

WHITE PAPER

Why Leadership Development Fails & What to do About it



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Executive Summary

Leadership development programs play a pivotal role in nurturing the capabilities of emerging and existing leaders within organizations. However, a significant number of these programs fail to achieve their intended objectives, resulting in wasted resources and missed opportunities for organizational growth. This whitepaper explores the common pitfalls of leadership development initiatives and proposes strategic approaches to enhance their effectiveness. By adopting a more personalized, practical, and continuous learning framework, organizations can better equip their leaders for the complex challenges of the modern business environment.

Introduction

Leadership development is an essential investment for organizations aiming to cultivate a robust pipeline of capable leaders, with an annual global industry spend of over \$350 Billion USD¹.

These programs are designed to equip individuals with the skills, mindset, and knowledge required to navigate the complexities of leadership roles. Despite the critical importance of these initiatives, many fall short of expectations, failing to deliver tangible outcomes in terms of leader preparedness, performance, and succession planning.

Consider these statistics from a 2019 HBR article² :

01.

75% of 1,500 managers surveyed from across 50 organizations were dissatisfied with their company's Learning & Development function.

02.

70% of employees report that they don't have mastery of the skills needed to do their jobs.

03.

Only 12% of employees apply new skills in-company training to their jobs.

04.

Only 25% of survey participants believed that training measurably improved performance.

1. <https://trainingindustry.com/wiki/learning-services-and-outsourcing/size-of-training-industry/>

2. Harvard Business Review. "Where Companies Go Wrong with Learning and Development." Steve Glaveski, 2019.

Common Pitfalls of Leadership Development Programs

Lack of Alignment with Organizational Goals and Context

One of the primary reasons leadership development programs fail is the disconnect between the program's objectives and the strategic goals of the organization. Programs often adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, neglecting the unique context, culture, and challenges of the organization and its industry.

Poor Timing, Flawed Content, and Mindsets are not Taken into Account

Often, programs are a one-size-fits-all that disregards the individual needs of each learner, resulting in irrelevant material (timing or content). This makes the program an additional time and energy burden on the individual learner, which corresponds to a lowering of their productivity and desire for other developmental opportunities. Becoming a better leader often requires changing behaviours — this process must start from within with an awareness of one's beliefs, values, and traits.

Insufficient Real-World Application

Many programs focus heavily on theoretical knowledge without providing sufficient opportunities for practical application. This gap between theory and practice leaves participants ill-prepared to translate what they've learned and reflected upon into actionable strategies in their work environment. Without immediate application, the "forgetting curve" kicks in, with learners retaining only 25% of the content after one week without any review.³

Failure to Measure Outcomes

A lack of robust mechanisms to measure the effectiveness of leadership development programs contributes to their failure. Without clear metrics and regular assessments, it is challenging to gauge the program's impact on individual and organizational performance.

Inadequate Support and Follow-Up

The effectiveness of leadership development is significantly diminished when there is a lack of ongoing support and follow-up for participants. Without reinforcement, coaching, and opportunities to apply new skills, the initial learning quickly fades, reducing the long-term impact of the program. Furthermore, executive leadership support and participation are often absent, signalling a lack of prioritization.

1. <https://www.structural-learning.com/post/ebbinghaus-forgetting-curve>

Strategies for Enhancing Effectiveness

Note: Bullet points indicate Gasparotto Group-specific approach

Aligning with Strategic Objectives

Leadership development programs must be intricately aligned with the organization's strategic goals and tailored to address specific leadership challenges. This alignment ensures that the development efforts are directly contributing to the organization's long-term success.



Conduct a full Analysis as part of the [ADDIE Model](#).



Sponsor to answer the Project Framing Questionnaire detailing objectives and constraints.

One-Size-Fits-One Learning

To enhance leadership development programs, organizations should tailor content and schedule to each participant's unique needs and career stage, ensuring relevance and engagement. This personalized approach boosts learner motivation and addresses the mindset of behavioural change, maximizing developmental opportunities and productivity.



While an overall program "Centreline" exists for content, participants choose their own "intentions for development" based on what is most relevant to their learning needs.



Conduct baseline psychometric assessments, including 360° feedback, to deepen self-awareness.

Emphasizing Practical Application

Programs should integrate real-world projects, simulations, and case studies that reflect the actual challenges leaders face within the organization. This practical emphasis enhances the transferability of skills from the learning environment to the workplace.



"Bring Your Own Challenges" are incorporated into the program so learners can apply the theory and group discussion insights directly to a current business challenge.



Conduct comprehensive experiential learning events that pressure-test individuals and teams to solve complex hands-on problems.

Providing Continuous Support and Development

Leadership development should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. Incorporating continuous learning opportunities, coaching, and mentorship ensures that leaders can evolve their skills over time and adapt to changing business dynamics.



Facilitating “Coaching for Leaders” programs to empower leaders at all levels with the skills to ask great questions.



Facilitating “Team Charter” workshops to consolidate all the learning from a program into current working methods explicitly written out in a team playbook.

Implementing Robust Evaluation Mechanisms

To ensure the effectiveness of leadership development initiatives, organizations must establish clear metrics for success and regularly evaluate the program’s impact on individual and organizational performance. This data-driven approach allows for continuous improvement and adaptation of the program.



Linking program objectives to organizational KPIs.



Conducting pre and post program evaluation surveys to measure effectiveness.

Conclusion

The failure of many leadership development programs to reach their objectives is a multifaceted issue that requires a comprehensive strategy to address. By ensuring alignment with organizational goals, focusing on practical application, providing ongoing support, and implementing robust evaluation mechanisms, organizations can significantly enhance the effectiveness of their leadership development efforts. Investing in the continuous growth and development of leaders is not only beneficial for the individuals involved but is also critical for the long-term success and competitiveness of the organization.




References

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5. Forbes. "Leadership Development is a \$366B Industry: Here's Why Most Programs Don't Work." Westfall. 2019.
6. Forbes. "What Makes Leadership Development Programs Succeed." Gleeson. 2023.



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