

Improving ROI: Three Leadership Development Best Practices

By David Giber



David Giber is a senior vice president at Linkage where he leads the consulting business. He is responsible for the development and delivery of consulting services and client solutions worldwide. David has more than twenty years of experience in transforming companies into high-performing organizations by creating integrated human resource and leadership systems with measurable business impact.

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As a leadership development consultant, I'm often asked about best practices, especially about which ones make the greatest positive impact on individuals, teams, and organizations-and which ones help turn training programs into a leadership system. Leaders want to know: Where is the biggest return on investment?

I rate the following three practices as most powerful in developing leaders:

1. Integrate classroom experiences with on-the-job application

Most firms have leadership programs that are highly rated in terms of the experience of participants but have little or no connection to rigorous application of the learning on the job. Despite all the excitement over action learning and connecting classroom experiences to on-the-job assignments, this is still the biggest, most common gap in leadership development-often due to the difficulty of coordinating assignments and the discomfort many internal leaders feel when working as mentors and coaches. Training groups rarely determine how participation in the leadership training will integrate with larger talent and succession planning for on-the-job assignments and participation on task forces or initiatives. Even with the advent of communities of practice and electronic means of connecting globally, most leaders don't know how to build networks among those experiencing common leadership transitions and dilemmas.

The artful blending of classroom work and on-the-job assignments takes focus. At Federated Department Stores, for example, the Leadership Institute has refined the work of "step up" assignments over several years so that high-potential participants review their on-the-job application plans with their manager, their manager's manager, a group of their peers as well as a senior executive from another division. Alumni from past programs are also used to mentor and advise on these assignments. This scrutiny leads to broader, more strategic thinking and more "stretch" in the challenges participants take on. Leadership practitioners need to put as much work into determining the dynamics of on-the-job development assignments as they do into planning curricula.

Action learning done in teams is the best method for integrating leadership development and real-world issues and practice. The critical issue, as Henry Mintzberg points out, is to make it into "action-reflection learning," leaving the time needed to assure that the program is not dominated by actions to be taken or problems to be solved.

2. Connect leadership development with business strategy

Connecting leadership development to the strategy and involving internal leaders as teachers and facilitators of that strategy. This goes beyond using leaders as teachers. It means involving them in crafting the strategic message and the issues to be tackled by the participants. It is more than telling leadership stories; it is teaching in a way that projects the participants into the strategic choices and decisions that their leaders are facing. I find that the personal involvement of senior leaders fundamentally changes their view of education and development. Taking on the role of teacher has a profound impact on leaders. However, these leaders are seldom provided with good models and training on how to be effective teachers and facilitators of strategic cases studies and interactive debates. Such teaching takes preparation and coaching, but it pays off by altering the leader's approach to asking questions, listening, and learning. In addition, leading organizations create their own toolkits for analyzing and solving problems,

improving teamwork, and driving change. These then become teaching tools. Creating a committed internal leadership faculty is a powerful way to turn leadership training into true development and turning senior leader sponsors into passionate advocates.

3. Access to the right resources at the right time

Timing access to the leadership development to the right career or transition point is critical. Are emerging leaders involved where they are most ready and open to learn? The timing element has both individual and organizational components. Has the organization communicated a development roadmap of where those leadership transitions are and what is needed to succeed at each point? Is the program connected closely enough to a transition point in responsibility or scope or when a change is recent or imminent enough that it rings powerfully in the experience of the participants? Are the developmental goals of a program or assignment clear to the participant, his or her manager and direct reports?

The individual component is one of engagement with learning and with change. Is the participant ready to engage with a new set of leadership issues? Does any assessment provided create an opening-not only through the typical 360-degree feedback process but also because there are new insights for participants on their personality, decision style, or strategic thinking?

Great timing also means that the learning needs to be applied during the class and reapplied more intensively soon after the class. Timing means engaging individuals, teams, and organizations at points where the connections to leadership learning hit with impact because success is not guaranteed and the stretch to improve and innovate effectively gets people's attention.

With these three practices, powerful leadership development is possible. Both practitioners and leaders should look for ways to bolster and maximize these three best practices as they seek an integrated approach to developing their leaders for the future.

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With a relentless commitment to learning, Linkage also offers conferences, institutes, summits, open-enrollment workshops, and distance learning programs on leading-edge topics in leadership, management, human resources, and organizational development. More than 200,000 leaders and managers have attended Linkage programs since 1988.

Linkage
Burlington, MA
781.402.5555
info@linkageinc.com