

**TIPS AND TECHNIQUES – JULY 2008**  
**THE CHALLENGE OF DEVELOPING LEADERS:**  
**MAXIMIZING THE IMPACT OF TRAINING**  
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*“The personal learning catalyzed by a top-notch program can be tremendous. The problem my research suggests, is what happens when a manager comes back to the day-to-day routine of the office.” --Herminia Ibarra, INSEAD*

Becoming a leader is a life’s work. Great leadership is the product of rich and varied experiences, clear values, good mentoring, thoughtful reflection, shared insights, and deliberate practice.

World class leadership training, like that found in *The Leadership Challenge*, can be a tremendous catalyst for accelerated leadership growth and development. But training is not, by itself, sufficient. Optimizing leadership development requires a holistic approach that includes what happens before, during and, especially, after training.

Moreover, leadership training has to be woven into the fabric of the organization. Values have to be lived and modeled. Training can succeed only where the current leaders have credibility, where their actions are consistent with the values and principles the training espouses.

You have to think beyond the classroom if you want to optimize the value that your organization gains from leadership training. You have to put in place systems and processes to support leaders as they work to apply new insights and skills. And, you have to “model the way” by practicing what you preach.

### **The Six Disciplines**

We have found that the most effective leadership programs incorporate *The Six Disciplines of Breakthrough Learning* (The 6Ds™):

- D1: **Define** business outcomes
- D2: **Design** the COMPLETE experience
- D3: **Deliver** for application
- D4: **Drive** follow-through
- D5: **Deploy** active support
- D6: **Document** results

An example of these principles in action is the *Leadership Challenge® Workshop*, which has a 10-week extension to the program using *Friday5s®*. This web-based program establishes a clear timeline for follow through and reminds participants to stop, reflect, plan and apply what they have learned to help them put their learning to work. It encourages learners to seek feedback from their managers and peers, provides supporting content, and documents progress and achievement.

## **Achieving Excellence**

The path to leadership excellence requires specific goals, dedicated practice, caring feedback, and thoughtful reflection.

### **Specific goals**

“[L]eaders must have the capacity to envision an uplifting and ennobling image of the future and to enlist others in a common purpose.” (Kouzes and Posner: *A Leader’s Legacy*, p. 100). The leader’s ability to envision an ennobling future is critical not only for the organizations they lead, but for themselves as well. To optimize the value of leadership training, leaders need to reflect on the feedback they have received and select a very few, specific, high-impact goals for improving their leadership.

While a goal-setting exercise is part of most leadership programs, too often it is given little time and attention. Setting a personal vision and objectives for enhanced leadership is hard and thoughtful work. It is not something to be dashed off in a few minutes. Nor should those goals, once set, be relegated to the forgotten pages of a neglected notebook on a dusty bookshelf.

For development goals to have maximum value, they need to be shared and understood by all those who can contribute to their achievement. In the case of development goals, that means people closest to the leader who can provide ideas, feedback, coaching and support. Leadership development is a team sport.

To optimize the value of leadership training, encourage participants to set one or two high-impact, stretch goals for themselves. Then encourage learners to share those goals with their managers, direct reports, and spouses or partners with a request for support and feedback.

### **Dedicated practice**

Studies of top-level human performance in a wide range of fields – from business, to chess, to sports and the performing arts – have all concluded that the amount of practice is what separates the truly great from the also-rans. “The best people in any field are those who devote the most hours to what experts call ‘deliberate practice.’ It’s activity that’s explicitly intended to improve performance that reaches for objectives just beyond one’s level of competence...” (*Fortune*, October 30, 2006, p. 94)

As there is a direct correlation between expertise and the number of hours of practice, leaders need to deliberately practice what they have been taught if they are to optimize the value of leadership training. It is especially important that they be reminded and encouraged to practice early in the development of new skills and habits, when they still feel foreign and awkward. In the absence of reminders, encouragement, and expectations for practice, it is easy to slip back into old habits.

Too often, developmental objectives “fall off the radar” in the face of other, more urgent, but seldom more important, objectives. That is why *The Leadership Challenge*®

*Workshop* incorporates a system which actively reminds participants of their goals and the importance of continuing to work toward them on a predictable schedule.

### **Caring feedback**

“Real experts seek out constructive, even painful feedback.” (*Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2007, p. 121). However thoughtful and self-aware leaders may be, it is impossible to be truly objective about one’s own performance. “To stay honest with ourselves, what we really need are “loving critics” – people who care deeply enough about us to give us honest feedback about how we’re doing.” (*A Leader’s Legacy*, p. 28).

But asking for feedback is not a natural act. Indeed the statement that ranks lowest on the *Leadership Practices Inventory*® from the observer’s point-of-view is: “(He or she) asks for feedback on how his/her actions affect other people’s performance.” So, to help participants maximize the value of leadership training, we need to make feedback readily available and actively encourage its use.

There are various means to accomplish this, including: establishing learning partners or peer coaching teams, providing professional coaches, and facilitating manager involvement. Follow through management systems can be used to encourage feedback in a number of ways: managers can be sent a link to their direct report’s goals that includes a built-in feedback form; each participant can see everyone else’s goals and progress and be encouraged to provide feedback and coaching; a feedback request form pops up every time a participant completes an update.

### **Thoughtful reflection**

Forum Corporation’s *Principles of Workplace Learning* concluded that maximizing the impact of training required alternating cycles of action and reflection. All action – being caught in an endless ‘do-loop’ – creates little new insight. All reflection without action is empty philosophizing. Instead, learning from experience requires taking action and making the time to reflect on the results: What went well and should be repeated or enhanced? What could have gone better and, therefore, what do I need to change or do differently in the future? What is my next move?

Unfortunately, time for reflection is under assault everywhere by an increasing workload and an ever-expanding array of disruptive electronic devices. To maximize the impact of leadership training, we need to remind leaders that “We have to *stop doing* for some amount of time each day.” (*A Leader’s Legacy*, p. 103) We have to prompt them to stop and reflect on their leadership and their goals and values, on the opportunities taken and the opportunities missed to improve each day. We have to encourage the practice of the art of reflection.

To further this practice, The *Leadership Challenge* follow through system, for example, poses questions for reflection on each update:

- What have you done to make progress on your goals?
- How far did you get?
- What are you going to do next?

- What did you learn in the process?

### **Summary**

Leadership training can be a life-changing event, a critical accelerator in becoming a great leader.

Its full impact, however, requires continued effort and practice back on the job. To optimize the value of training, business leaders, HR professionals, and learning professionals need to treat leadership development as a process rather than an 'event.'

Increasing deliberate practice, feedback, and support are the areas of greatest opportunity to increase the positive impact of leadership training. Systems and processes need to be in place to extend learning beyond the classroom and encourage application in day-to-day leadership.

Most importantly, the environment has to be right. The future leaders we want and need to run our organizations can only emerge in an environment where values are clear and unflinchingly modeled, where leaders genuinely care about the people that work for them, and take their greatest pride from the leaders they have helped develop.

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