

# Can Leadership Training Really Work?

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It makes sense that there is an unquestionable link between organizational success and leadership development programs. After all, the more we upskill our leaders through training, the better, right? In fact, a study reported in *Harvard Business Review* (March, 2007) clearly showed that companies that invested in developing their leaders had substantially higher share returns than those that did not. Leadership programs help ease the chain of succession, make employees feel more connected to the business, and can transfer good ideas from one section of the company to the whole organization.

But here is where the catch comes in: even though we know the benefits associated with leadership development programs, oftentimes they don't produce the results we're looking for. Why is this? Speaking as an instructional designer who has been around the block a few times, I know I'm following the ADDIE process to diligently meet the needs of our clients. In fact, I'm sure my fellow instructional designers do this as well. So what's the problem?

There are likely many reasons, but I think it lies in the semantics of "training" versus "developing." Building better leaders does not suddenly occur in a training classroom. The classroom provides us with a tool to help teach leadership skills, but it does not end there. If organizations are truly interested in building successful leaders, a change in thinking is required. Effective leadership programs require a multitude of elements that work together to help leaders develop new skills over time.

So what are some of these elements? Let me share a few that Accelerated Business Results (ABR) strives to incorporate in our leadership programs to promote true development of leaders.

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## Assess and Align Corporate Goals

We all know this one, but sometimes we forget the critical importance of ensuring that a leadership program aligns with organizational goals. Unless the program is revenue generating, the budget is usually seen as an expense. In today's economy, expenses are constantly scrutinized. Additionally, the program must concentrate on building skills that the organization is focused on. If not, you risk the program not receiving the attention it deserves, which decreases the impact. How do you think senior management will evaluate this type of expense?



**To ensure that your program is aligned, ask these 10 critical questions:**

1. What are the goals of the organization?
2. What does success look like?
3. What metrics does the organization use to measure success?
4. What is the desired performance needed to achieve the organizational goals?
5. Where are the performance gaps?
6. What is needed to achieve performance improvement?
7. What is the goal of the leadership program?
8. Why is the leadership program important and to whom?
9. How will the program address the performance gaps?
10. How will we know if we are successful?



## Require Manager Support

Manager support is crucial to ensuring the success of any leadership program. Not only do learners take their lead from their managers about training and development programs in the organization, but managers must play an active role in providing opportunities to apply the skills and behaviors learned. Learning does not stick without application. However, we find that many times manager support is scarce due to lack of formal training. Requiring manager support up front is nonnegotiable.

For this reason, we always suggest developing a separate manager program when designing leadership programs. The intent is to provide a process for the growth and

development of their team members, along with tools to support this process. Many times managers progress through the ranks of the organization without any formal training in how to coach their team members.

In addition, the instructional strategy should pinpoint specific areas in the overall program where managers should get involved. For example, we encourage learners to meet with their manager at designated places in the program to set goals and check their progress. We also create accompanying materials for the manager to help them better understand their role and how to support their employee through the program.

# Take Advantage of Various Modalities to Address Different Learning Styles, Work Environments, and Content

To truly optimize the effectiveness of leadership development programs, they must use a blended instructional strategy. The American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) explains, "Blended learning focuses on optimizing achievement of learning objectives by applying the 'right' learning technologies to match the 'right' personal learning style to transfer the 'right' skills to the 'right' person at the 'right' time." (ASTD 2001)

Incorporating a mix of modalities, blended learning can be a tremendous boom for companies because it optimizes the effectiveness of the allocated time and resources. From the perspective of instructional designers, the beauty of using different modalities is that we have the flexibility to match the delivery method with the level of thinking required. For example, videos and podcasts are effective for delivering new knowledge while face-to-face time in the classroom is ideal for applying new concepts to real world situations.



## Below are some examples of strategies to use.

**Form social learning communities** where learners can forge relationships with each other and even with "experts." Build in assignments in which learners dialogue around posed situations and/or create mentor networks that connect learners with subject matter experts when needed.

**Incorporate technology** such as podcasts, videos, or ebooks to convey new concepts. Using technology doesn't have to be complex. Simply video two people having a mock coaching conversation and post it to YouTube. Distribute the link for new leaders to watch the interaction. Ask them to write down the key skills used and how well they feel they use these skills themselves. Have them discuss ways to improve these skills with their own manager.

**Construct action learning assignments** that bridge the different sessions together. For instance, participants could attend a virtual webinar where they learn a skills model for holding a performance improvement process. The assignment then could be to actually hold this type of conversation with a team member and report back on what went well and what could be improved for next time.

**Add a gamification component** to incentivize participants to learn and accomplish more skills. Gartner Research predicts that by 2015, more than 50% of organizations that manage innovation processes will gamify them. Gamification uses gaming components in a non-game environment. We tend to associate gamification with something electronic; however, it doesn't have to be. Post a huge gameboard in a central place where tallies are kept for things such as coaching conversations conducted or solving problems.

**Use virtual webinars** to introduce less complex content that doesn't necessarily require a face-to-face environment. In fact, the flipped classroom theory encourages us to "teach" new knowledge and concepts outside of the classroom in order to preserve face-to-face time for practical application.

# Build a Learning Program That Happens over Time

*Remember the proverb, “Rome wasn’t built in a day”?*

The word “development” infers time, and building leadership skills requires time. As outlined earlier, learning does not occur as a one-off event. Rather, the learning should be spread out over time and follow an instructional strategy that includes different learning opportunities that address the learning objectives. For instance, our leadership programs might incorporate a leadership

assessment, interactive webinar, application-based workshop, and one-on-one coaching spread out over a period of six months. This way, learners have time to continually work on their growth and apply the new knowledge to their real world situations.

They would begin with the leadership assessment to pinpoint their strengths

and areas of opportunity for the purpose of building a personal action plan to work on for a definitive time period. One-on-one coaching is a highly effective component to help support personal action plans. From there, learners might engage in a webinar that introduces new knowledge and concepts, followed by an action learning assignment that would help them begin to absorb

the new knowledge. By the time the learners arrive in the classroom, they are prepared to participate in some robust discussion around the new learnings and in activities designed to help them apply the knowledge to their own environment. And lastly, they would be assigned specific follow-up tasks to ensure that the learning continues.

## Ensure That Leadership Content Is Relevant and Practical

Leadership programs should focus on the practical application of skills in a real world environment that address the needs of the marketplace. Conceptual theory may be interesting, but it is not the vehicle that will raise performance. Today’s leaders need to practice working through situations that help them hone their leadership skills around engaging and relating to others. We find that many of our clients see skill-building opportunities around fostering relationships up, down, and across the organization.

We must ensure that we are not just providing the *what*, but also

the *how*, as well as opportunities to practice holding authentic conversations. Because ABR is a custom shop, we strive to incorporate the tools and systems learners use on the job into the program. For instance, leaders typically have tools available that allow them to run reports to evaluate a team member’s performance. This information is vital to have before entering a coaching conversation. By including this audience-specific tool in the training, it ensures that the practice opportunities are realistic. Leadership programs must help leaders build skills they can readily apply.



## Incorporate One-on-One Coaching or Mentorship

Personal coaching and mentoring can have a huge impact on the success of leadership programs by helping to promote individuality and ensuring that learning occurs. In fact, a great deal of professional growth stems from interaction with others and mutual learning. The paradox is that many times clients tend to hesitate when they hear *coaching* and *mentoring* because

they associate these concepts with *formal* and *structured*. Coaching and mentoring relationships can in fact be quite informal. Leaders may even self-select their own mentor or a network of mentors that can help guide them in different capacities. The conversations do not even have to occur face-to-face. The key is to make sure all parties are clear on the goals of the relationship.

## Can Leadership Training Really Work? Wrap Up



The power of leadership development programs is there for the taking. However, organizations must recognize the importance that time has on the development of new skills and learn to accept and embrace it. They need to slow down and think strategically about the different elements needed to ensure that their leaders truly glean what is intended from the program. When this occurs, true learning will happen.

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- Customized content development
- Performance assessment
- Interactive training tools
- Customized e-learning
- Facilitation

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