

Link&Learn Interviews with Phil Harkins

PHIL HARKINS is founder, CEO, and chairman of the board of directors of Linkage, Inc., the company that he founded in 1988. Phil is also an internationally-known expert in the fields of organizational development, leadership, communications, and executive coaching. His clients include senior executives and teams at leading organizations worldwide. Phil has authored and edited several books, including *Everybody Wins: The Story and Lessons Behind RE/MAX* (John Wiley & Sons, 2004); *The Art and Practice of Leadership Coaching* (John Wiley & Sons, 2004); and *Powerful Conversations: How High-Impact Leaders Communicate* (McGraw-Hill, 1999). He has spoken on these and other topics at more than 400 conferences, seminars, and programs around the globe.

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Link&Learn had the opportunity to sit down with Phil Harkins, President and CEO of Linkage, to discuss the importance of tools in a leader's everyday work. In his consulting and coaching work with senior leaders and senior leadership teams, Phil regularly uses tools (i.e. processes, frameworks, assessments, and other step-by-step mechanisms) to drive change and results. He is also the author of several books, including the recent business bestseller *Everybody Wins* that demonstrate the connection between tools, processes, and results. In this interview, Phil discusses why he believes tools are at the core of leadership success.

INTERVIEW

Link & Learn: *For leaders and managers in the trenches, why are tools important?*

Harkins: Most leaders and managers today work at such a fast pace that they have little time to focus on anything. They are crunched for time. I know I am. Everybody is. So you find yourself unable to accomplish your daily tasks as a leader -- at least the way that you would want to accomplish them -- whether it be conducting a performance review, leading a meeting, or planning a difficult conversation. When you are pressed for time, you tend to do everything as if it is the first time that you are tackling these tasks. You find yourself asking, "How am I going to run this meeting? How am I going to create an agenda for change? How am I going to do this performance review with a difficult person?" Tools provide the answers. They give you the model, or the blueprint, to help you perform these daily tasks more efficiently. With today's time crunch, tools are important because they allow you to spend time on *what* you're going to do -- not *how* you are going to do it.

Link & Learn: *Why should leaders use tools on a regular basis?*

Harkins: It's all about consistency. If you listen to some of the bestselling leadership and management thinkers, such as Larry Bossidy on Execution, David Allen on Time Productivity, or Michael Treacy on Double-Digit Growth, it becomes clear that high impact leaders do things in a consistent way to get better results. Tools take accumulated information from experts in that field and provide you with a proven method to accomplish something in the same way every time. Instead of making things up as you go along, you want to be consistent. And consistency is so critical -- it's one of the key qualities that give people confidence in you as a leader.

Using tools on a regular basis helps you to be specific with your direct reports. Instead of saying to one of your managers, "I want you to fix this problem," a tool provides guidance and helps you specify, "I want you to fix this problem *in this way*, so that we can achieve *this specific result*." It comes down to process. If you have good process, you usually get good results. Tools provide that type of process.

Link & Learn: *What type of tools are the most effective?*

Harkins: Simple ones.

Your question reminds me of a guy that I used to work for, one of my mentors -- John Keane, the founder of Keane Inc. When I first went to work for him, he was always telling me that we were in the business of providing processes and tools that would help people do things in a consistent way that are simple. Looking back, his idea was brilliant.

Today, I find that if the tools I provide leaders are simple, leaders will use them more. If they are complex, they will not use them at all. People want to look at tools and say, "I can do that in two minutes and there are only four steps-that's perfect. I can do that."

You know that saying, "Keep it simple, stupid"? Well, I think that's what leaders are constantly telling us. It's not because they have attention deficit -- they just have no time. After you put in a 12 hour day and you have kids at home or you have something planned that night, you don't have the time to wade through something complex on your computer. It's not *attention* deficit, it's *time* deficit.

Link & Learn: *Where do tools fit into overall leadership & management development strategy?*

Harkins: I look at leadership development as comprising various levels of learning. You've got experiential learning, or what I call Level 3 learning. Then there's Level 2, which encompasses instructor-led, face-to-face learning and things of that ilk. And then there's Level 1 learning, which is very situation-based. It's very foundational. That's where tools come in. If they're not part of your overall leadership and management strategy, you're going to find yourself with a gap at that level.

Link & Learn: *If you are an HR, OD, or leadership development professional, is providing tools a key element of leadership & management development?*

Harkins: Absolutely. It better be. Because leaders are going to be calling you for help with their everyday tasks. You've got to be able to answer with tools and solutions that will cut through all the complexity and help them do their jobs better. And if you can't provide them with proven tools and methodologies? Then you won't be helping them -- and they'll eventually stop calling. On the other hand, when you have access to proven tools and methodologies, then your job becomes easier -- and you become the strategic, "go to" person for your leaders.

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Linkage is a global organizational development company that specializes in leadership development. We provide clients around the globe with integrated solutions that include strategic consulting services, customized leadership development and training experiences, tailored assessment services, and benchmark research. Linkage's mission is to connect high-performing leaders and organizations to the futures they want to create.

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.

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