

LEADING CHANGE

Leader Training

A Waste of Time & Money

It's the elephant in the room, something that many have suspected but did not talk about for fear of being the first person to say that the emperor has no clothes.

In a 2006 article, David Maister, *the* expert on managing professional services firms wrote:

"I now believe that the majority of business training, by me and by everyone else, is a waste of money and time, because only a microscopic fraction of training is ever put into practice and the hoped-for benefits obtained." (<http://davidmaister.com/articles/1/96/>)

After more than two decades as a touted solution to better organisational performance it appears that the money and time invested in leadership training have not led to a genuine change in behaviour and performance in our public and private sector organisations. At worst, we have seen leadership programs that resulted in reduced commitment, fatigue and resignation. However, there are ways to ensure that your leadership program delivers the results you hoped for. But it may require a significant shift

in the existing paradigms surrounding leadership development.

Paradigm 1 - No measurable objectives required, we've got competencies

The first paradigm is that there is no need to clearly articulate a measurable business objective for the leadership program. Often there will be a set of competencies or capabilities developed at great expense (or borrowed from a favoured leadership model) and which are identified as ideal. These are offered up as the behavioural, knowledge and attitudinal goals of the program. But, *why* are we developing these capabilities? What organisational results will be improved? How will the results of the program be measured? Can we be sure that improvements in these capabilities will lead to improvements in organisational results? We have seen 60 page documents that describe the desired leadership capabilities with no mention of organisational objectives or measures.

A sense of frustration

has led to us writing this special edition of Leading Change. In our work with clients in both the public and private sector we find that organisations repeatedly fall for a set of mental models or paradigms that lead to leader training being a waste of time and money.

This article identifies the five most common paradigms that often underlie leader training that fails to deliver results.

We also provide direction for busting the paradigms and rethinking the way organisations develop the leaders of the future.

Five paradigms that lead to failure:

1. No measurable objectives expressed as business results.
2. A quick-fix mentality.
3. When training, separate leaders from followers.
4. Any theory of leadership will do.
5. Develop leaders and leadership will follow.

WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR YOUR VIEW

We appreciate that some may consider the content of this article to be controversial. That is our intention and it is our hope that we may sponsor some debate about the issues raised. You may have found the five paradigms alive and well in your organisation. You may have further paradigms that, in your experience, limit success. Or you may disagree totally with the views expressed. Whatever your view we



would like to hear from you. You can email us, phone us, fax us, or use the old fashioned remedy and write to us.

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Paradigm 2 - Quick fix mentality

The second paradigm is the quick fix mentality. The leadership researcher Jay Conger¹ found that top management view leadership development as “code for products that are divorced from business issues and sold by consultants to line managers looking for quick answers and HR managers looking to help line managers at any cost”.

The apparent priority is to be seen to be taking action. To have a program so that the claim “we have invested in developing our leaders” can appear in the next annual report. Root cause analysis of the relationship between organisational and leadership performance is rarely if ever conducted. As a result investment in leadership development is likely to be wasted.

Paradigm 3 - When training leaders, separate from followers

The third paradigm is that most leadership programs separate leaders from their followers. The leadership team attend the training (usually offsite), learn the theories and practices in isolation from the realities of the workplace, role play with other leaders (or out of work actors) and play leadership games. They might learn a tremendous amount about themselves and their peers, but what have they learnt about their followers?

This is akin to one disastrous leadership idea of WW1 - keep the leaders away from their troops at the front line. How can one learn to lead without being in the trenches with the people they are supposed to lead? How can one be a leader of a team and not be part of that team? Leadership and management are skills and are best learnt on the job, not in the classroom.

Paradigm 4 - Any theory of leadership will do

The fourth paradigm leads to the use of irrelevant and inauthentic leadership models and theories.

There are literally dozens of different and often contradictory definitions of leadership. The concepts underlying leadership have changed over the course of history and leadership research is far from complete. This makes choice very difficult. The simplest way is to choose a leadership program that others are using - the most popular. But, is the leadership model, its underlying philosophies and its prescribed behaviours right for your team and their collective objectives? How will doing the same as other companies lead to competitive differentiation?

Many leadership theories prescribe a set of qualities and behaviours which are defined as ideal and generalisable across individuals, teams and organisations. These behaviours (often reflective of the cultural biases of the authors) are often noble. But here lies the danger. What if, as a leader I am finding these “ideal” qualities and behaviours difficult to enact. Psychologists tell us that a perceived gap between an “ideal” self and actual behaviour leads to lower self-esteem, reduced engagement, and possibly depression. The difficulty in enacting the “ideal” may have nothing to do with the real capabilities of the leader and more to do with an ill-fitting, irrelevant leadership model that doesn’t address the collective goals, values, principles and identity of the followers or the environment in which they and the leader find themselves.

Paradigm 5 -Develop leaders and leadership will follow

This is the paradigm that is the most difficult to bust because as Pfeffer² noted, organisational psychology is inherently individualistic. Huge amounts of money are spent by organisations on management tools that identify the “right” person and their fitness to lead. It is the notion that there is something special or different about leaders. This is reinforced by popular books which

feed us a romantic diet in which self-avowedly ‘great’ business leaders identify the 7 great habits, the 10 insider secrets or the 14 winning ways which serve to differentiate them from ordinary mortals like you and me. These views accentuate the division between would-be leaders and their followers.³

Leadership is not about going-it alone, nor about having special qualities. Leadership is, at its core, a group process and training programs that focus on the individual leader might undermine the very thing it hopes to create, an engaged and productive team.

BUSTING THE PARADIGMS TO MAKE LEADERSHIP TRAINING PAY OFF

What can your organisation do to ensure it is not wasting its time and money in leadership development? Here are four recommendations:

Leadership development is Strategy

Leadership development is not done because it is nice to do but because it is necessary for the achievement of the organisation’s strategic goals. Leadership development is therefore the task of those who have responsibility for strategy. It should Measure what matters and what can help turn knowledge into action. Work out what to measure based on a clear strategy and set of key objectives. Don’t let the external consultant and their model or theory of leadership decide what’s important.

Leadership development is the job

Don’t let your executives see leadership development as an event. It is their daily task. One study of leadership development found that 70% of learning to lead occurs on

the job, 20% of learning comes from workplace relationships and only 10% from formal education and training.

Leaders are defined by followers.

Knowing comes from doing and teaching others. Train leaders in the field with their followers and with regular follower feedback. Provide the necessary support structures, tools and relevant metrics. Use your leaders to train and nurture other leaders. Use external leadership experts as leader support not as leaders.

Develop leadership and leaders will follow

Base your leadership development around the identity, needs, values, principles and collective aspirations of followers not on externally prescribed leader traits. The most effective leaders are the ones who understand, consider, and represent their followers. Leadership is given by followers to those they believe best represent them, their interests, their identities and their group. By taking this approach, the resulting leadership is more likely to be seen as authentic, relevant, practical, more influential and ultimately uniquely differentiated.

Next issue

In our next issue of **Leading Change** we will outline our six step approach to designing leadership development programs that do result in real gains in organisational performance.

TURN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT INTO RESULTS

Over the last 20 years we have seen these paradigms adversely affect the planning and outcomes of leadership programs. The evidence is clear that the quick fix, short course, leader-focused training fails to deliver business results. What frustrates us most is that we see the same mistakes repeated again and again with little consideration of the paradigms that underpin failure.

We think that by challenging these paradigms we have found better ways to make leadership development pay off.

We don't want to change the world one organisation at a time and we can't change your life in 3 days but, we can help you design and implement programs that develop leadership (not just leaders) for better business outcomes.

Whether you have an existing leadership program in place or are embarking on a new program we can help you to close the knowing-doing gap and improve the ROI on your leadership program. Call Randal Tame or David Heap on 02 9410 0290 or email us at info@iandi.com.au.

FURTHER READING

1. Jay Conger (1999), *Building Leaders: how successful companies develop the next generation*. Jossey Bass
2. Pfeffer, Jeffrey and Sutton, Robert I., (1999) *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action*. Harvard Business School Press, Cambridge
3. Alex Haslam, (2006) Let's go the extra mile: Social identity and the link between leadership and followership. In: *Leadership matters (Bulletin of Leadership South West)*.

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