

Leader development explained

In my last article I reported that leadership has been shown to account for 37.6 per cent of the variability in business performance. I commented that small business leaders haven't tapped this personal competitive advantage to achieve more with the resources they already have.

But as we know, it is one thing to champion the potential results that leadership development may offer; it is quite another to make it happen.

At the outset I want to make two points crystal clear. First, leadership can be improved no matter what your age. And second, it takes time and effort.

As the Harvard researchers who authored one of the definitive texts on adult learning stated, "We're going to give it to you straight: the transformation of talent takes a while. There is no McDonald's drive-through window for adult development." (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, p.136)

Even so, I continually receive invitations to "development" opportunities that vaguely promise professional development, maybe over an afternoon, or with a breakout session, or perhaps a two-day intensive workshop. My least favourite are the soft-sell industry sessions that claim to have a developmental aspect. Not going to cut it.

When I find these "opportunities" I can't get the image out of my head of getting into bed, watching a few YouTube videos on weight loss, and miraculously losing 10 pounds by the next morning.

Leader development is not a spectator sport. It's hands on and it's about you. You — finding a better way to know your own mind and to communicate your thoughts and decisions with every person you connect with during your work day.

So what is leader development? Opinions will vary, but here is mine, as someone who has designed his own program.

As the name suggests — it's developmental. It's a program with clearly stated objectives that will develop your leadership capacity.

This means it can't merely deliver content, no matter what the format. Content is not in short supply or difficult to access. Amazon's book search on leadership tops at 100K, a Google search of leadership is creeping on two billion hits. If anything, content is too plentiful. Instead, great leadership development:

1. Assesses. You can't develop what you can't measure. Leader development should define the edge of your leadership capacity to provide an objective measure of where you are starting from. I'm not talking about

personality assessments either, I'm referring to an actual assessment on your current leader effectiveness.

2. Challenges: Quality leader development programs will not suffer passive engagement by participants. A program must push you beyond your comfort zone. As the legendary consultant Marvin Weisbord was quoted, "Change means doing something you have never done before." Leader development should invite you to walk 18 months out into your future, plant a flag in the ground and say, "I will be able to..." with a significant and measurable goal that will have a noticeable impact in your business.
3. Trains: If we know how to lead better, we likely will. Programs should teach skills, require you to practice, and provide substantial feedback to help you develop those skills.
4. Supports: Significant, lasting change will require support to develop. Programs should include ongoing connection to a cohort, create closer connections with a stable smaller group, and have access or directly include one-on-one accredited executive coaching. They should have an intensive residency period but are also ongoing to allow you the required time to develop your leadership with support along the way.
5. Puts you first. Programs should invite you to co-create your development according to your specific needs and your schedule. "One-size-fits-all" doesn't apply to leader development, and neither does, "take what you think you need." If you knew, you wouldn't need the program.

My description might seem rigorous, challenging, even intimidating. A good program will be all these things at some point to each participant. But you won't be alone and the return on investment is incalculable if you really show up. What is the return on successfully dealing with a major issue in your life or business that you haven't been able to? Developing the confidence of clarity to make a bold decision? What is the return on showing up in a serious conversation, at your personal best, where what you say or do next has seven-figure, generational consequences? What's the Mastercard slogan? Priceless.

I've had the privilege of supporting and witnessing leaders who for the first time clearly understand what they can do to dramatically increase their effectiveness. How they can change their approach to have a significant impact in their organization, or for the very first time, become aware of their not-so-minor role in an ongoing problem pattern. The gratification of witnessing a permanent boost in confidence and energy from that kind of life-changing clarity is a big part of why I do this work. **CG**

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