

Leadership training - the pitfalls

Andrew Game takes a look at what *not* to spend your training budget on and why

While the 'war for talent' is something of a worn-out phrase these days, that doesn't mean that the problem has gone away: the scarcity of high-calibre managers remains a key concern for all employers.

In a seller's market, organisations are finding it increasingly hard to find and attract managers with appropriate leadership skills and this, in turn, has forced them to look inward in their search for people with the 'right stuff' to take the business forward. In our experience, the search for home-grown leadership talent has now become fundamental to human capital management strategies.

Unfortunately, not all leadership development is good development, and buyers of training courses are beginning to take a more rigorous approach to assessing the returns on their investment. Leadership training – like leadership itself – is open to many interpretations.

Here are some of the areas that are worth avoiding.

One size fits all

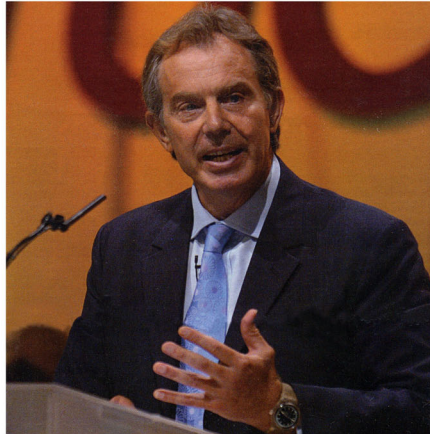
Avoid: Perceiving leadership training as a "commodity" purchase, putting large numbers of managers through standard development programmes, with identical content and structure. From a psychological standpoint, this approach is rarely effective and is unlikely to result in long-term improvement because it assumes that everyone has the same development needs, the same learning style and that they can be brought on in the same way.

Try: A targeted approach to people development that takes into account an individual's unique characteristics.

Treating the symptoms, not the cause

Avoid: Sending people on courses as a knee-jerk reaction. "John needs to develop his coaching skills to be a more effective leader – send him on a course." How many times have we heard people say this? While this may have a positive effect on John if he has poor understanding of the techniques available to coach others, the reasons for his under-performance may be far more complex. For example, he may have poor levels of emotional intelligence, a lack of assertiveness, or a basic lack of motivation to help others.

Try: Identifying the specific root of the performance problem by analysing how the manager's personal motivation or core psychological skills are contributing to the issue.



Tony Blair is a natural leader, but not everyone has the right stuff to command the troops

'There's little point in imposing a set of leadership techniques on individuals who, in terms of their innate psychological make-up, will find it difficult to put these techniques into practice'

The short, sharp shock

Avoid: Instant fixes. People will not move from novices to experts at the end of a standard three-day leadership programme. Too often a short course can be seen as a passport to success without any consideration of how delegates actually change their behaviours. One-off leadership courses far removed from the challenges of the office environment and with no feedback mechanism are likely to be less effective.

Try: Relating the challenges to those in the workplace and ensure that feedback after the course continues in the workplace.

All talk, no action

Avoid: Thinking that just by being told about a skill someone will learn it. Effective leadership requires a range of skills and knowledge, which are driven by different psychological processes. Take empathy: developing a person's ability to anticipate the emotional reactions of others requires accessing deep emotional parts of the brain. To effectively improve a person's psychological skills requires thorough practice and feedback repeated over a period of time. No amount of models or descriptions will lead to development of this capability.

Try: Taking account of the underlying psychological processes being targeted and select the appropriate training approach to 'reach the right parts'.

The more the better

Avoid: Cramping too much into the course. Some leadership programmes run on the principle of the more content, the better the value. Delegates are bombarded with endless models and nuggets of 'useful information'. Stimulating? Sometimes. Confusing? Yes. Effective development? No. I recall a manager in a financial services company, after attending an in-house training programme of this type, saying: "It was good, I found it really interesting. But I'm not sure I learned anything."

Try: Clearly defining one or two key learning objectives and focusing the content on developing these capabilities. Avoid the trap of covering too much and achieving too little.

Everyone's a winner

Avoid: Offering leadership courses on an open basis. The harsh reality is that individuals all have different levels of motivation and different levels of psychological skills in relation to leadership. Therefore, while organisations may have the best intentions in running open leadership training programmes, investing equal amounts in everyone is not going to be cost-effective.

Try: Some initial screening of that person's potential, to maximise the value to both the individual and the organisation.

The conclusion

There is an obvious need for leadership training and there are many good practitioners to choose from. But first, buyers need to be more engaged in the purchase process – knowing precisely what they're buying. Second, they should have a far better understanding of the psychological needs of individuals marked out for leadership training. There's little point in imposing a set of leadership techniques on people who, in terms of their innate psychological make-up, will find it hard to put these techniques into practice. By avoiding these mistakes, and focusing on people with the right motivation, leadership development can be hugely beneficial to the individual and the organisation. [▶](#)

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