SIX REASONS WHY LEADERSHIP TRAINING FAILS

A research review

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Leadership Development Program

3 things that can create great leaders

By Randy Sabourin

We have all witnessed, or experienced, Leadership Development Programs at organizations that miss the mark. Although designed using valid processes—evaluate what we have today and train the gaps to create the Leaders of tomorrow—somehow the return on investment is not enough.

Young executives who have become good leaders early in their career have an intuitive sense about how to lead. Although pragmatic about learning, they often reject a content based ‘do it this way’ approach to leadership development. They feel they are unique and haven’t gotten this far by doing everything the same way everyone else has. There is also the brash young ‘know it all’ executive leader: Full of hubris, too high on control and unwilling to consider others’ input. Their reaction to classroom training is much same, perhaps with the exception of the pragmatic approach to new learning.

Leadership Development programs fail for what they don’t give new leaders, not from a lack of the right content. Increasing business acumen (reading balance sheet, cash flow, budgets, etc.) or learning a companywide system coaching process is great content to learn, however, understanding these things will not produce a leader. There are three things that can create great leaders.

First: Know Thyself

The best leaders understand their strengths, and more importantly, their weaknesses. A good behavioral psychometric evaluation can give the indications about where to begin. A leadership development program must increase self-awareness to be successful. There are two factors to self-awareness: Knowing and believing. Reading the results from a psychometric inventory is one thing; believing the results and having strategies and tactics to adapt behavior generally requires outside help. When using psychometric inventories, make sure they focus on behavior, on performance under pressure and have very high test-retest validity. Figuring out favorite colors and which animal you most relate to are not statistically or psychologically valid, and won’t help you be a better leader. About 54% of managers use only one style when providing direction and support for their people, according to Ann Phillips, a senior consulting partner with The Ken Blanchard Companies. Leaders who are unable to adapt their style either are unaware of their blind spots or are unwilling to adapt. Either is a roadblock to becoming a successful leader.

Second: Practice, Practice, Practice

The reason newly learned content from workshops or e-learning rarely finds its way into day to day usage is the fear of trying something new under pressure. New Leaders face a multitude of important new situations that they only get one chance to be successful at. The first time coaching what was previously a co-worker, for example, is not the place to try something new. Imagine a professional tennis player trying a new serving technique for the first time during the finals at Wimbledon. Think of practice the same way a professional athlete or musician does—dedicate time and resources to working on developing new skills in a safe environment. Consider the 10,000 hour theory in context to being a leader; there are lots of mistakes to be made in the learning process, better they happen in a safe practice environment. Practice is not answering questions in e-learning or role-playing with another participant in a coaching workshop. Applying new skills in the workplace becomes a natural progression after dedicated practice.

Third: Seek Assistance

Finding or creating a coaching organization that can help navigate behavioral assessments and incorporate safe practice into a Leadership Program is critical. The investment is small considering the potential return. A coaching team can help focus practice on the challenges of each individual, as with other professionals there can be coaches for various tasks. You can engage in targeted safe practice on coaching, or presentation skills, or even Business Improvisation if required. The coaching team is designed to work on converting knowledge from various learning content into usable skills.

New Leaders are generally eager to learn; they’ve read the popular business books, watched TED talks and listened to podcasts. The content developed by Corporate Learning & Development for Leadership Development is usually sound; more content is not the answer. The missing ingredient is a service that transfers knowledge into a usable skill.

The barrier to not approaching Leadership Development one leader at a time is cost. Assessing a new Leader with a valid behavioral psychometric inventory and one-on-one strategic debrief can range from $500 to $1500. Targeted one-on-one telephone based practice focused on coaching and critical conversations can range from $500 to $1000 per participant. If the result of these costs is an effective, sustainable, respected leader, the expense seems insignificant. The choice is even easier when considering the alternatives; redesign an already valid Leadership Development program, add the costs of delivering the workshop, time away from the office, travel, etc. Or, do nothing and hope that the new Leader has the will and ambition to figure it out. LE