but it's not; acknowledging that this doesn't always happen is important. As a leader, everyone has the best intentions to develop those around them. But when the going gets tough, or a decision is made which we may not have taken, it's difficult not to rush in and take over.

The reality is that it's one of the most frustrating and ultimately damaging things we can do. It makes our future leaders doubt themselves and their ability. And it can often undermine their authority. Ultimately, if you are entrusting people with something, you must believe in them. So, let them run with it. Encourage, advise, motivate and help them. But don't rip back the reigns.

Based on experience, this invariably pays off. Because ultimately, as much as it pains us CEOs to say this, we're not always right and our approach isn't guaranteed to be the best one.

Developing future leaders is about empowering and encouraging them. Give them something to lead and add your support to their decisions. Be their advisor and their guide and watch them thrive.

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