

BRAINTRUST

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF A LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

by Jack Denfeld Wood and Gianpiero Petriglieri

You have come to the conclusion it is time for a leadership program for some or all of the members of your management team. You may even embark on such a program yourself. As this will require precious time away from work and family, you want to maximize return on investment for you, your team members and the company. How can you do this? First, by questioning your own assumptions about leadership. Second, by opting for a genuine leadership development program. Third, by encouraging those who will attend the program to take emotional risks and assume responsibility for their own learning. Fourth, by providing a supportive context for responsible leaders after the program is over.

USEFUL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT LEADERSHIP

We'd like to start by dispelling some common - and misunderstood - assumptions about leadership. The statements below may sound simple, but they are nonetheless fundamental in choosing a program upon which serious leadership development can be built.

There is no gene for leadership. To our knowledge, completion of the human genome project has revealed no gene for leadership. No one is a 'born leader'. Innate traits and early experiences are important, but the capacity to exercise leadership can be developed and refined throughout our lives.

Leadership really happens in small groups. Although there might be organizational aspects to leadership - such as your ceremonial speech at the annual meeting - leadership is really exercised every day in the context of small group. Small groups, usually 4 to 12 members - family sized - are the fundamental decision-making unit of any collectivity, whether tribe, nation or organization.

Leadership is not the preserve of individuals in positions of formal authority. Leadership is exercised at all levels in any organization - from the shop floor to the boardroom. However, to develop leaders it is crucial that highly visible and recognized top executives endeavor to demonstrate, encourage and reward effective and responsible leadership behavior throughout the organization.

Leadership is not a style one adopts. Leadership is not simply a "style" one learns to adopt and apply to a certain situation, like a new suit of clothes for a party. It is a dynamic exchange of emotional energy to further some task within any social system. In order to exercise leadership effectively and responsibly, we need to understand how organizations function socially and psychologically, how small groups and individuals work - and especially, how we ourselves operate.

Leadership can't be taught, but the capacity to lead can be developed. Leadership cannot be learned from a book. It needs to be developed from repeated cycles of experience and reflection. Technical and strategic skills can be learned from others, i.e. teachers, or through others, i.e. role models, but lasting behavioural skills are best developed through integrating personal experience with others. This means that learning for leadership requires practicing and reflecting, not alone, but with others.

Leadership is not only a rational endeavor. Covert and unconscious forces are a central influence on individual and collective behavior. Learning to recognize, understand, and work with these influences is the only way to avoid being inadvertently surprised, disturbed, or unwittingly controlled by them.

Leadership is timeless. The fundamentals of leadership do not change with culture, century, civilization, sector or industry. Effective leadership is a timeless and universal human phenomenon, and its essence has not changed in millennia.

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“Leadership isn’t necessarily good. Leadership is as much a force for evil as it is for good. It takes as much leadership to destroy a building, start a war, or obliterate a city as it does to create an institute....”

Leadership isn't simply about change. It has become fashionable nowadays to talk about leadership as if it were synonymous with change. But a realistic view of history shows that while some changes are positive, others can be catastrophic. It takes wise leadership to recognize when the pressure for action and change is detrimental to the health of an organization or society. Effective and responsible leadership is just as much about stability as it is about change.

Leadership isn't necessarily good. Leadership is as much a force for evil as it is for good. It takes as much leadership to destroy a building, start a war, or obliterate a city as it does to create an institute, build a peace or develop a society. This is why the primary task of a world-class leadership program is to develop the capacity to lead effectively and responsibly.

OPTING FOR MEANINGFUL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The primary task of any leadership program that fosters meaningful and long-lasting development is to provide participants with a chance to deepen their understanding of lead-

ership, and to develop their capacity to exercise it effectively and responsibly. A genuine leadership development program will offer numerous opportunities to learn about exercising leadership, followership and working in groups. Participants come away from the program with an increased awareness of their individual motivations, of the way they manage interpersonal relationships, and of the complex structure and dynamics that occur within and between groups.

How do participants learn all this? Case studies, readings, lectures and questionnaires are not enough. Learning about leadership takes practice, involvement, and the willingness to question oneself. In short, it requires learning through personal experience. Learning from experience does not mean accumulating knowledge, nor even successfully completing concrete exercises within the program. Developing the capacity to lead involves the messy job of exploring one's own and others' behavior as it unfolds in the here and now.

Many executives - and management professors -approach leadership training with a thinly veiled 'assessment mentality'.

A CEO BACKGROUND

PRESIDENT & CEO

They rely on cognitive-rational models to capture behaviors, assess them, and recommend solutions for improving performance. Yet the main purpose of any serious leadership program based on experience is development, not assessment. In other words, working to enhance a capacity to lead responsibly through understanding and integrating rational and emotional factors.

To do this, we have found it helpful if both faculty and participants work together to build a culture of curiosity rather than one of judgment. This creates a relatively safe space to explore the domain of leadership and teamwork. Only then can the program become a learning space where it is possible to be curious about, and 'play' with, relatively unfamiliar and uncomfortable material - an environment where it is possible to experiment and be clumsy, without judging and being judged, and without getting overwhelmed or over-reacting.

A clear and explicit confidentiality contract among faculty and participants is essential. Nothing about managers' behavior is to be shared with the sponsoring company or other staff outside the program boundary.

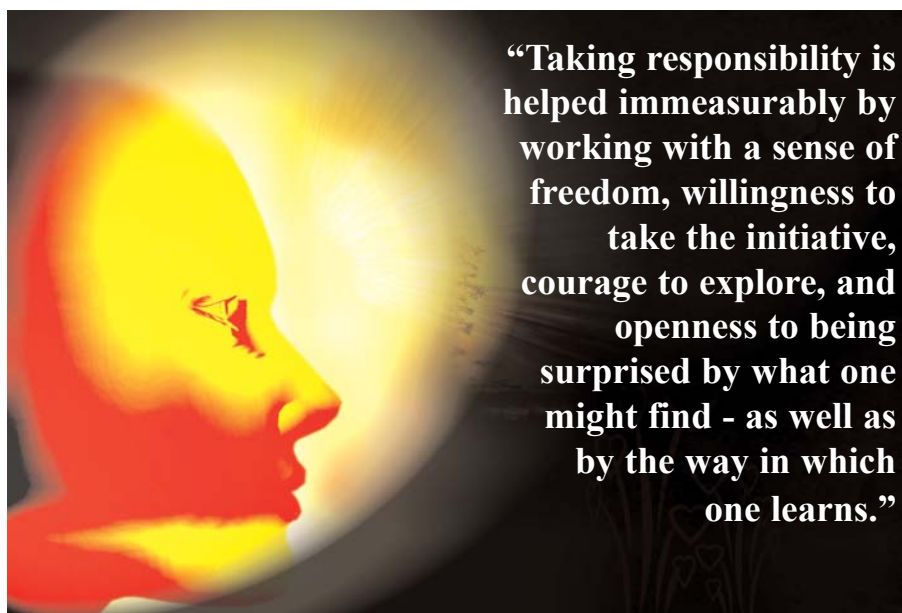
MAXIMIZE LEARNING BY TAKING RISKS AND TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Maximizing learning during a leadership program - like exercis-

tional. This allows you to experience, express, and explore emotional material that we habitually avoid, dismiss, forget, or conceal behind the comfort of formal roles familiar routines, and large desks in corner offices on the top floor.

In our experience - without exception - a class cannot be challenged any further than the degree to which individuals are willing to challenge themselves. Participants have the capacity to explore and learn, and each has the ultimate authority and responsibility to decide how deep they want to push the exploration of their own behavior. Hence, for meaningful and long-lasting development, it is essential that participants take responsibility for shaping and discovering their own learning. They will be asked to articulate their expectations and concerns, and encouraged to actively pursue whatever they wish to get out of the program.

Taking responsibility is helped immeasurably by working with a sense of freedom, willingness to take the initiative, courage to explore, and openness to being surprised by what one might find - as well as by the way in which one learns. Skepticism, reluctance and defensiveness are as natural and spontaneous as courage, openness and risk-taking. As long as participants are willing to explore what provokes their behavior, they will derive lasting learning from the program, and further develop their leadership capacities.



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PROVIDE A SUPPORTIVE CONTEXT AFTER THE PROGRAM

An excellent leadership development program, at its best, can foster meaningful and long-lasting behavioral learning-nothing less, and nothing more. Executives who take the opportunity seriously, bring themselves fully into the program, and allow themselves to explore and be surprised are rewarded with a richer developmental experience and a deeper understanding of how leadership really works. However, the impact of even the most intense and meaningful course will ultimately fade if the company is unable to provide a supportive context when participants return back to the workplace.

ing leadership - requires authenticity, investment, commitment and a willingness to take certain emotional risks. Authenticity means voicing thoughts and feelings as they occur. Investment means putting one's heart into the work of learning. Commitment means leaving one's heart there through good and bad moments. Risk-taking calls for moving outside one's usual comfort zone. The more naturally and spontaneously participants behave, the more experiences they have available for reflection and learning.

We often begin working with a new group by asking managers how much they would like to be challenged. More often than not, they understand the question in terms of physical challenges - with images of bungee jumping and abseiling down steep cliffs. We are, however, referring to a psychological challenge. The first critical step out of your comfort zone is not physical but emo-

An intensive leadership program works best when individual participants have a concrete need and genuine desire to deepen their understanding of leadership and team dynamics, and when their companies reward the pursuit of such learning in two ways: by encouraging managers to develop their self-awareness and leadership skills, and by offering them opportunities to apply those skills at work. Such opportunities might include challenging assignments, chances to lead teams, genuine feedback, and visible rewards for those who continue growing and exercise creative, effective and responsible leadership. It goes without saying that the commitment, example and tangible support of senior leaders are essential factors for creating a developmental environment back at work.