

# Maybe Leadership Development Has Become Stale

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For the past several years we've been perplexed by the recurring findings about the quality of leadership. Titles such as Authenticity and Leadership, Is Leadership Lacking or Distracted, Lessons Learned from Better Leaders and Outcomes, and Entitlement are available on our web site.

All the while surveys and leadership forecasts report stagnant or even declining quality of leadership. Overlaying of all this is a recent study by the Becker Friedman Institute for Economics at the University of Chicago titled The Effects of Sexism on American Women: The Role of Norms and Discrimination. We took a long deep breath, did some critical thinking, internal brainstorming and reflection. Taking that opportunity to drill into our experience as well as highly reliable and respected research, it became apparent that leadership development as being conducted and sold today is stale. Not only is it not serving potential leaders well, but it's not, at all, addressing the lack of opportunities for women. Sure there are new people with innovative and motivational approaches, but the reality is for the past 20 years not a whole lot has changed.

Millions if not billions of dollars have been committed to leadership training with marginal Return on Investment (ROI). We discuss the difficulty of measuring ROI below. The Development Dimensions International (DDI) Global Leadership Forecast 2018 states:

Leaders at the Core — leadership and talent are top agenda items for CEOs, and the readiness gaps continue to be significant.

More than 2,500 HR professionals told us that identifying

and developing future talent is the most critical skill leaders will need in three years. A significant gap exists between the criticality of this leadership skill and leaders' own assessments of their ability to successfully master it.

The net result would be a weakened leadership cadre. Only 35 percent of HR professionals rated their organization's bench strength — the supply to fill critical leadership positions over the next three years — at any level of strength (slightly strong, strong, or very strong) and, on average, only 43 percent of positions could be filled by an internal candidate immediately.

Unfortunately the results of the 2018 DDI Global Leadership Forecast is not much different than previous years. There clearly is a failure in the current process/methods to identify and successfully develop future leaders.

Based on these types of findings, coupled with our own experience (see case study below), it's time for a significant change and even a paradigm shift.

*The case of a middle management female engineer in a predominately male construction company. She was a high potential person, and part of a group of about 15 other engineers and other middle management professionals in an ongoing leadership development program we were conducting. They were from different geographical parts of the country since this was a large company with several offices. She was engaged and committed to the program. We included as take aways from each session notes we*

*titled Top Tips. These were simple handouts hitting the highlights of each topic of the session and were a quick reference tool for our attendees. We met quarterly for a few years. When starting each session, we held an open discussion of experiences and application of learning from the previous sessions. During one discussion she opened up and revealed that when she returned to her local office and attempted to implement the things she learned, she ran into organizational and cultural resistance. The common remark was that while the class was a good thing for her to participate in, that's not how we do it here. How many times have we heard this? It's a key red flag of an organizational culture resistance to change, or maybe resistance to the fact that this person was a woman, or maybe indicative of a characteristic of the geographical area, or a typical behavior of this company or industry. We certainly are not sure, but we certainly were disturbed. One other interesting issue here was this program was a multi-level design. One for entry level professionals, mid-level and senior management. The powers to be were willing to commit to the entry and mid-level people attending, but the senior level would not participate. Ironically those who sponsored the program would not participate, and in reality represented the barriers. This unfortunately is very typical. Spending money on development programs is acceptable, but allowing implementation of learning is not encouraged.*

### Looking at Leadership Development Programs (LDP) Content and Methods

Typically Leadership Development Programs consist of the typical topics such as:

- Communication
- Myers Briggs Type Indicator
- Listening
- Conflict Management, etc.

The methods involve collecting groups of people, if working with a large company, the attendees may come from different parts of the country; in a facility or large hotel, and presenting (as we refer to it as Talking Heads or Death by PowerPoint) content on topics such as those above. Following the presentation segment, some level of interactive session results. Once the two- or three-day workshop is over, everyone disperses to their respective offices and in too many cases, it is business as usual.

Through our examination we realize that the content is not cognitively challenging. The lessons are rather straight forward and in many cases things most people know if presented in a logical sequence with supporting examples. Last year we restructured our program such that the content is video/computer based, self-paced and self-study. Upon completion (content had to be completed within a defined time frame) the group would then assemble for interactive sessions. They arrive with the prerequisite knowledge, plus time to think about their situations so when in discussions, they are prepared to have meaningful interactions with their peers. Cost was the primary driving force behind this shift. The cost associated with a group of executives or senior people sitting in a room for two to three days is expensive. Not so much the cost of the facilitation team but the salaries of the people in attendance. Our approach described above reduced the onsite time expense, and resulted in the onsite interactive time being more meaningful and higher value.

Even to this day methods as well as the content have not changed. We developed Computer Based Training modules 30 years ago for nuclear power plant outage personnel. Surprisingly neither have results. More of the same yielding the same outcomes is operational insanity. It's time for a change; a change in approach, content and most importantly in the attitudes of senior management being willing to see new ideas introduced by LDP participants.



## How do we know if training works?

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of Leadership Development is determining its ultimate value. We return to Kirkpatrick's Four Levels of Evaluation.

Level I – Reaction

Level II – Learning

Level III – Transfer

Level IV – Business Results

### Level I: Reaction

Assesses participants' initial reactions to a course. This, in turn, offers insights into participants' satisfaction with a course, a perception of value. With leadership programs this usually receives high marks. Most attendees walk away feeling invigorated. A classic example is the mass marketed sessions where celebrities come and talk. Their message is one of self-reliance, step up and act boldly, your instincts allow you to pursue possibilities, etc. What's not to like, you are in a room with like-minded people searching for something being told to believe in themselves. Everyone loves that. The question remains what was really learned?

### Level II: Learning

Assesses the amount of information that participants learned. Herein lies the real issue – what learning took place? Was the content and the interaction, such that real learning in the context of one's professional and/or personal life, achieved? Relevant learning, tangible takeaways, and meaningful insights? Going back to the mass-marketed sessions, business specific/applicable context is generally lacking leaving the Level II learning rather empty.

### Level III: Transfer

Assesses the amount of material that participants actually use in everyday work 6 weeks to 6 months (perhaps longer) after taking the course. Achieving this level of evaluation involves a rigor of assessment through observations, surveys, and interviews with co-workers and supervisors. As indicated above, transfer is contingent on the organization and its senior leadership embracing it. Transfer will run amuck when senior leaders stonewall attempts to implement new ways of doing things. Once again, this is way too common.

### Level IV: Business Results

Finally the ultimate level of evaluation assesses the financial impact of the program on the bottom line of the organization 6 months to 2 years following the course (the actual time varies depending on the context of the course).

For many reasons, Level IV is the most difficult level to measure. In the leadership context it is even more difficult. There are direct and indirect measures that will ultimately impact the bottom line. If one or two return from LDP training and are allowed by senior management to implement changes it will still take time before the changes impact operations. This is why measuring Level IV results is difficult.

*One example, we implemented a program for a non-profit. This organization's success both in the public's eye and consequentially financially is contingent upon an external certification entity examining the organization annually. While many within the organization knew things were better, no tangible, external validation of that fact existed. When the certification entity provided their review, their comments revealed the program had made a difference. With this certification the non-profit was able to attract more of the public through their doors, develop and expand its developmental programs and fundraising as well as have a stronger and happier workforce.*

*We achieved a positive Level IV outcome. It is important to note that this was unusual and all the stars lined up such for the positive result.*

## Why shift the paradigm?

First and foremost, existing programs are not working well. Without tangible measures and outcomes, it's difficult to really know, so we rely on surveys. Those surveys support the notion that leadership development programs as we know them have become stale. There is a new book titled: 21 Lessons for the 21st Century by Prof. Yuval Noah Harari. Google him, it's worth it. At this writing the book is not in bookstores, but should be soon. In previews and talks by Professor Harari he brings up key concepts affecting leadership and leadership development. Previous article we've written address change, change management, people's desire for stability and people's general aversion to the changing of the status quo. I think we can all agree that finding the stability and security we nostalgically seek is similar to searching for Narnia. We can characterize the change we are experiencing today as unlike anything ever before in both speed, capabilities and context. We were warned years ago of information overload, we don't believe we ever would have characterized it as reality is demonstrating. Therefore, when we discuss the issue of content, content is readily and easily available. The things missing include: the understanding that there is no Narnia or fantasy time and place when life is carefree; to prevent the world from racing by, learning must be a lifelong endeavor; and to remain a viable member of society individual reinvention is essential. These are disconcerting concepts for baby boomers whose developmental ethos is work your whole life so you can retire and enjoy the fruits of your labor. Reality is not like that today.

What does this all have to do with stale leadership programs, everything? The focus shifts from an ever changing world of content and information to one of mental identity and emotional intelligence. Mental identity is a term used by Professor Harari, and correlates well with a redefining paradigm. Our framework for a re-envisioned Leadership Development program includes a significant level of effort placed on mental/personal identity. Knowing oneself has been a keystone of many programs, and while important, the methods focused on specific behavioral characteristics. What we are talking about is more involved and requires deeper introspection. The process might look like this:



Self-Assessment/Introspection involving:

- Heritage
- Values
- Geographic location
- Life experiences and learnings

Insights into one's barriers to tolerance and understanding

Expression – Being able to talk about the findings and breaking down barriers

Real World Exchange – Discussions in open forums or small groups

Tools

- Mechanisms and methods important to self-checking,
- Ongoing and Continuous self-evaluation and behavioral modification,
- Improving tolerance and compassion, and
- Reinforcing desired behaviors.

Case Studies that demonstrate methods, tools and outcomes. Real world or hypothetical situation discussed in small group settings with honest and open exchange of thoughts, beliefs approaches.



**Conclusion**

Studies showing diminished management/leadership strength continue to be discouraging as should those in the leadership development business. Adding to our discouragement is the resistance (direct or indirect) to increasing the number of females in senior leadership positions. The complexity of the multifaceted issues facing leaders, coupled with the rather unchanged approaches to LDP. Our position is that much of this is a result of stale leadership development programs. We propose a new approach to LDP utilizing a deeper introspection and self-assessment, self-study followed by group time for more active interaction and discussion. This would allow also foster a balancing of gender leadership development for future leaders. The one key aspect for which there is no magic solution is to get existing senior leadership to actively support and participate in LDP. “We don’t do it that way here” is not an acceptable response to LDP graduates who want to implement new skills and change. This is a tough nut to crack!

Organizational culture that is reluctant to change must itself be changed.



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