

UNLIMITED POTENTIAL

Volume IV, No. II

Newsletter

How Do You Develop Leaders? Practice, Practice, Practice

Leadership isn't just for leaders anymore. Top companies are beginning to understand that sustaining peak performance requires a commitment to developing leaders at all levels. Management experts Drs. Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard have defined leadership as "working with and through others to achieve objectives."

To meet the demands of today's fast-paced and competitive business environment, people at all levels are being asked to step up and assume leadership behaviors. As retired Harvard Business School Professor John P. Kotter explains in the Summer 2004 issue of *strategy+business*, this means we must "create 100 million new leaders" throughout society.

Companies are investing millions of dollars annually in leadership development training to meet this challenge. Results are positive: Studies show companies that excel at developing leaders tend to achieve higher long-term profitability (Marc Effron and Robert Gandossy in *Leading the Way: Three Truths from the Top Companies for Leaders*, John Wiley & Sons, 2004).

But it seems there are as many approaches to leadership development as there are leadership developers. An Amazon.com search for leadership development books reveals 12,580 titles. Most leadership programs have a half-life of only a few days or weeks after sessions end. Few incorporate adequate transfer mechanisms to bring leadership skills back to the office.

Programs offer everything from whitewater-rafting trips and bungee-jumping to encounter groups and 360-degree assessments. Executive coaching is a popular development tool, and companies are increasingly investing in these individualized programs.



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It is necessary to ask if any of this is working—and, if so, how?

Can We Really Train Leaders?

Which types of developmental activities will have the greatest impact on increasing executives' effectiveness? How can leaders achieve positive long-term changes in behavior? Lured by the promise of instant success, many companies are writing checks without asking critical questions about program design and actual accomplishments.

Leadership programs work very well if they use a multi-tiered approach. Most fall into one of four types:

1. Personal growth programs
2. Skill-building programs
3. Feedback programs
4. Conceptual awareness programs

Personal Growth

A simple premise underlies the personal-growth approach: All effective leaders are in touch with their purpose and passions, unafraid of risks and dilemmas; thus, if we teach managers to access their inner callings, they'll become more successful leaders. To achieve these results, the personal-growth approach to leadership training relies on intense emotional experiences and adventures that become metaphors for risk-taking.

Examples of such leadership-development programs include "survival" hikes, river-rafting trips and bungee-jumping off cliffs. Trainers believe we can create more leaders if we put managers in touch with their passions and power.

But can you transfer the lessons learned from jumping off a cliff to the office setting? Research shows these programs tend to improve participants' personal lives far more than their work lives. Learning can be magnified by risk-oriented experiences that challenge us to act in new ways and see things differently; however, the decision-making skills applied to a cliff jump are quite different from those employed at the office, where problem-solving is more complex.

Skill-Building Programs

The skill-building approach to training is attractive because it turns leadership into a practical, teachable reality. Program designers identify a key leadership behavior that can be taught.

For example, an offsite group may participate in

exercises or games, with one individual challenged to lead a team through a task, thereby practicing specific leadership skills (perhaps the ability to mobilize others). The task may involve building toy cars or solving a puzzle. The team leader is then graded on how well the leadership skill was put into action.

But certain skills are more complex than we realize. While communication skills can be straightforward, strategic vision proves otherwise. To truly learn a skill, one needs to spend considerable time studying it, experimenting, receiving coaching and making improvements. Most programs cover several major leadership skills in just a few days.

Despite these shortcomings, skill-building is the most common—and fastest—method of learning and implementing new skills. It should be incorporated in all leadership training.

Programs Based on Feedback

Feedback-based programs may also be conducted offsite and involve team tasks. Team members then grade each other on particular leadership skills, while supervising psychologists simultaneously rate each participant.

This type of leadership training embraces the premise that most of us cannot fully see ourselves. We may be partly aware of our leadership styles, and we possess varying degrees of leadership strength. We simply require a mirror to view ourselves more objectively, allowing us to act with greater confidence and overcome our weaknesses.

For motivated learners, this program produces positive outcomes. One drawback, however, is the risk of being overwhelmed by information. In addition, one usually self-selects the behaviors on which to work. While most participants describe a sincere desire to change their ineffective behaviors when they return to work, this motivation dissipates soon after the program ends. Many report giving up when faced with a lack of support and coaching on the job.

Conceptual Awareness Programs

This analytical approach uses case studies during training, and it's a mainstay in MBA degree programs. Conceptual awareness helps us intellectually understand the distinctions between managing and leading. But such an approach teaches ideas, not skills. As adult learners, we need exercises, experiences and coaches to turn concepts into leadership abilities. As such, conceptual

awareness is beneficial, but only a first step.

Designing Better Leadership Programs

As Jay Conger notes in *strategy+business* (Fall 1996), leadership development programs can and do work well if they incorporate elements from all four learning approaches. Programs must also provide participants with practice opportunities upon returning to the office. Conger's suggestions for an effective program include the following:

1. Bring together all four types of learning programs, with opportunities for personal growth, skill-building, feedback and conceptual learning. A single approach is too narrow.
2. Start with support from the top. Senior management must be involved, either as participants or teachers. Top executives must be prepared to practice the techniques taught in the classroom, leading by example; otherwise, interest and commitment will fade.
3. Build for long-term learning. Leadership development occurs over time; it is not a one-shot program. A three-day program will not transform anyone into a leader. It may create awareness, but that's the limit.

Courses need to be designed in modules, with one week of training followed by six months of on-the-job practice. The next phase is another training session and follow-through on an action plan during the next six months at work. These action projects turn classroom learning into concrete initiatives on the job.

4. Use coaches for accountability. Most bosses don't have time to help. Send the boss to training beforehand to work on his coaching skills, or arrange for external coaching.
5. Require peer-to-peer feedback and follow-up. One of the most effective methods to lock in learning is use of a system of follow-up and feedback from office peers.

Following Up with Feedback

Effective leadership training must have some type of transfer-of-learning mechanism that translates to real office situations.

Marshall Goldsmith and Howard Morgan conducted one of the most revealing studies on the effectiveness of leadership training programs (*strategy+business*, Fall 2004). They reviewed programs at eight major corporations.

Each company had the same goal for its leaders: to determine desired organizational behaviors that align with actual practices. Companies, however, used different methodologies: offsite training versus onsite coaching, short versus long duration, internal versus external coaches, and traditional classroom-based training versus on-the-job interaction.

As Goldsmith explains: "Rather than just evaluating 'participant happiness' at the end of a program, each of the eight companies measured the participants' perceived increase in leadership effectiveness over time. 'Increased effectiveness' was not determined by the participants in the development effort; it was assessed by pre-selected co-workers and stakeholders."

The participants' ongoing interaction and follow-up with colleagues was the determining factor that emerged as central to achieving positive long-term change. Leaders who discussed their own improvement priorities with coworkers, with regular follow-ups, showed striking improvement. Leaders who failed to maintain ongoing dialogue with colleagues showed improvement that barely exceeded random chance.

Leadership Is a Contact Sport

Goldsmith and Morgan conclude from their study that leadership is a relationship between leaders and their colleagues. The sustainable success of leadership training resulted not from ongoing contact between the coach and coachee, but rather from continuing dialogue among the individuals trying to make changes and their trusted change partners or peers. On a regular basis, these developing leaders asked for feedback on how they were progressing on their targeted behaviors.

Leaders who ask for input and then follow up to see if progress is being made are viewed as people who care, other studies reveal. Coworkers who don't respond to feedback are considered to be uncaring.

"The leader of the past was a person who knew how to tell. The leader of the future will be a person who knows how to ask," noted Peter Drucker in a classic statement. Colleagues believe leaders who ask for input increase their effectiveness. Conversely, those who don't follow up are not necessarily bad leaders, but coworkers perceive no improvement.

The Hawthorne Studies Confirmed, Again

These results confirm the historic observations of workers at the Hawthorne plant of Chicago's Western Electric Company more than 80 years ago. Professor Elton Mayo showed that productivity tended to increase when workers perceived leadership interest and involvement in their work.

A great deal of energy is usually focused on leadership training programs themselves. But studies show real leadership development is a process that occurs over time, continuing when reinforced in the office.

Consider this exercise analogy: No one would expect a person to get fit by simply watching films and listening to a theoretical lecture. Nor would you expect lasting results with a one-time practice session.

As Professor Drucker and Drs. Hersey and Blanchard have pointed out, leadership involves a reliance on coworkers to achieve objectives. Who better than these same coworkers to help a leader increase effectiveness?

In many ways, the executive coach functions as a personal trainer, reminding the coachee to do what he or she intellectually knows. Good trainers spend more time on execution than on theory. The same is true for leadership development.

The great challenge is not in understanding the practice of leadership; it is in practicing the understanding of leadership.

Create a Constellation of Leadership Development Systems

Training is a critical element, and other systems must be in place to reinforce learning in real time. Ultimately, the companies that do the best job of creating leaders are founded on a culture that values and rewards leadership. Performance appraisals should be altered to tie salary increases to demonstrated leadership behavior.

Ideally, a company supports leadership development through challenging job assignments, outstanding bosses, effective mentoring, financial and promotion rewards, performance feedback and on-the-job training.

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