In many respects, leadership development is like an exercise regimen. To have the best chance of success, each should be approached as a process rather than an event.

The observations of researchers and trainers at the Center for Creative Leadership and the experiences of CCL’s clients indicate that although distinct leadership-building events do occur, leadership development takes place over time. In both leadership development and fitness training, periodic measurement helps people to know where they are, to see whether they are heading where they want to go—from their own perspective and from that of others. Leadership development is best achieved through a skillful combination of experiences (such as attending programs and participating in developmental exercises) and constructive follow-up evaluations (such as periodic assessments, tracking the continuous setting and completion of goals, and ongoing feedback).

Since its beginnings in the early 1970s, CCL—which has never subscribed to the theory that leaders are born, not made—has worked to better understand effective leadership so as to better develop it.

Through most of its history, CCL has focused on the development of individual leaders through self-awareness and behavioral change. Especially in the past decade, two important questions have emerged from those who design and conduct leadership development programs at CCL and from those who participate in them:

- Do leadership development interventions create a lasting impact beyond the immediate increases in self-awareness and changes in leadership behaviors?
- What factors contribute most to successful and lasting impacts?

It’s not uncommon to hear from participants in CCL’s Leadership Development Program (LDP) and other weeklong interventions that “this has been a wonderful experience, but what can I do to ensure I will be able to use it when I get back to work?” One of the biggest challenges for both CCL and program participants, then, is finding a way to transfer what happens during the programs to the workplace. CCL knows from research and practice that event-driven developmental experiences are not as likely to have long-term impact as are process-oriented experiences.

Also in This Issue

ISSUES & OBSERVATIONS:
- How Changing Realities and Perceptions Affect You as a Leader

LEADERSHIP BRIEFING:
- Leadership Effectiveness Hangs in the Balance

DIVIDENDS & INTEREST:
- Reflections on Leadership in Troubled Waters
People who attend one-week training programs will derive the most benefit when they follow up with related activities such as on-the-job training, coaching, and assignments. Why? The main reason is that they are using and evaluating what they learn. One way to extend the developmental experience is through periodic follow-up, which we examine in this article. We will focus on a specific type of follow-up—assessment instruments and surveys.

The Nuts and Bolts
How is follow-up done, and what benefits can it bring? There are many methods of conducting follow-ups to leadership development programs, but here are three of the most prevalent:

- Conducting checklist surveys to determine whether program alumni are continuing to work on their goals
- Administering 360-degree assessment-for-development instruments to measure behavioral change
- Analyzing company data to determine the effects of an individual’s developmental experience on his or her department and the organization

As for the benefits, they often depend on the form that the follow-up takes but can include the following:

- Motivating the program participant to stay focused on and to review his development goals
- Extending and adding to the participant’s developmental process through feedback from others
- Helping superiors of the program participant understand what she needs to continue her development
- Identifying specific types of impact resulting from a leadership development program and, in turn, the effectiveness and value of the program itself

We’ll look more closely at each of these benefits and what they mean to individuals and organizations.

Motivating Individuals
Returning to the physical fitness analogy, what is it that motivates people to maintain an exercise regimen? One important motivator is monitoring results—through strength testing, for instance, or screening for body fat ratio or heart healthiness, or simply looking in the mirror. Once progress has been achieved, it’s a strong disincentive to becoming lazy and watching all those hard-earned gains fade away.

A similar dynamic is at work in leadership development. People can be motivated by wanting to improve their initially poor performance or to sustain their competent performance in the face of new challenges or by a fear of falling behind colleagues and competitors. And they can be motivated by being able to see what areas they need to work on, by charting a development path and looking forward to periodic measures to indicate their progress.

Periodic follow-up can also create motivation in the form of a challenge. People who know they are going to be assessed tend to make their best effort to get a good “grade.” Challenges can be either external (competing against others or against a predetermined standard or norm) or internal (competing against one’s own past performance or against one’s own expectations).

Furthering the Process
We have already mentioned that approaching leadership development as a process rather than an event can significantly enhance long-term impact. Periodic follow-up is an important ingredient of the process because it provides feedback that can extend and add to the developmental experience.

There are, however, some do’s and don’ts when it comes to the specifics of following up:

Follow-up should

- Be scheduled and intentional, not random and out of the blue.
- Focus on being developmental rather than evaluative or, worse yet, punitive.
- Be informative and educational.

People can be motivated by charting a leadership development path and looking forward to periodic measures to indicate their progress.
If you ask ten people whether popular music has changed in the past twenty years, you probably won’t be surprised when they all answer yes. It’s a question that can be looked at objectively and answered easily by comparing the music that tops the charts today with the hits of twenty years ago.

However, if you ask a different question—How much has popular music improved in the past twenty years?—you will likely receive ten different responses. This question has no right or wrong answer because it is subjective and depends more heavily on context and frame of reference than the first question does. Factors such as age and culture might influence a person’s opinion on whether today’s pop music is better than that in the early 1980s. So it would be hard to come up with a conclusive answer to the question of whether pop music has improved.

A similar difficulty confronts those who try to measure the amount of improvement resulting from a leadership development intervention. Definitions of what constitutes a successful intervention can vary from one person to the next. For more than two decades a great deal of research on this question has been conducted. Although this research has shed light on the problem and helped evaluators of competency and skill development measure evaluation more accurately, there is still no clear-cut solution.

One reason for that is a methodological phenomenon called response-shift bias, illustrated in the following story:

Anna, a manager, is preparing for a leadership development program by completing the preprogram surveys. She considers herself to be a fairly good leader and gives herself a rating of 6 on a scale of 1 to 10. During the program she receives feedback from her boss, peers, direct reports, and others. They indicate that Anna has some significant problems to overcome before she can consider herself an effective leader.

Anna also learns during the program that leadership is a much more complex concept and entails a much wider set of behaviors than she originally thought. At the end of the program, she sets some development goals for herself and returns to work. After some time has passed, both Anna and her colleagues notice that her leadership abilities have improved substantially. But when Anna completes a follow-up self-evaluation, she gives herself a rating of 5 out of 10—lower than her score before the program.

An observer looking only at the pre- and postprogram scores would conclude that Anna’s leadership skills declined as a result of the program. Companies that send their executives and managers through leadership development programs often want “proof” of the value of the programs in the form of hard numeric data and give little credence to anecdotal evidence. So even though Anna’s real progress would have been clear from her testimony and that of her colleagues, in many organizations that testimony would be dismissed or ignored and an effective leadership development program might be cast aside.

Response-shift bias has been most thoroughly studied in self-report data, but because the expectations of others are doubtlessly affected by the knowledge that someone has gone through a leadership development intervention, it follows that this effect can skew the ratings given by colleagues as well.

Response-shift bias and its impact can perhaps be best understood by looking at three types of change that have been labeled alpha change, beta change, and gamma change.

- **Alpha change** is true change. If Anna’s self-rating after the leadership development program had reflected her actual improvement as a result of the program, it would probably have been a 7 or an 8 on the 10-point scale. Alpha change is difficult to capture, however, because of the other two types of change.

- **Beta change**, the rating scale is in effect recalibrated between the preprogram evaluation and the postprogram evaluation. In other words, the expectations for the person being rated are altered. Let’s say Anna’s boss had given her a rating of 4 before the program, indicating a need for improvement. The boss expected Anna to return from the program with dramatically improved leadership abilities, and that established a new baseline. So even though Anna’s new leadership behaviors might have qualified for a rating of 6 from the boss before the program, after the program the boss rates them only a 4 because of these inflated expectations. A comparison of the pre- and postprogram scores then creates the impression that Anna has not grown as a leader when she actually has.

- **Gamma change** occurs when the entire meaning of what is being evaluated shifts in the respondent’s mind. In Anna’s case, her perception of the range of behaviors that constitute leadership was radically altered during the leadership development program. Before the program she thought leadership comprised six skills, including the ability to motivate others and having vision. After the program, however, she understands leadership as encompassing ten dimensions. Before the program she considered herself to be quite adept in the six areas she knew about; thus her self-rating of 6. Now, even though she believes she has improved on or is doing well at seven of the ten dimensions, her realization that she needs work on three more causes her to give herself a rating of 5. So her actual improvement is not evident to someone looking only at the numeric data.
• Be targeted at the specific behaviors that the individual being tracked has been working on.

Follow-up results should not

• Be used to make personnel decisions.
• Be kept from the person being tracked. Knowing that he or she won’t be able to learn from the results, the individual will likely become disenchanted with or cynical about the whole developmental process and may not take the follow-up seriously.

One question that arises in discussions of how follow-up should be carried out is: What exactly is meant by periodic? Is it best if follow-up comes within three, six, or twelve months after the initial leadership development experience? Should it continue indefinitely? Going by the theory that development is best approached as a process rather than an event, program planners and participants need a way to induce momentum between developmental experiences and to tie them together so they feel like a process and not a sequence of events. At the same time, changes—in self-awareness and in behavior at both the individual and organizational levels—take time to set in to the extent that they can be measured. So the periods in periodic follow-up need to be long enough to measure real change but not so long as to lose the developmental flow. As for whether follow-up should be continued indefinitely, that largely depends on the type of assessment used, because some assessments have limited effectiveness in repeated use but can be powerful when combined with complementary methods. Using the right variety of assessment batteries, combined with an individual and organizational executive development plan, can be an integral part of a company’s efforts toward management development, succession planning, and organizational competitiveness.

Helping Superiors

When the superiors of a person who is working on leadership development are involved in the follow-up process and are given access by the participant to the results of the follow-up, they are then able to use the information to help the individual in a coaching framework. That is, they can see whether change has occurred and can identify areas where progress has been minimal or nonexistent. Then they can work with the person to focus additional attention on those areas. It’s important, however,

Periodic follow-up can help determine whether the desired impact of a leadership development program on organizational factors is being achieved.

that superiors be granted access only if the participant so chooses. If the individual does not choose to share results with superiors, he or she can select someone else, such as a trusted mentor or a coach, with whom to share the results and discuss progress or lack thereof.

Identifying Types of Impact

Depending on their design and content, follow-ups can yield certain types of information, such as whether

• The leadership development intervention helped the individual develop as a leader
• The individual’s growth as a result of the intervention had an impact on her work group or department
• The individual’s growth and the resulting changes in his work group or department had an impact on the organization overall
• Aspects of the intervention itself need to be improved

The versatility of follow-up is evident from this ladder effect that it offers, the ability to assess individual, group, and finally organizational impacts through their interrelationships. In addition, if follow-up is skillfully designed to determine whether the specific objectives of a leadership development intervention have been met, it’s possible to take the information related to the goals that haven’t been accomplished and use it to make improvements in corresponding aspects of the intervention.

There can be pitfalls in periodic follow-up, however—the major one being that measuring change,
A Tale of Two Studies

A look at the experiences of two organizations with which CCL has worked to develop leaders provides insights into methods of follow-up and the ways follow-up can be a powerful tool in a leadership development intervention.

One client is a large, international, nonprofit human services organization; the other is a large, multinational manufacturing company. For each client, CCL designed a multipart custom initiative to address specific organizational needs. The human services organization, for example, was facing increased competition for its services, internal turmoil from extensive restructuring, and a lack of consensus on the best strategic direction for daily operations. So the program and process focused on improving leadership at all levels in ways that could help resolve these problems, and the follow-up and evaluation component provided feedback about the impact of the program on both program participants and the organization.

In the human services organization, 73 of the 122 program participants, along with their bosses, peers, and direct reports, completed Reflections®, a CCL-designed 360-degree follow-up survey that measures the impact of a leadership development program three months after completion of the program. Sixty-four of the 122 participants also answered a second survey with five open-ended questions designed to determine the overall impact of the program on both individuals and the organization. Sixty-one, or half, of the participants took part in both surveys, and the combination of quantitative and qualitative data on these participants was intended to enable top management to determine whether the participants were developing their leadership abilities and, if so, whether that individual growth was having an impact on the organization that would help it meet its strategic challenges more effectively.

In the manufacturing company, 150 middle- to high-level managers who participated in the leadership development programs took part in Reflections, which was sent to them six months after completion of the program. Benchmarks®, a 360-degree instrument that assesses skills and perspectives related to managerial effectiveness, was administered to 220 managers both before and one year after the program. Fifty of the managers took part in both Reflections and Benchmarks. The combination of these change measurement methods was designed to give the company a clear indication of the return on its investment in terms of individual leadership behavior change.

The follow-up methods employed for the two organizations provided information to them that was valuable in assessing the impact of the leadership development programs. Following are some examples:

- The quantitative evidence from the Reflections survey administered within the human services organization showed that participants had made significant strides in improving behaviors the organization had targeted. Participants had become more approachable and receptive to others; displayed more sensitivity to others, especially in times of high stress; were taking more effective actions in leadership situations; and were building more effective teams.
- The qualitative evidence from the five-question survey administered to the human services organization’s program participants showed some overlap with the quantitative results, but it also provided additional information that was valuable to the organization in determining specific impacts of the program at the individual, group, and organizational levels. At the individual level, participants showed great improvement in awareness of both themselves and the issues and concerns facing the organization, and they also showed heightened self-confidence. At the departmental and organizational levels, there was significant impact in four areas: staff stress had decreased and morale had improved; colleagues had been made to feel valued for their thoughts and opinions; team development and communication within work groups had improved; and the focus on organizational strategy had increased.
- The greatest improvements indicated by both the Benchmarks and Reflections results for the manufacturing company were in interpersonal skills such as self-awareness and building and maintaining relationships. This was encouraging to the client because a number of its managers were moving from task-management to people-management positions.
- The managers at the manufacturing company were generally identified as high performing, so their potential for growth was limited. But the lower-performing managers among them demonstrated the greatest amount of positive change as measured by both Benchmarks and Reflections. The company therefore felt it was getting a good return on its investment because the participants most in need of development had developed the most.

The results of these studies enabled both CCL and its clients to

- Understand the impact of the initiatives on the participants and their organizations.
- Make appropriate revisions to the initiatives.
- Demonstrate the value of follow-up in extending the development process.
and thus the impact of a leadership development intervention, is not always simple or even reliable (see the sidebar “Evaluation’s Theory of Relativity”).

**Levels of Change**
What specific kinds of change do individuals and organizations experience as a result of the leadership development process? For individuals, the two main levels of change are self-awareness and behavior, and periodic follow-up can be valuable in promoting both.

Gaining knowledge about how other people perceive you can enhance your understanding of your strengths and weaknesses and make evident the areas that are most in need of development. A keen understanding of your own skills and preferences and your impact on others is necessary to move to the next level—behavioral change—and acts as a motivational force for advancing to that stage. Behavioral change then feeds back into your growing self-awareness.

Behavioral modification involves reacting appropriately to a situation as it arises and being willing and able to use different approaches than one has used in the past. The enhanced self-awareness that can arise from the new knowledge and perspectives acquired from a leadership development experience can encourage changes in behavior. Behavioral modifications range from relatively simple, small-scale improvements—such as becoming a more effective listener or no longer interrupting people during meetings—to more complex, large-scale transformations—such as becoming more effective at leading a team or creating a work climate that values diversity of perspective.

Changes in groups and organizations that result from individual development can be assessed in two ways: as an aggregation of individual-level changes or as overall organizational change. Organizations play a significant role in enhancing ongoing developmental experiences. For example, welcoming participants back and creating and sustaining systems that encourage growth increases the likelihood that individual learning will be integrated into the person’s overall leadership capacity, thus creating opportunities for impact on the organization. If a leadership development program has been designed to have an impact on organizational factors, periodic follow-up can be valuable in determining whether that impact is being achieved. A company that is soon to lose many of its senior leaders through retirement, for instance, might establish a leadership development initiative for succession planning as part of its effort to create a pipeline of qualified replacements for top management. Periodic follow-up that determines how many of the people moving into the senior positions have been through the development program and how many have not would therefore be a good indicator of how well the initiative was meeting its objectives.

**Smelling the Roses**
Periodic follow-up is a crucial but often neglected element of leadership development. It brings dual benefits (see the sidebar “A Tale of Two Studies”). First, by reinforcing the idea of development as a process and not an event, it promotes continuous, lifelong learning. Second, by identifying what levels of change and how much growth has occurred, it measures the impact of a leadership development intervention on individuals, groups, and organizations and the value of the intervention itself. People in today’s society are often so focused on moving on to solving the next problem that they are unable to acknowledge what has already been accomplished. Sometimes looking back, however, is the best way to move forward.

**SUGGESTED READING**


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