Laying the Groundwork

First Steps in Evaluating Leadership Development

Evaluating the impact of an organization’s efforts to develop leaders is challenging. However, if the evaluation is set up properly, it will not only improve development efforts, and thereby the quality of leadership, but also contribute to the effectiveness of the organization.

This organization is spending a lot on leadership development. Show me that it will provide my people with what they need to be prepared for the challenges we are facing now and the challenges we’ll face in the future. Show me that they are facing those challenges in a new and more effective way. Show me that what they do as leaders will have an impact on the people around them and on the organization. Show me the relationship between leadership development and my bottom line. Show me!

That statement is not a direct quotation, but you could go into any number of organizations around the world and hear senior leaders saying something very much like it. Given the importance of leadership to organizational viability and competitiveness and the significant resources that are being devoted to developing leaders, it is absolutely critical to assess the impact of leadership development, to learn what’s working and what isn’t.

Conducting high-quality evaluation, though, is a challenge. Leadership is a complex activity, and organizational efforts to improve it, and to make sure there is enough of it, take many forms. But if the evaluation is set up and executed properly, it will not only improve development efforts, and thereby the quality of leadership, but also contribute to the effectiveness of the organization.

Done well, the evaluation of leadership development is itself an important leadership activity.

Whatever kind of leadership development initiative is being conducted—a classroom program, 360-degree feedback, formal coaching, work-
Based projects, developmental relationships such as mentoring, challenging assignments, or some combination of these—the evaluation of it is best carried out in five interrelated steps: identifying key stakeholders, performing a needs assessment, designing the evaluation, implementing it, and communicating it. The first two steps lay the groundwork for effectiveness and are what I focus on here. (For some evaluation basics see the sidebar above. For more information on the whole process of evaluation, see the resources listed on page 8.)

**KEY STAKEHOLDERS**

A fundamental step in any evaluation is to identify key stakeholders: individuals or groups who have involvement in, responsibility for, or significant interest in the leadership development initiative and its evaluation. They may belong to the client organization, the provider organization, or some external group, such as an external funding organization. For instance, the stakeholder group might include the designers of the initiative, trainers, other human resource staff, potential participants in the initiative, senior managers who have a stake in the outcomes, line managers whose staff will participate in the initiative, and representatives of the funding organization.

To identify specific key stakeholders, you can begin by asking questions such as these:

- Who has a vested interest in the intervention or the evaluation?
- Are there additional people whose support is required for the success of the initiative or the evaluation?
- Who has decision-making authority with respect to both the initiative and the evaluation?

After identifying key stakeholders, it is then necessary to determine the best way to involve each of them in the needs assessment and the initiative and evaluation design process. Because it can be very difficult to gather all key stakeholders together, you may need to get creative. For example, if you can gather only half of the key stakeholders, part of their “homework” in preparation for the needs assessment can be to gather crucial information from the remaining stakeholders. This activity serves three functions. It provides the information necessary for the assessment, it promotes relationships among the stakeholders, and it gets them all on the same page in terms of information about the initiative.

Whatever the method, the important point is to gain buy-in from all key stakeholders for both the leadership development initiative and the evaluation, greatly improving the chances of success.

**NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

The process of evaluating leadership development begins at the beginning—with needs assessment. When evaluation is considered only after a leadership development initiative has been designed or is actually underway, the effectiveness of the evaluation (and possibly of the initiative itself) is greatly diminished.

In an effective needs assessment, three types of things are identified: first, the critical organizational challenges that drive the need for leadership development; second, the targets for leadership development and the leadership needs related to the challenges; and third, the specific, measurable outcomes of leadership development that are needed, including...
the level of mastery desired for these outcomes.

Organizational Challenges

To meet the leadership needs of a group or an organization, leader development and leadership development (see the definitions above) must be linked to the critical challenges the organization is facing. It is important to know why the organization’s stakeholders are willing to spend time and money on leadership development and what they hope to accomplish. What is the challenge that is so compelling that they are willing to devote resources to it? This step is critical to laying the groundwork for establishing clearly focused and well-aligned leadership development processes.

For instance, you can ask the stakeholder group questions such as these:

- What are the most critical issues addressed by your strategic objectives by your CEO? (Note that the CEO is rarely part of the key stakeholder group, except when the organization is relatively small or the risk of the initiative is relatively large.)
- What challenges stand between your organization and its success?
- What are the consequences of not addressing these challenges?

Organizational challenges can vary widely. Some examples are reducing employee turnover, developing leaders to fill the leadership pipeline, creating a new, postmerger culture, increasing revenue, creating high-performing teams in order to remain competitive, and bringing quality services and products to market in a more efficient manner.

Once the stakeholder group has listed and defined the most critical challenges, it should then prioritize these challenges.

Targets

Development can be targeted at individuals, work groups or teams, or even the organization as a whole. Most feedback-intensive programs—CCL’s own leader development programs, for example—are targeted at individual leader development. In such programs, individuals receive feedback on their personal strengths and weaknesses in a classroom or coaching setting. Some feedback-intensive programs have team leadership as the focus but target the individual team leader for development. Team development programs, in contrast, often get the whole team in the room and target group development as the goal. In these cases, team actions, interrelationships, and performance are the focus, and the feedback is about the strengths and weaknesses of the group as a whole.

Leader and Leadership Needs

Identifying leadership development needs involves discussing with stakeholders where change is needed to solve a business problem or meet an organizational challenge: What do individuals or groups need to do differently? In what ways do they need to think or interact differently?

Leadership development needs can be assessed using questions such as these:

- What three changes in individual or group leadership would address the organizational challenges, and why?
- What are individuals or groups doing, or not doing, that prevents the organization from overcoming these challenges?
- What are the consequences of not addressing these leadership needs?

Typical individual leader needs include enhanced ability to share decision making, to act with incom-
ple information, to develop and motivate others, and to adapt to an environment of rapid change. Typical group needs have to do with improved communication and collaboration within and across groups, making changes in the way the group focuses on the organization’s strategy in its work, an enhanced ability to execute the group’s work in a way that uses the strengths and talents of all group members, and learning to access the whole system, rather than just those immediately nearby, to solve an organizational challenge.

Outcomes

Once you understand how development will be targeted and have established the leadership needs of the group or organization, you must identify the specific outcomes that should be evaluated. For any specific leadership need, there may be multiple outcomes. For example, if a leadership need is stated as “all individuals need to be able to coach their direct reports more effectively,” the associated, desirable outcomes might be that individuals can recognize the need for coaching with all employees, prepare coaching strategies for each employee according to need, develop employees by providing challenge and opportunity, develop strategies for appropriately increasing employee responsibility, and support a challenging climate to encourage employee development.

In addition to individual leader outcomes, business challenges may call for changes in the leadership capacities of groups or teams. Outcomes at a team or group level should also be created for these leadership needs. If, for example, stakeholders identify a group-level need for improved communication and collaboration across units in the organization, outcomes could be articulated that focus on increased frequency and complexity of contact between groups and that assess change in this area over time.

It is frequently the case, however, that organizations want group- or organization-level outcomes from initiatives targeted at individuals. It is important to surface these expectations, through dialogue with stakeholders that focuses on a deep understanding of both their targets for development and their expectations for impact. For example, it is common for organizations to want an impact on the bottom line as a result of sending many of their managers through a leader development program that targets the individual. Although such a result is not possible to achieve under some circumstances, it is unlikely to occur without extensive organizational support for individual development, such as action plans or coaching.

So the assessment of leadership needs and the articulation of outcomes for efforts that address these needs are both part of a process in which stakeholders must come to agreement on three issues. Two of the issues are interrelated: the desired targets for development and the level at which outcomes are expected. The third issue, less obvious but important to understand, is what level of mastery is desired for each of the chosen outcomes. The stakeholders’ expectations on all of these factors have important implications for how the evaluation should be designed and implemented. In the sections that follow, I will discuss levels of outcomes and how they relate to the targets for development, before turning to the issue of mastery.

Outcome Levels. As stated earlier, whereas an initiative may target the individual, the group, or the organizational level, the outcomes expected from an initiative may or may not be limited to the level of the target audience. For example, feedback-intensive programs focus almost exclusively on the individual and his or her own strengths and development needs—that is, they target the individual. However, this kind of program is often used by organizations with the intention of obtaining outcomes at the group or organizational level as well as the individual level.

At the individual level, participants may learn new leadership models and practices, gain new knowledge about their own strengths and weaknesses, or increase their ability to understand an issue from multiple perspectives. It is also possible that an initiative such as this may have group-level outcomes as well if the individual leader returns to the work setting and implements changes that affect his or her work team. In fact some organizations use individually targeted leader development to foster outcomes in the groups for which a single leader is ultimately responsible. Relevant group outcomes might come in the form of changes in working relationships within the group; changes in the operations of the group; changes in the vision, mission, or strategy of the group; changes in the effectiveness with which the group interacts with other groups; changes in the way the group interacts with clients; and changes in the productivity of the group, however it is measured.

When a team is the target for development, development work can focus both on the team as a functional entity and on the outcomes for which the team is responsible. Possible team-level outcomes include team cohesiveness, team effective-
ness, and the accomplishment of the team’s targeted goals.

A team development program, though having the group as the main target, might be expected to have outcomes for both the team and for individuals. For example, by working together in an initiative targeted at the team, individual team members may learn more about their unique contributions to their team and any current behaviors that make them less effective within it.

Finally, organization-level outcomes are also often desired from individual or team development initiatives. These outcomes may include culture change, enhanced organizational climate, improvements in the business challenges represented during the needs assessment, and improvements in the group or company bottom line. The likelihood of these outcomes occurring increases substantially when an individual or team development initiative is targeted at the skilled performance level of mastery (more on this later), when leaders have set specific action plans related to the challenges of the organization, and when the focus of the initiative is on leadership development broadly defined.

Of course the quality of individual and team leadership is only one factor playing into most organization-level outcomes. Organizational success results from a myriad of factors, such as well-aligned strategy, financial stability, and quality products and services.

Because the intended targets and expected outcomes can differ, it is important to review them both with all stakeholders. In this way, you can design measures that are appropriate to the target audience and that assess all desired levels of outcome.

Levels of Mastery. It is not reasonable to expect the same kind of learning or change, or the same quantity of learning or change, from different kinds of development initiatives or from initiatives of different scope—programs of different length, single events, a series of integrated experiences. In addition to clarifying stakeholder expectations with respect to targets and outcomes, it is important to understand the level of mastery desired for each outcome. Levels of mastery can be thought of as describing how well the targets are able to apply the skills and knowledge they have acquired during the initiative.

In general one of four levels of mastery can be assigned to each outcome. The progression through the levels describes movement from possessing knowledge about content, self, or group to skillfully performing a new leadership practice. Each level provides a platform for further development to the next level. What is important about these distinctions is that as the complexity of the learning increases, the time required for acquiring that learning also increases. A number of factors determine the specific length of time necessary to achieve each level of mastery: individual or group abilities and motivation, organizational commitment to leadership development, and access to high-quality leadership development resources are among them.

The first level of mastery, critical awareness and knowledge, includes the acquisition of new knowledge, change in self-awareness, and what we at CCL call “transformational perspective change.” New knowledge is acquired in almost any development event, from feedback-intensive programs and coaching relationships to action learning and job assignments. The knowledge people acquire through these experiences takes various forms. People gain new information about themselves or about how others perceive them. They learn new concepts about leadership itself, such as the components of strategic leadership, the cultural values on which the most significant national differences rest, or the dimensions of personality that affect leadership style.

Increased self-awareness can be general (“I am a reasonably good manager”) or more specific (“I am not seen as listening well to others”). After participating in a feedback-intensive program, some people report gaining personal insights about how they see themselves (“I judge myself too harshly”) or about their own needs for inclusion, achievement, or acceptance (“I want to be involved, and sometimes my requests for involvement overload me,” or “I need substantial issues to keep me driven”). It makes sense to think that new awareness about oneself must precede any behavioral change. In addition, new self-awareness often motivates an individual’s development of new skills.

Transformational perspective change is similar to increased self-awareness in that it is a change in attitude rather than an observable behavior, but it differs in its focus. Instead of focusing on one’s own strengths and weaknesses, attention is paid to insights about others and the environment in which one lives and works. Significant perspective changes usually happen more slowly than new self-insights, but they can occur as a result of a single powerful event.

The second level of mastery, guided application, is a more complex developmental task in that it involves comfort with the use of new insights and lessons in a structured, safe setting. A safe setting is one in which the individual or group will not be ridiculed or penalized for making mistakes, will receive supportive feedback from others regarding the use of new approaches or behaviors, and will have multiple opportunities to practice. Mastery of guided application is usually accomplished in two or three days in a classroom setting or simulated work environment, with a facilitator or coach providing feedback and guidance. Without guided
For more guidance on evaluation, see the following sources:


Leadership Learning Community. [www.leadershiplearning.org]. (A resource for “those who run, fund, study, and provide services to leadership development programs.”)


practice it is difficult for most people to move to the next level of mastery, which is attempted in the work setting itself, where mistakes may not be tolerated.

The third level, independent application, involves the use of new attitudes, skills, and behaviors in actual workplace situations without real-time guidance from facilitators or a coach. Independent application begins after a formal development experience has sparked individual or group awareness of the need for improvement, and, ideally, after the individual or group has had some opportunity for guided practice.

Independent application often takes time and exposure to multiple experiences. This is particularly true for skills that involve significant personal change in perspective or self-understanding, such as empowerment of others or learning tactics. Skills that are dependent on learning a process, such as giving constructive feedback or conflict resolution, can be acquired more quickly. Although real-time guidance is typically not available at this level of mastery, independent application does require an opportunity to be debriefed about how well a new practice is being received by colleagues and others.

Individuals working toward this level of mastery often choose a trained coach or a trusted colleague to give corrective and supportive feedback and to help devise a plan for further improvement. Working with a coach or trusted colleague ensures that use of newly developed leader skills, behaviors, and attitudes is transferred from the laboratory setting of the classroom to the more challenging milieu of the workplace. Independent application can last from one month to one year, depending on the amount of time devoted to practicing and coaching.

Mastery peaks at the level of skilled performance, which is marked by unconscious competence, the effortless and seamless integration of a new leadership practice into daily repertoires. Work at this level involves continual practice and the ability to adapt newly developed skills and behaviors to new contexts and situations. Leaders working on skilled performance often rely on journaling, periodic meetings with coaches and others, videotaping, and formal and informal solicitation of feedback from colleagues for their development. Attaining skilled performance requires devotion to the continued refinement of newly developed practices over a period of several months or even years.

The amount of time an organization invests in leader development initiatives and the type of activities these initiatives offer must match the level of mastery desired—and the evaluation design must incorporate measures suited to the level desired as well. The design of both the initiative and the evaluation must be in line with client expectations regarding level of mastery of the outcomes. A stakeholder who expects a skilled performance level to result from a three-day development program will inevitably be disappointed. In addition, an evaluation that attempts to measure this level from this kind of program is bound to have poor results.

CARE AND RIGOR

Laying the proper groundwork for the evaluation of a leadership development initiative is essential because leadership is complex and developing it is equally complex. This complexity can be dealt with only by getting people together at the onset so that systematic care and rigor can be applied over time. In this way, effective evaluation is an important component of leadership itself.