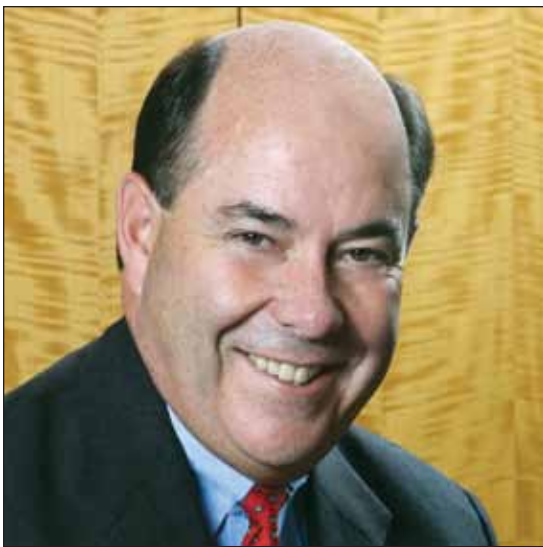# Leadership Development

**An Interview with J. Randall MacDonald,
Senior Vice President-Human Resources, IBM**

J. Randall MacDonald

How do you define IBM's approach to leadership and its focus on reinventing leadership development?

Leadership development is deep within IBM's DNA. We are engineered to think about leadership competencies within our workforce today and for the future. We're constantly looking at key leadership competencies that we expect from senior and emerging leaders, whether we have achieved those levels and, if so, how we can anticipate transformational changes in the marketplace to create value for our clients.

The important thing that has been ingrained for decades at IBM is that leaders teach leaders. Leaders own the responsibility of building the leadership of the future. Previous leaders took chances on each of us, so now we're giving opportunities to future leaders, and that has always been the fabric of IBM.

Does your global reach make it more challenging, and how has globalization affected your leadership development efforts?

For some companies, globalization can be a barrier to effective leadership. At IBM, we see it as an opportunity and a competitive advantage. We have been a global company for decades and do business in 170 countries. That includes mature markets, where the process of identifying and developing people has been in place for a long time, and growth markets like China, Brazil, India, and South Africa, where we are placing special focus on identifying leaders early in their careers. I believe our systemic ability to develop leaders across such varying markets and for a wide range of business challenges has been, and will continue to be, a competitive differentiator for decades to come.

In emerging markets, how critical is it to develop local leaders who have grown up in that culture, and how do you balance that with bringing in workers from the outside who understand IBM's platform and training?

Increasingly, we see lines blurring between global and local. We are focused on building leaders who can lead in a variety of situations and markets, and collaborate successfully across the world to drive growth for the company. We always prefer to use local leaders where we can. And when we do bring in an IBMer from elsewhere in the world, we make sure their top priority is building the right local leadership team as rapidly as possible.

Do you handle a lot of training and mentoring through technology, and how important is it for you to not lose the personal touch when it comes to these efforts?

For the first time in years, we have four generations working: World War II-era; the Baby Boomers; Generation X; and Generation Y. Learning through technology for some of those generations is business as usual, but some prefer face-to-face. So it has to be a blend and it has to be customized.

Learning does not necessarily have to take place in traditional classroom settings, although we still do that. We made a fundamental decision eight years ago that the vast majority of our leadership development would be experiential, or on-the-job. We give people opportunities to be on task forces and project teams, or shadowing environments, where people see the practical application of leadership as opposed to the theoretical.

What is IBM's role in providing training and understanding of social media to employees, and has that been a key focus for you?

It's very important, and our employees have readily embraced a wealth of social media tools that enable them to collaborate in global teams in real time. Social media is an effective way of networking and putting the concept of diversity of thought into action. IBM created social media guidelines for employees and we have counseled our employees to see that it's important to recognize both their own personal privacy and the privacy of others.

IBM has led in building a culture with a focus on corporate responsibility. How do you blend those efforts with your business strategy?

One way of looking at it is to examine our values – dedication to client success, innovation that matters for the company and for the world, and trust and personal responsibility in all relationships.

So when we think about ourselves, we think about our responsibility not only to our fellow IBMers and our shareholders, but also to society. To the extent that our work can link into society, it makes us a better company. The classic example of that is what IBM is now doing in the area of Smarter Planet. We think about that in the context of smarter transportation, smarter grids, smarter health care – all of these things ultimately are beneficial to employees and shareholders, but they're beneficial to society as well. ●