

Six Reasons Why Leadership Training Fails

A research review

 By Cynthia Kivland and Natalie King

U.S. businesses spend more than \$164.2 billion dollars on learning and development programs annually (1). However, according to Tannenbaum only 20 percent of these dollars result in transfer of learning or directly impact the company's bottom line (2). Why? Because the training does not measure or create habits most critical to leadership success.

This article will first review research that provides a mixed review on the return on a training investment, suggest standards required for effective training transfer, followed by the top six reasons why leadership programs fail.

A Mixed Return on Investment

Employee engagement is a core indicator of leadership excellence. Yet, according to a Gallup report (October 2013), there are almost twice as many "actively disengaged" workers in the world as there are "engaged" workers who love their jobs (3). A review of the research also shows that the top three organizational challenges are related to a leader's inability to adjust to rapid change (4,5,6). The research shows that top executives often lack the necessary emotional and social competencies to deal with stress and change.

Standards for Leadership Training

About \$12 billion is annually spent on leadership programs, specifically on top leaders of the organization (Jack Zenger, Forbes, 2012). However, only 20% of the skills or knowledge taught in leadership training programs is transferred into new leadership habits.

"Leadership theory can be interesting, even intellectually stimulating, but at the end of the day, theory is not of much value. We've found, and numerous studies over the decades have documented, leaders learn most of what they know about leading from leading." (Mike Miller, Secret of Teams, 2011) (7). Real learning happens when leaders actually practice and apply the learning!

In reviewing the research, standards or best practices of effective leadership training include an interactive approach of role play and required practice. Accountability partners, or groups, are another standard that provides a process to review and record progress or setbacks. The use of pre and post-360° surveys is also a standard in leadership training programs to measure other's perception of their leadership style. Using evaluation methods such as Kirkpatrick's tools, KPIs or Balanced Scorecards is an often-used best practice in leadership programs. Training coupled with mentoring, coaching and peer review are considered important for training transfer. Another standard is self-selection, which shows that those who self-select to participate are more motivated to practice new behavior. Finally, one other standard mentioned is a leader's self-discipline to practice new habits daily.

Training guidelines have also been developed by the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations (Cherniss, Goleman and Emmerling, 1998(8). As more organizations seek to develop emotional and social competencies in leaders, best practices were reviewed and 22 guidelines were established specifically to four developmental phases: Preparation, training, transfer and maintenance, and evaluation. Examples of "gold standards" noted in the report are to maximize the learner's choice, encourage people to participate, gauge

readiness, build in support and provide opportunities to practice.

In summary, experiential interactivity, self-selection, practice, support and pre and post measures are the common standards required to impact real leadership change, especially if this change involves acquiring new habits.

It is clear that companies will continue to invest time and money in developing leaders, even when the return on investment and standards vary. The key questions are: "What are the common reasons leadership development programs fail to return a higher investment evidenced as permanent change?"

The remainder of this article will summarize extensive research about leadership training and then summarize the top six reasons leadership training fails to produce evidence of permanent change.

WHY LEADERSHIP TRAINING FAILS

REASON 1: No Long-term measures prove the permanency of training

Companies require measures for their own performance, but don't require measures on the permanency of their leadership training - why? "The trainers don't provide what's referred to as 'evidence-based training' - training that was statistically proven to provide permanent change" was the response from Tony Thompson, President, Goodland Hospital in Goodland, Kansas. Quite the opposite. The design priority of most companies that create and sell their leadership training courses is to 1) Assure their clients that their training is effective (a critical beginning for any training) 2) Influence that decision by the reputation and quality of the speakers they provide, and the timeliness of the topic 3) Provide exercises at the end of their training to show the effectiveness of what their clients learned. Each are intentionally designed to produce high-scored self-reports or high-support random interviews immediately following the training. Much of that good 'feeling' come from experiencing the same training as a group, self-energized in achieving a common goal, and getting to know each other better. It's all a very positive experience with no permanent measures. Apparently, that doesn't matter.

The challenge is time. Developing permanent habits require repetitive training that requires months, not days. Corporate America favors short course time frames when it comes to leadership training. "We just don't have the time for longer training," was the explanation by Doug Patrick, Sr. VP of Human Resources for Hyatt International. Conversely, on-the-job training envelopes most of their corporate training time and is effective in developing good habits, but not leadership training. Leadership training course's primary benefit appears to be a catalyst reward for deserving managers. It's enjoyable and most leave that training feeling better about themselves. It's viewed as a leadership stimulus reward, not a habit maker.

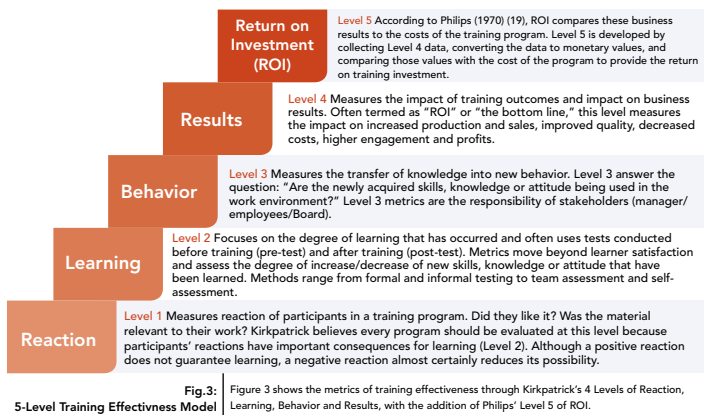
The other challenge is the cost and time required to develop evidence-based courses, which requires long-term commitments from the clients that use this type of training. The training industry apparently can't support the extended time or higher costs to warrant that development expense given the corporate preference for short time span leadership training. Let's look at the results.



» Six Reasons Why Leadership Training Fails

Nearly 75% of respondents surveyed in a 2010 study by the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) and Institute for Corporate Productivity reported that training evaluation methods weren't measuring a return on investment that directly impacted their leadership skills or the bottom line(9). The purpose of establishing training metrics is to measure (and ensure) that what is learned is transferred to new on-the-job behaviors. Metrics ensure that what is learned in any leadership development program actually gets applied on the job. Training effectiveness is often based on the metrics of Kirkpatrick's 4-Level Model (1954) of learning evaluation and, lately, Level 5 (Phillips) (see Fig. 3). According to Kirkpatrick, training evaluation begins with Level 1 and moves sequentially through Levels 2, 3 and 4. Jack Phillips added Level 5, ROI, to Kirkpatrick's model (1970).

In summation, Kirkpatrick's Level 1 and Level 2 metrics measure learner satisfaction and knowledge retention, but do not measure the impact of training to new habits or business outcomes. The ASTD study previously cited revealed that most companies are only measuring learner satisfaction (Level 1). Collecting trainees' perception of training provides data as it relates to satisfaction with design and delivery; however, metrics geared towards Kirkpatrick's Level 3 or 4, along with Phillips' Level 5, provides analysis to measure if new habits were formed, yet also assess their impact to business outcomes and training dollars spent.



REASON 2: Lack of management support

The extent to which new skills or behavior are reinforced by management is directly proportional to the adoption of these behaviors into the culture (see Fig. 2).

Barriers of Transferring Training to the Job

- Immediate manager does not support the training
- The culture in the work group does not support the training
- No opportunity exists to use the skills
- No time is provided to use the skills
- Skills could not be applied to the job
- The systems and processes did not support the skills
- The resources are not available to use the skills
- Skills no longer apply because of changed job responsibilities
- Skills are not appropriate in our work unit
- Did not see a need to apply what was learned
- Old habits could not be changed
- Reward systems don't support new skills

According to Brinkerhoff, Gill, and others (10), "Lack of supervisor support after training has been referred to as the bane of training transfer." This includes pre- training support, reinforcement throughout training and, most important, post- training recognition, accountability and encouragement. Lastly, peer support is important as trainees need to feel inspired and complimented by their peers when practicing new behaviors.

Conversely, the lack of support has a negative impact on whether employees choose to practice and adopt new skills. How that culture is shaped by management impacts the knowledge and adoption of new skills. The opportunity for trainees to witness leaders and peers practicing the same skills is called the "critical mass" approach. The goal is to build a critical mass of employees trained simultaneously to maintain noticeable changes within the work environment by other employees.

Overall, organizational culture—defined as the prevailing organizational standards, customs, and psychological and social patterns—has an impact on introducing any new program or process. Having a critical mass of employees complete the training simultaneously will accelerate the cultural shift to support and, most importantly, reinforce the new behavior as, "the way we do things around here."

REASON 3: Leaders don't walk the talk

Organizations often believe that the degree of employee support and commitment to training is directly related to the amount of training dollars or how loud the leadership team champions a specific training program.

Employees often view this approach as a false and shallow commitment from the leadership team. As Sam Palmisano, the former CEO of IBM, states, "Everyone is responsible for identifying and developing leaders and leadership development is a top corporate priority." Leading by example shows authentic commitment to the program curricula and processes (11). Therefore, rolling out leadership programs only to mid-management and frontline employees lacks a critical component of lasting training transfer: The perception of authentic leadership support (12).

Senior managers must complete the training themselves and prove they "walk the talk." Employees will only perceive leaders as authentic champions after they have engaged in the same training. Employees will then be more likely to view training as a career investment aligned with organizational culture and valued by leadership, and thus more likely to apply their new behavior skills in the workplace.

REASON 4: Most corporate training uses level 1 metrics

Corporate training directors are not provided many options beyond Level 1 training especially since there is little pressure or need to demand a change. Who can argue with any ten-day or less training program that gets high marks from its participants and training director? But the reality is, this ongoing momentum doesn't serve the permanency of Kirkpatrick's Level 2-5 training, which is required to induce any measurable change. The American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) and the Institute for Corporate Productivity (2010) revealed that most companies are only measuring learner satisfaction (Level 1).

When planning training programs, a key question to ask is "Are we training our employees for a sprint or a marathon? While sprints and marathons both have starting points and each race requires conditioning and practice, the focus of a sprint and marathon is quite different. A sprint is measured by how fast an "athlete" can run in a single short term event. The energy is focused on getting off to a quick





start and success is measured by how fast one can “run” in the least amount of time. Conversely, when preparing for a marathon, months of conditioning and short “runs” are performed to prepare for the longer race. The marathoner often trains within groups and relies on a “support system” who cheers them along each mile of the race. The marathoner also follows a routine in meals, sleep and practice weeks before the race, often relying on other runners to keep them focused. A marathoner’s success is measured by how well they can endure, evolve and commit to the months of practice, setbacks and regimen.

When leadership training is designed as a weekend or multiple day excursion, they mirror the training mindset of a sprint. The measurements are not focused on creating new habits of behavior, they are focused on how much content can be absorbed in the shortest amount of time. However, after that short event, the running shoes or training manual are placed back on the shelf. A sprinting approach to leadership training is not weaved into the strategic mission, which makes a “sprint” program more likely to be a victim of budget cuts. When learning new skills is perceived as a onetime event and aligned more with short-term outcomes than long-term strategic goals, a human capital leadership deficit occurs from imaging leadership rather than affecting it (13, 14, 15).

Companies that design leadership programs aligned with long term business strategy embrace the marathon approach. A marathon approach to leadership development includes incremental learning in groups that train together over a period of time. Practice and trial runs with just-in-time feedback lead to new behavioral habits. The marathon approach builds habits over time with a commitment to long term strategy and endurance that anticipates setbacks along the way. Most important, the marathon approach encourages Level 5 evaluative metrics, including the metrics of impact on long-term business results and ROI of training dollars to achieve these results.

REASON 5: The absence of need for audit and correction

Successful companies continually audit everything they do. Audit allows correction and helps focus that change to the desired outcome. Most leadership training courses are designed with no post-audit measures nor is management demanding to audit these courses. This trend has existed for years, with no complaints, so why change now?

The purpose of post-training feedback and follow-up is to measure the long-term impact of training to sustained behavioral change (Kirkpatrick’s Level 3). The premise is that learners will practice and retain new skills if they are required to report upon their learning progress.

Feedback and follow-up provides leaders and their organization information on how often and how well new habits are being observed in the work environment and, if needed, corrected. Feedback and targeted follow-up also gives instructional designers and program facilitators information related to program design, along with how well current feedback and follow-up processes are increasing accountability and practice. Omitting processes with embedded feedback and follow-up methodology increases the probability of failure of any sustained learning transfer.

REASON 6: The absence of pre-screening to measure the compatibility of the trainee to the training or the training to the culture

Studies of the influence of trainees’ characteristics on training effectiveness have focused on the level of ability (Able) necessary to learn program content. Just as important are the motivational (Willingness) and environmental influences (Readiness) of the trainee and culture. Attitude, which includes a learner’s motivation and the expectation (Benefit) of completing the training, does influence the level of leader engagement (16). A leader’s ability, along with intrinsic or extrinsic motivators, are key drivers of skill acquisition and training performance (Kanfer and Ackerman, 1980) (17,18). However, the level of environmental support, along with authentic encouragement to sustain practice even when failure occurs, is critical for learning transfer.

In a study by Stuart et al. (2003), a core reason for transfer failure was a lack of time due to fast work environments and “production” expectations (an example of environmental readiness) (19). The emphasis on meeting production expectations combined with daily time pressures and lack of environmental support tends to put the practice of interactional leadership habits at a lower priority.

Summation

Why do companies support training with no post measures?

A University survey was mailed to 300 randomly selected (from a list of 15000) Corporate HR Director and/or Staff and Corporate Training Directors and/or staff which generated an 11% return.

Those results showed 70% believed the satisfaction response immediately following their leadership training course provided the desired impact, and 30% disagreed. Less (55%) believed the costs justified the results. Only 23% used 360 post measures one or more years following their Leadership Training to measure its long term impact, with most post-measures coming from their own, internally generated leadership training. Only 39% correlated their leadership training to an increase in their overall performance measures, and the other 61% found no correlation at all to performance. Leadership training courses, despite their low correlations to improvement, are habit forming, with 77% reporting their biggest reason for recommendation was that they were used successfully in the past. Recommendations from others influenced 64% in their selection, and 50% were influenced by the ‘new-wave’ reputation of the training.

Are evidence-based leadership training courses the answer?

Evidence-based training courses are developed from studies that statistically validate outcomes that affect every participant with the same results, confirmed with pre and post measures. They are used in the military to teach the habits required to be effective, and used in all training that requires predictable results. The most significant finding from our survey showed 98% responded that given the choice they would require all course-providers use pre and post-measures to prove the efficacy of their training. All of those surveyed stated that evidence-based should be the requirement for all training courses.

The Consortium for Emotional Intelligence Training reports examples of evidence-based training from their members. One Control Study (Journal for Management Development, Jan, 2010) reported a 23% overall two-year post-measure increase in social and emotional communication skills for all the Intervened 81 executives, compared to no increase in the Controls. The measurable increase in Emotional Intelligence, using 360 surveys, yielded the similar increases in all participants.

What’s preventing vendors from providing evidence-based training courses?

Cost and time may be the biggest factors . The Evidence-Based course developed in the Control Study above included 162 participants from nine separate companies and required time to evidence that training was applicable to a variety of corporate cultures. The cost to create that Study was \$1.5MM. The other factor is the market has become comfortable with 8-24 hour training courses. Evidence-based training courses require 40 hours to evidence permanent habit change.

Developing leaders using training that yields consistent outcomes will become the new training standard. The existing trend of ‘no-measures’ for training courses is simply not consistent with companies that define all their performance using measures. “If you can’t measure it you can’t manage it”.

We’d be interested in your views related to the need for measures in your training courses. **LE**

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