

How to Make Leadership More Teachable

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How often have you heard current and prospective clients as well as colleagues make statements such as these when talking about leadership development (LD)? Leadership theory is too complicated and abstract. Leaders are born, not made, and it is easier to select good leaders than to develop them. LD programs place too much focus and attention on style and fluff and not enough on getting concrete results.

While participants in LD programs frequently rate the activities in these programs favorably, companies and organizations view program outcomes less positively. For instance, Boatman and Wellins¹ report that only 18% of Human Resources professionals and 32% of line managers consider their leadership bench "very strong" or "strong". Furthermore, Kaiser and Curphy², thought leaders in the area of leadership, report that the perception of leadership competence in organizations has dropped 30% over the past 20 years while spending on LD has doubled. While companies and organizations recognize that they need to improve leadership capabilities and are willing to increase investment in LD, they are becoming increasingly skeptical that existing LD programs will achieve the results they need in order to be successful in an increasingly competitive global marketplace.

Let's take a closer look at these perceptions and beliefs so that we can regain the support and confidence of organizational leaders in programs designed to improve the leadership capabilities of their employees at all levels - individual team members and contributors, supervisors, managers, and executives.

Are Leaders Born or Made? A common belief is that there are born leaders, and it is true that some people have more talent than others for leadership. However, talent is not enough. Vince Lombardi, a pretty good judge and developer of leaders, said, "Leaders are made, they are not born. They are made by hard effort, which is the price which all of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile." Furthermore, even when it is clear that there are differences in God-given talent, the nature of enterprise today requires leadership from individuals who may not be seen as natural leaders. Many of the most successful leaders today do not necessarily have the extroverted and dominant personalities or physical qualities and gifts of leaders in previous generations. Instead,

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technical skills and knowledge may propel many individuals into positions requiring effective leadership. In many cases, these leaders need to learn the additional skills that will allow them to harness the talents and energies of their employees to achieve complex and difficult goals.

Organizational research has long confirmed that a general prototype for a strong leader does not exist. We now know that there are many strategies and tactics that can be used by leaders based upon the demands of the situation and talents of the leader. Leadership works best when leaders understand the demands of the situation as well as their own capabilities and talents in executing proven leadership strategies and tactics.

Leadership theory is too complicated and abstract. When research indicated that leadership could not be reliably predicted by simple psychological or biological attributes, more complex and abstract processes were proposed. Warren Bennis³, a well-known expert on leadership, proposed the "tripod" framework of leadership - leaders, followers, and a common goal they want to achieve. Implicit in this model is the recognition that effective leadership requires influence. The field of LD, however, has had great difficulty breaking down the process of influence into easily teachable components. Harry Truman's definition of leadership - "The ability to get other people to do what they don't want to do and like it" - is a good example of the difficulty of using definitions based upon influence to teach leadership. How in the world can you operationalize this definition of leadership?

Recognizing that influence-based definitions, by themselves, were a dead-end, the field of LD adopted the concept of leadership competencies to provide the operational details omitted in the tripod model. Leadership competencies or skills, first proposed by pre-eminent psychologist David McClelland⁴, were quickly embraced because they provided more discrete and concrete skills that leaders could use to be effective.

This was a big step forward, but the enthusiastic acceptance of leadership competencies or skills created another problem. Most competency models include 15 to 25 separate and distinctive skills organized into competency domains such as thought, drive for success, people, and personal leadership. How do leaders know which leadership skills to use in which situations to achieve their goals and objectives? It doesn't make sense to apply all competencies in a random or additive fashion. Surely, there must be some strategies that can be applied using a subset of these leadership competencies.

Unfortunately, continued acceptance of the tripod model of leadership produced a muddled, complex, and overly abstract LD process and increasing reliance on competency models and LD tools such as 360-degree feedback, personal coaching, self-assessment, simulations, and most recently, Action Learning. All of these tools are effective in placing a useful spotlight on many of the components of the leadership process. Without a companion "teachable" model of leadership, however, participants are taught individual leadership skills without an instruction manual for applying them to the leadership problem. Organizations will accept and embrace complexity and abstraction as long as it

helps leaders become more successful in delivering organizational results. Organizational leaders, however, do not perceive sufficient linkage between LD programming and organizational results. So, complaints that leadership theories are too complex and abstract are justified.

LD programs place more emphasis on appearance than getting results. Many LD programs teach participants how to look like leaders by exhibiting "executive presence" at the expense of learning how to get results. Organizational leadership experts such as Robert Kaiser, Robert Hogan, and Bart Craig⁵ have decried the fact that only 18% of leadership research looks at organizational outcomes to evaluate the effectiveness of leadership (Did the team/organization win or lose?). Twice as many studies evaluate how leaders and their teams appear (approval ratings, how much did they "stand out", how functional/dysfunctional did their team process appear).

Because LD programming frequently places a greater emphasis on appearance than results, it should come as no surprise that LD program graduates learn that it is more important to look good and to avoid blame (CYA) than to make the less glamorous, tough, or riskier decisions that may develop detractors or even enemies even if the overall impact of those decisions is positive for the many stakeholders in the organization.

Linking Organizational Success and Leadership More Directly

This may seem like an obvious linkage because leaders have generally been hired, evaluated, and retained or fired by organizational and corporate leadership and boards based upon a leader's ability to achieve organizational objectives. Remarkably, most definitions of leadership, inspired by the tripod theory, conceive of leadership as a fairly abstract and poorly understood intervening process such as interpersonal influence and "inducement":

*Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal;*⁶

*Leadership is the process of persuasion or example by which an individual (or leadership team) induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader and shared by the leader and...followers.*⁷

Without a clear definition of what leadership is or looks like, is it any wonder that so many contemporary leadership programs teach "executive presence" and how to manage your boss rather than how to get things done?

Here is my simple, uncomplicated definition of leadership.

Leadership is taking responsibility for getting results through the efforts of others.

This definition makes it clear that getting results is the primary purpose of leadership. It also clarifies that leadership requires engaging others to achieve common goals. Also, note that this definition does not distinguish between successful and unsuccessful leadership. In my view, leadership is best conceived

of as a combination of attitude (commitment) and effort to achieve results. If both are present, leadership is evident. Not all leaders who are committed and hardworking, however, are successful.

Leadership Strategies

Most LD programs view the teaching of leadership competencies as central to the development of effective leaders. As noted earlier, while mastery of leadership competencies is a necessary element in LD, this process is not sufficient to prepare people for the challenges of leadership. There are several problems with focusing only on developing leadership skills. First, no single leadership skill works or is appropriate for every leadership challenge. How do leaders make decisions about which skills to apply in any given situation requiring leadership? Secondly, how do leaders know how to combine and coordinate the use of competencies in order to accomplish his or her leadership objectives. Strategies provides a useful and necessary component for applying leadership: (1) identify the goal requiring collective action in the organization; (2) identify the most effective leadership strategy for achieving the goal, and; (3) decide which leadership skills are necessary and within the individual's repertoire to execute the strategy.



Figure 2. Leadership sequence of goals, leadership strategies, and leadership skills (competencies)

Surprisingly, very few LD programs provide useful information, practice, and feedback in the use of leadership strategies. In most cases, LD programs emphasize the development of skills such as financial strategy, systems thinking, power and influence, expectation and impression management, building relationships and trust as if they were individual, "stand-alone" skills that leaders would know how to apply individually and collectively as leadership challenges emerge.

This assumption is often unwarranted. Without an understanding of leadership strategy options and an awareness of one's capabilities to apply those strategies and supporting leadership skills, most leaders simply use and overuse the same leadership strategies that have been successful for them in the past, whether or not that strategy will be effective in a new situation. For example, supervisors who closely monitor team member behavior continue to micro-manage direct reports even if this method becomes counterproductive as they rise through an organization.

Effective Leadership Strategies

Fortunately, recent research has identified a core set of leadership strategies that are employed by effective leaders. Organizational and leadership researchers and scholars led by Craig Pearce⁸ conducted research that identified four fundamental leadership strategies used by leaders throughout the organizational hierarchy from supervisors to CEO's.

Leadership strategies are introduced here as clusters of leadership skills/competencies that are associated with each other (i.e., are correlated behaviors which are used together to achieve similar goals). Strategies, however, are not simply a different way to organize competencies to develop logical taxonomies (as is common in most competency models). Strategies involve plans for achieving a goal or objective. Using a travel analogy, strategies provide a "road map" to help leaders decide which routes to follow in traveling to a destination (the goal) while competencies provide instructions for operating the means of transportation in order to get to the destination. Both sets of information are important but are distinct.

The Directive Strategy. The Directive Strategy (DS) is perhaps the most frequently used and time-tested leadership strategy. The DS consists of a leader (formal or informally designated) giving verbal direction to others ("followers") who are often considered subordinate to the leader. The DS is also associated with traditional management methods as well as the "command and control" methods used by military leadership. The DS relies heavily upon position and coercive power and is often perceived to be the opposite of a participative approach to leadership.

The extent to which leaders use a directive versus a more participative approach often depends on how leaders perceive the task (i.e., How urgent is the situation? Do followers have a high degree of trust in the leader? and How likely is it that followers will follow the directive?) and the assumptions they make about the people they are leading.

Management practice in the post WWII period was described by management theory pioneer Douglas McGregor⁹ as based upon a "Theory X" which implicitly assumes that employees (1) are lazy and work as little as possible, (2) lack ambition, (3) dislike responsibility, (4) prefer to be led, (5) are inherently selfish, (6) are indifferent to organizational needs and goals, (7) are resistant to change, and (8) are gullible, not very intelligent, and easily duped. If managers of that era held many of these assumptions, it would make sense that they developed policies that contained tight controls over performance and exhibited coercive behavior over subordinates. Consequently, the management literature reflected these beliefs and the terms "supervision" and "management" were used interchangeably.

McGregor challenged these basic assumptions about employee motivation, beginning a trend that de-emphasized the use of the DS in many situations that require employee creativity, loyalty, and good-will. However, when the situation

calls for quick action, leadership is trusted, and resistance to directives is not anticipated, the DS may be the most effective leadership strategy approach.

In their research, Craig Pearce and his colleagues summarized these features of the DS into three behavioral clusters:

- instruction and command;
- assigning goals; and
- issuing reprimands and other punishment for disobeying and/or failing to follow orders or directions.

Incentive-based Strategy (IBS). Douglas McGregor challenged the belief that all or most employees behaved according to the "Theory X." Instead he proposed that many employees in contemporary organizations demonstrated more positive motives which he termed "Theory Y" - workers who seek responsibility and are motivated to fulfill prescribed goals, are self-motivated, and work creatively to solve work problems if given the opportunity.

Instead of punishing workers for non-compliance, managers were encouraged to find positive incentives for working to achieve leader-specified and organizational goals. This approach was also consistent with a large body of psychological research (for instance, B.F Skinner's¹⁰ work) that demonstrated how the appropriate application of incentives and rewards to "reinforce" and make desired behavior more likely and was, therefore, more likely to achieve a leadership goal.

IBS was broadly embraced by management by the mid-20th century. A prominent management theorist in that period, Robert House¹¹, suggested that the key objective of leadership was to manage the perception of the relationship between the desired activity and the probability of reward as well as the effort required. Craig Pearce and his colleagues proposed that the IBS focused on material and personal incentives and rewards for complying with, and cooperating with, the requests and goals of leadership.

Inspiring Strategy (IS). Political historian¹² James MacGregor Burns characterized most leadership theories through the mid-20th century as "transactional". He believed that the power to lead was based upon micro-transactions between leaders and followers rather than upon an appeal to pursue transcendent goals in order to achieve a greater good rather than a maximization of individual rewards and advancement.

The IS is heavily influenced by the theory and research of charismatic leadership proposed by sociologist Max Weber¹³ in the early 20th century. Weber and others have suggested that leadership charisma is a "gift" that cannot be learned. Recent research, however, indicates that the ability to inspire can be learned and developed. John Antonakis¹⁴ and his team at the University of Lausanne Business School have provided evidence that the ability to inspire can be developed through the use of specific social psychological principles. Craig Pearce and his colleagues summarized these leadership behaviors as central to

the IS: providing stimulation and inspiration, describing an overarching vision, demonstrating idealism, and challenging the status quo.

Empowering Strategy(ES) . While elements of the empowering leadership strategy had been articulated by Robert Greenleaf¹⁵ in the 1970's as servant leadership, the current interest in empowering strategies didn't really attract the attention and enthusiasm of leadership theorists until the mid-1990's and corresponded with the rapid gain in popularity of coaching for high potential as well as derailing leaders. Craig Pearce and his colleagues believed that the ES is a "paradigm shift" rather than a linear extension of transformational leadership. For Pearce and his colleagues, the ES is also aligned with a number of behaviors identified by Gary Yukl, a well-known and respected organizational-industrial psychologist: consulting; delegating; supporting; developing and mentoring; and managing conflict and team building.

In addition to an emphasis on organization and community service, the ES also includes many of the principles and methods emerging from the positive psychology movement: encouraging self-empowerment; building on strengths rather than focusing of disability and weakness; acknowledging that people are motivated by different needs under different conditions and in different stages of life; and encouraging self-reinforcing positive social relationships.

The ES identified by Pearce and his group includes the following leadership behaviors: encouraging opportunity thinking; encouraging self-reward; encouraging self-leadership; promoting participative goal setting; and encouraging teamwork.

Effective Principles for Teaching Leadership

There is general agreement that leadership is situationally determined. No style of leadership or leadership strategy is effective in all situations. Because of this reality, LD programs must provide opportunities for participants to learn how to:

- assess the leadership requirements with respect to the organization's competitive environment as well as its goals and objectives;
- select the appropriate leadership strategy given the organization's capabilities and their personal skills and talents; and
- apply the leadership skills necessary to effectively carry out the selected strategy.

In addition, LD programming should conform to a learning framework that is consistent with best practices in adult development. I propose the following developmental principles to achieve this goal.

Involve and engage the learner in action as quickly as possible. One of the most effective ways to engage participants is to use designs that emphasize discovery rather than lecture material delivered by a content expert. The inductive learning designs championed by David Kolb¹⁶ are action and experientially-based and are anchored by practices emphasizing inquiry.

In many cases, employing this principle means delaying the presentation of relevant theory until participants have had an opportunity to engage in meaningful action (e.g., experiential exercises or simulations). The attitudes of inquiry and discovery support inductive learning approaches that are well received by participants and produce excellent results with adult learners.

Encourage participants to create their own insight to explain what has happened and what they are experiencing. After an experiential process is completed, trainers/instructors can lead inquiry-based debriefing sessions that encourage participants to assess what has happened and to offer personal, team, or organizational insights. Systematic debriefings after every significant action is consistent with the after-action review (AAR) process developed and popularized by the United States armed forces. The debriefing processes also provide opportunities for creating the personal and team-developed mental "homegrown" models.

Delaying theory presentation (for instance, the theories underlying the four strategies) until experiential and debriefing activities are completed may seem counter intuitive but, in my experience, produces a superior outcome. In most cases, the theories and explanations that participants develop in a debriefing process mirror the principles that the trainer/instructors would present in a more traditional educational process. Placing activity/ debriefing processes first doesn't eliminate the opportunity to include additional theory content not identified by participants in later presentations. Furthermore, the experiential component provides many examples that can be referenced in later content presentations.

Provide opportunities to practice leadership skills in realistic settings. Coaching experts Mary Dee Hicks and David Peterson¹⁷ warn that the lack of opportunity for realistic practice can significantly reduce the amount of on-the-job development and change achieved by even the best skill training programs. While most LD programs include experiential exercises or limited simulations designed to provide opportunities for practice, in many cases, they are experienced as artificial or contrived. Realism is significantly increased when the training is embedded in actual work (e.g., coaching) or a highly realistic exercise or simulation. Action Learning¹⁸ provides the most realistic environment for practicing leadership skills because participants are working in the context of real organizational and personal problems and challenges. A wide variety of organizational simulations are available today, including simulations that range from a focus on specific topics or leadership skills (for instance, Barry Oshry's Power and Systems lab) to highly realistic and comprehensive "day in the life" simulations such as Korn-Ferry/PDI's Active Leader, and the Center for Creative Leadership's Looking Glass simulation.

Provide opportunities for real-time feedback and process debriefing. The AAR processes discussed earlier are excellent ways to provide immediate feedback to participants in LD programs. AAR debriefs can be initiated immediately after critical events or pivotal moments and can also be conducted at periodic intervals such as the end of an exercise, simulation segment, morning or

afternoon, or a program day. AARs within Action Learning or organizational simulations are typically facilitated by program trainers/instructors using a discussion outline that includes: What was our objective? What was the action plan? What actually happened? Why did this happen? What did we learn? What are the implications for change? While these discussions start at the team level, it is not unusual for the review to shift to the actions of individuals. An additional benefit of including AARs within a leadership coaching process is that it encourages discussion of participant success in achieving organization success rather than over-emphasizing style, personal impact, appearance, or individual leadership skills.

Ensure that participants experience accountability for learning and demonstrating leadership skills. This is another necessary condition identified by Hicks and Peterson for achieving development that has real impact in the organization. In too many cases, high-potential participants in LD programs act as if merely showing up and completing a program (i.e., getting their "ticket punched") qualifies them for promotion into senior leadership positions. Successful development programs create consequences to make sure that people are recognized and rewarded for applying their new skills on the job.

One way to ensure accountability is to involve senior leaders in developing goals and evaluating participant performance. Senior leader participation in developing program goals and showcasing participant achievements (or lack thereof) is a central component in Action Learning. Accountability also occurs when senior leaders participate in personal goal development in leadership coaching and when skill development is assessed through anonymous ratings from program peers, participants' superiors, and subordinates.

Moving Forward - How to Make your Leadership Development Programs more Teachable and Effective

While current LD methodology is unnecessarily abstract and complex, improving the leadership capacity of organizations is both possible and necessary. I have provided the adjustments and additions in this article that are necessary for this transition. First, because the current tripod model of leadership is inadequate for teaching leadership in contemporary organizational contexts, a newer, results-focused definition is offered that makes leadership more concrete and understandable to developing leaders. This definition is much more compatible with the way leaders are evaluated by organizations and, therefore, makes it easy to support and defend LD budgets. This definition also provides a roadmap for getting from high-level strategic goals to operational success.

Secondly, four fundamental leadership strategies are described that augment and provide an instruction manual for applying leadership competencies. These strategies are based upon well-understood behavioral principles that are supported by a long research history in the organizational sciences, psychology, sociology, and education. Because the fundamentals for these strategies are so well understood, useful instructional content can be readily developed.

Finally, I have proposed a set of instructional/training principles that will result in the successful application of this teachable model. These principles encourage learning based upon action, reflection, and personal theory development. These principles also require teaching platforms that provide opportunities to practice leadership in realistic setting, to receive real-time feedback from other participants as well as trainers and program faculty, and to experience accountability for applying themselves fully to their personal development as leaders. The best platforms for this growth include Action Learning, realistic organizational simulations, and individual leadership coaching.

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¹⁰ Ferster, C. B. & Skinner, B. F.(1957). *Schedules of Reinforcement*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

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