

Head start A new approach to leadership development



How do you ensure leadership development programmes benefit organisations in the long term? How do you sustain behavioural change? The answers, says the Deloitte LEAD team, lie in understanding leaders' minds.

The past few years have seen a greater focus on leadership and leadership development than ever before. But investment in leadership programmes, leadership retreats and e-learning tools doesn't seem to be paying off in tangible and sustainable results.

A 2011 study found that only one-third of 14,000 leaders and HR professionals rated their organisation's leadership development efforts as highly effective.¹ LEAD's own research confirms this dismal outlook. Only 17% of the leaders we surveyed agreed that their organisation had a strong succession plan; just 7.9% felt their leadership was 'very effective'; and only 4.3% listed their organisation's leadership development as 'very effective'.

Why is there so much dissatisfaction with current leadership development programmes? We believe it's because they fail to take into account how leaders learn best – and what motivates them to change.

Leadership development should be about more than imparting information or developing skills: the individual should not only gain new knowledge but also new ways of thinking and behaving. We see development as a synonym for change.

To find out how leaders develop most effectively, we took a step back and decided to investigate how adults best learnt, processed information and changed their behaviours. Earlier in the year, we interviewed adult learning professors, development practitioners and prison offender counsellors and rehabilitators across the UK and the US. The rationale for including the last group was to see if there were any lessons we could learn from people whose ultimate goal is to effect long-term – and often radical – behavioural change. At the same time, we asked the executive development firm IEDP to carry out an online survey, which saw 302 leaders from more than 40 industries give us their views.

So what were our conclusions? Essentially, that four factors drive effective learning and development for leaders. They are: personal motivation, constructive challenge, real issues and reflection.

The participant's **personal motivation** to learn is important on several levels. Our research clearly shows that leaders commit to development or learning initiatives when they can see a direct benefit to themselves.

¹ Jazmine Boatman and Richard S. Wellins. *Time for Leadership Revolution*. Global Leadership Forecast 2011, Development Dimensions International.

The needs and goals of leaders have to be incorporated alongside the company's agenda if a development initiative is to succeed. Asked what kind of learning experiences had the most powerful impact on them, 60% of leaders in our survey said those linked to their personal development plans, and 47% cited those linked to their personal career aspirations.

As Peter Jones, the founder of the Counselling in Prisons Network, put it, "You have to work with the individual and understand their agenda rather than imposing your own."

Programmes must, it's clear, be as tailored to the individual as possible. In-depth profiling or developmental assessment should be an essential part of the process.

The importance of understanding the psychology of change has been highlighted by the writer Alan Deutschman. Telling someone the negative impact of their actions is not enough to persuade them to change. You have to address the causes of behaviours, not just the effects. If you know the underlying reasons why someone acts in a certain way and what's holding them back, you're much more likely to be able to find sustainable solutions to problems. As Deutschman has pointed out, people need to be actively helped to understand themselves, their strengths and weaknesses, and what they need to work on to become more effective – and they need to see the benefits of change.

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Understanding the learner's goals and in turn their personal investment in 'old' behaviours has two main effects. Firstly, it ensures that they *want* to learn – rather than just listen to – the messages being taught. Secondly, it allows leadership programmes to be properly tailored to the needs of the individual in concert with those of the organisation.

The second critical factor is **constructive challenge** – the creation of a learning environment that takes leaders out of their comfort zones. It's what Ronald Heifetz, co-founder of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, refers to as a state of productive distress. In our experience, leadership development is often delivered in a comfortable environment, where leaders are not properly challenged to understand their current ways of working and the areas they need to develop. The most significant learning experiences often occur during challenging circumstances – circumstances that take people far beyond their comfort zones. Pushing leaders to think and act in different ways, unpicking behaviours and revealing the reality of their impact on the organisation helps drive change and growth.

Three things are essential for constructive challenge:

1. *A trusting environment* – without openness and honesty, the leadership development effort is likely to be wasted. A trusting environment is particularly important during group work. Leaders often find it difficult – or believe it to be dangerous – to openly admit to personal weaknesses. The facilitator has to create a 'safe' environment where leaders will share their experience with each other.
2. *Expert facilitation* – The facilitator plays a decisive role: they must be both nurturing and challenging, providing direction without giving answers. Ultimately, they act as a mirror to those who are being developed – making them aware of their current behaviours and reflecting on ways they need to change.
3. *Awareness and limits* – If you push leaders too far, they can shut down and disengage from the learning experience. Acceptable limits need to be set.

Minds at Work founders Lisa Lahey (a LEAD interviewee) and Robert Kegan agree that a level of positive conflict (which they term optimal conflict) is beneficial, capable of converting feelings of frustration into actions that will benefit an organisation. Optimal conflict allows us to see the limits of our current behaviours in an area of life we care about, helping us to change current behaviour more effectively.²

The next key factor is **working on real issues**. Force-feeding participants a generic, one-size-fits-all script rarely works. The most successful development programmes uncover the root of the learner's specific problems and then engage them in finding solutions. They're based on what LEAD calls 'real work'.

The first step sees the learner identify what's holding them, their team or their organisation back from achieving their goals. The training then leads them in search for a solution. The learner is challenged to confront and work through the issues at hand – in other words, face up to the real work they'll need to do when they leave the programme.

"People's approach to learning is problem-based, with them choosing to seek resolutions to problems and challenges they encounter in their personal and professional lives," Douglas Smith, head of adult learning for Florida International University, told us. "Adults will be more involved and motivated through problem resolution."

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Setting up communities of practice or action learning groups for organisational projects is an effective way of getting leaders to work on their real issues. Often of the same level of seniority, members of these groups come together to discuss a common goal. Through open and honest peer-to-peer discussions, leaders hold a mirror to each other's behaviours. Having these conversations allows leaders to become aware of the 'real issues' they face and what they need to work on to develop and improve their leadership capability.

The final pivotal factor is **reflection**. The words of Vincent Lombardi rang out from our research: "Practice doesn't make perfect, only perfect practice makes perfect." Self-reflective learning and guided development were cited by both our interviewees and survey respondents as extremely important. Coaches, guides and mentors play a central role in getting learners to create the environment for 'perfect practice'. Coaches help hone skills so that leaders can reflect on their actions and behaviours; they guide them on how best to integrate lessons and the development process into their daily working lives.

Leaders have to be encouraged to constantly reflect on the impact of their actions and the behaviours they exhibit while addressing personal and organisational challenges. The workplace is a busier and busier environment. Most senior executives we talk to bemoan the fact that they have 'no time to think'. It's therefore highly unrealistic to expect them to reflect on the application of new skills or capabilities in the workplace – unless there's a support system that allows them to do so.

Our survey confirmed the importance of a coaching or mentoring relationship. Nearly one-third (30%) of respondents listed coaching as the vehicle that brought about their most powerful learning experience. Coaching and mentoring also ranked first (25%) when our leaders were asked what learning method fitted best with their schedule and work/life commitments.

Reflections should be recorded and shared regularly with coaches or mentors to further aid the development process.

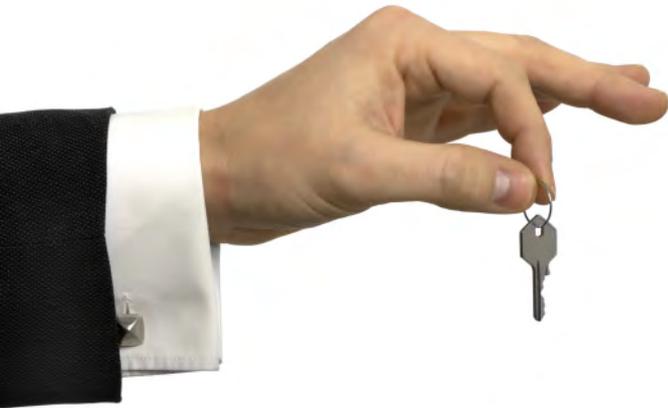


² Robert Keegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey. *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organisation*. Harvard Business Press, 2009.

Experiential development, ranked first in our survey for powerful learning experiences, provides an additional opportunity for people to apply their reflections and conclusions in the real world of work. Along with coaching, it's vital in the development of leadership capability. In our experience, the best experiential learning is where leaders are given the opportunity to work on 'wicked problems' or adaptive challenges. Defined by Keith Grint, professor of public leadership and management at Warwick Business School, as complex, messy and often intractable challenges to which there is no known solution, wicked problems test and develop leadership skills.³ Similarly, solutions to adaptive challenges require people to change the way they think and behave. As defined by Heifetz, they include crises and persistent conflicts – and, unlike routine and 'technical problems', can only be solved through experimentation.⁴ Doing without a script or manual, is, it can be argued, a rite of passage for a leader.

Combining all the four factors listed above provides the optimum learning experience – and therefore the most effective leadership development.

"Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other," John F. Kennedy once said. LEAD's research is still evolving, but early evidence strongly suggests that in-depth knowledge of the way leaders best learn will help organisations derive more value from development initiatives – and, more importantly, from their leaders. Our aim is to help create a virtuous circle of learning and leadership: the more we know about what works, the more leaders and organisations will know.



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³ Keith Grint. 'Wicked Problems and Clumsy Solutions: The Role of Leadership.' *Clinical Leader*, Volume I, Number II, December 2008.

⁴ Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald L. Laurie. 'The Work of Leadership.' *Harvard Business Review* December 2001.

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Designed and produced by The Creative Studio at Deloitte, London. 16741A

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