

Designing a successful leadership development programme

The solution to ineffective leadership development

So let's start with the problem that has plagued leadership development for as long as we can remember, which is described by Henry Mintzberg as the 'lone wolf' approach. He describes the belief that if we send people on a programme of development they will return changed, and what's more, will transform into evangelists, cascading skills and spreading change around the organisation.

But in reality this is exceptionally hard - they will be fighting against years of learned behaviour and reluctance to change throughout the organisation. The more likely outcome is that they will simply revert to their old way of working very quickly, and the learning is rapidly forgotten.

A solution is described by Margaret Mead, the cultural anthropologist who says "never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

If we can galvanise a group of people in our organisation to work together, committed to a common purpose, they can change anything.

So the question is, how can we design a leadership development programme that builds a group of thoughtful committed citizens? How can we empower them to change their workplace?

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Margaret Mead



The essential components of successful leadership development programmes

Let's take a look at the 4 essential components of successful leadership development and how to deliver them successfully

1. Skills and knowledge transfer

Clearly leaders need new skills and knowledge - there are things they need to learn that they don't currently know. It is important to remember that our goal is to empower those leaders to deliver real change. Therefore the skills and knowledge they need will be a combination of technical skills AND the behavioural skills to better lead and influence others.

Traditionally this is the point where we would get people together in a classroom, but there are all sorts of reasons why this is becoming harder and harder to do. Flexible working, remote working and busy workloads all mean people find it difficult to be able to be together at all, let alone for days at a time.

The modern workplace requires us to consider a wide range of different approaches that allow learners the flexibility to engage with materials on their terms.

The availability of inexpensive video technology has made this so much easier, allowing organisations to replicate many of the techniques typically

used to manage a physical classroom environment with features like breakout rooms. You also get the added benefit of being able to record sessions so people can watch or rewatch the workshop, including the discussion, at any time.

With workshop time being squeezed, it becomes even more important that your learners are guided and encouraged to experiment in the workplace and reflect upon their experiences. Make practical homework an integral part of your programme and review learner experiences during coaching and action learning.

Finally, whatever your plans for your learning content, be prepared to change them to respond to changes in the organisation's, or the learners' circumstances. A lot can happen in 12 months or more, and your learning programme needs to stay relevant. If themes are coming out of coaching that suggests more time needs to be spent on a particular topic, revisit it. If the organisational strategy changes and learners need different skills to excel, include them.

Leaders need a combination of technical skills AND the behavioural skills to better lead and influence others.





2. Individual coaching

Effective leadership development requires us to persuade our leaders to do things differently. We need to challenge their preconceptions of good leadership behaviour, examine how they compare against best practice, and generate a desire within them to take individual action. The single most effective way to do this is with individual coaching for the participants of the programme.

Coaching is a unbeatable tool for encouraging action and reflection by participants, but the two words that are going to be particularly important here are *alignment* and *value*.

We need to make sure the goals of our coaching are closely aligned with the goals of the programme and therefore of

the organisation. It's common to come across the preconception that coaching can only be about the individual and what they want to achieve, but that is simply not the case - in fact coaching should always incorporate organisational requirements into the goal setting process.

Make sure you discuss that alignment with your coaches and agree a process by which coaching goals can be reviewed and amended to meet organisational goals and those of the development programme.

The second aspect of alignment involves using what comes OUT of coaching. The coaching you provide is going to generate a lot of incredibly useful data about the strengths and weaknesses of your leaders and the support they need, and



we need to be able to respond to this. For example, you may discover that all the participants are looking for help in a particular development area that could be more efficiently tackled in a later learning session, rather than through 10 individual coaching conversations.

Once again, talk to your coaches and agree a process so this information can be gathered whilst respecting the confidentiality of the coaching process.

One of the biggest challenges with including coaching as part of leadership development programmes is the perceived cost, but there is so much that can be done here. Firstly consider using a small coaching team so each coach is working with multiple participants, which will immediately reduce costs associated with preparation, travel and logistics. Secondly, consider using video-conferencing for coaching or a blend of in-person and video coaching.

3. Action learning

We need to bring our programme participants together as an effective leadership group. We need them to feel competent and confident to challenge each other, and to support each other. They need to get comfortable in failure, confident that their colleagues will pick them up and dust them down. The process of action learning encourages self-sufficiency amongst the group by getting them to work together to solve real workplace challenges.



Once the group discovers the value of the action learning environment, you typically see them bringing more and more of their own challenges in to be discussed, and this should be encouraged. Of course as the topics become more diverse, they also need carefully managing, so work with the participants to design a structure that keeps discussions on track and on time.

Leadership development white paper

As discussions wind up, keep a focus on learning by asking questions that bring the group full circle. Questions such as “what have you learnt from this conversation?”, “how could you do better next time?” or “how has this helped you with your own development?” are great to refocus people on learning, and provide a balance to the problem-solving aspects of action learning.

3. Workplace projects

Finally, we need the group to prove their value to the organisation by delivering real practical change during and after the programme. By setting the group meaningful workplace projects to work on together, the organisation can get immediate value from the programme and also demonstrate its trust in the group and its commitment to their development.

It's not unusual for leadership development programmes to include some activity that resembles homework, but the recommendation is to aim big! Design projects that give participants the opportunity to demonstrate the higher-level skills and attributes they need to get on in the organisation, and to deliver meaningful monetary value.

Your leadership development programme is probably going to be a minimum of 6-12 months, so there is time for participants to make a real difference here, remember however that they are going to be delivering as part of a team whom they probably haven't worked with before, with a variety of different views

and approaches they haven't experienced before. They'll need lots of help (and time) to plan and scope the project, on top of the time it actually takes to deliver.

Because the projects are significant, they are likely to need sponsorship from senior leaders, so this provides a great opportunity for those leaders to demonstrate their commitment to the programme, and for the participants to get exposure to those in senior positions.

Finally, hold the participants account for what they deliver. Whilst a leadership development programme should give participants a safe space to experiment and fail, they need to learn from that failure and be able to ultimately deliver on their commitments, and a project is absolutely the right environment in which to expect them to deliver.

Further help and advice

VMAX have been designing and delivering leadership development programmes for over 30 years.

If you'd like our help to design your programme...

Phone us on [01925 426006](tel:01925426006)

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