

Leadership Development Best Practices

By Russel Horwitz

9 February 2021



Contents

***The case for leadership development* 3**

Creating a strategy 3

***Best practices* 4**

1. Align to organizational strategy 4

 Begin with a general competency model 4

 Identify the most important competencies 5

 Identify the gaps 5

2. Identify links with other HR processes 6

3. Ensuring organizational support 7

4. Design the program using tools that work 7

 Spread Learning 8

 360-degree feedback 8

 Personal development planning 8

 Manager involvement 8

 Involving others 8

 Coaching 9

 Training 10

 Action learning 10

5. Program measurement 11

 mini-feedback survey (level 3 measurement) 12

6. Sustainment 13

***A sample leadership development program* 14**

***Summary* 15**

***About the author* 15**

THE CASE FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Great companies understand that leadership effectiveness is the key differentiating factor that will determine the culture and performance of the overall organization. Excellent leaders are more likely to make the right decisions, attract and retain staff, and maximise the use of resources. All of this increases the probability of success.

While leadership development starts with getting the right people on the bus in the first place, most successful organizations have some form of leadership development process or program for developing the people they have. The purpose of this white paper is to summarize the best practices in developing leaders and offer practical tips that you can actually use.

CREATING A STRATEGY

Developing an approach to leadership development that works for your organization can be achieved by following the following steps:

1. Align to organizational strategy
2. Identify links with other HR processes
3. Ensure that there is support from the top
4. Design a program using tools that work
5. Measure the outcomes and refine
6. Sustain the learning

BEST PRACTICES

1. ALIGN TO ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY

BEGIN WITH A GENERAL COMPETENCY MODEL

Designing a leadership development approach typically involves many stakeholders, including HR, the Executive team and others. The use of a good *general* competency model that covers most areas of leadership can help everyone to share a common language, making discussions and decisions more effective. Here is a high-level summary of a general competency model:

	Competency	Explanation
Leading Self	Personal Growth	The willingness of leaders to invite feedback, learn from mistakes and seek to build their own skills
	Time Management	The ability of leaders to stay organized in terms of management of their time and commitments
Leading Others	Communications and Conflict resolution	The ability of leaders to practice effective advocacy and inquiry with others and resolve conflict
	Managing People	The ability of leaders to get work done through others
	Influencing without Authority	The extent to which leaders are able to influence others towards needed change without reliance on positional power
	Teamwork	The extent to which leaders are able to work collaboratively with individuals outside of their immediate area for the greater good
Leading the Organization	Customer Relations	The extent to which leaders understand and respond to the needs of their customers
	Strategic Planning	The extent to which leaders are able to think far into the future and develop effective vision and action plans in response
	Critical Thinking	The extent to which leaders are able to properly diagnose problems and opportunities and develop innovative responses

IDENTIFY THE MOST IMPORTANT COMPETENCIES

Alignment starts with the question: “what must the organization achieve in the *future*, and what kind of leadership is needed to get there?”. Here are some examples:

Organizational Strategy	Likely Key Leadership Competencies
Employee engagement	Managing People
Focus strategically	Strategic planning, Critical Thinking, Time Management
Dealing with growth	Strategic Planning, Managing People, Time Management
Succession planning	Managing People, Critical Thinking

IDENTIFY THE GAPS

Identify how your leadership team stacks up with respect to the competencies they need. The most common methods for doing this include:

- Observation and common sense

Experienced leaders at the senior level and HR practitioners may have the background to recognize leadership gaps with little need for gathering empirical data. If one uses this method, it still pays to bring a number of people together, because any one individual may not see the whole picture.

- Employee opinion surveys

An employee opinion survey is an effective tool for assessing leadership, provided there are sufficient questions that relate to leadership competencies.

- Focus Groups

Well-facilitated focus group sessions can go a long way to uncovering the current reality with respect to leadership strengths and gaps. It is recommended to hold focus group sessions with leaders at multiple levels as well as individual contributors, as these groups often see things differently.

- Composite 360 degree feedback

Composite 360 degree feedback can be used to assess leadership competency gaps across the organization. However we find that data that has been averaged for a group of participants can be undifferentiated because high scores from some tend to cancel out low scores from others. For this reason we do not regard it as a strong method for determining overall leadership gaps.

However, 360 feedback is a very effective method for determining *individual* leadership gaps when kicking off leadership development programs, which we will cover later.

- Exit interviews

Well-executed exit interviews can be an excellent source of information relating to leadership gaps. Note that the quality of exit interviews depends on the level of trust that employees have with the interviewer, and in environments with low trust, departing employees may not be honest enough to draw good conclusions from the data.

2. IDENTIFY LINKS WITH OTHER HR PROCESSES

It is important that the leadership development strategy not be developed in isolation of other HR processes. Instead, look for synergies by integrating leadership development with other processes, for example:

a) Succession planning

The people who will show the most improvement on leadership development programs are those that are willing to accept feedback and are self-motivated to take action. These are your “high-potentials”.

If your organization has a succession planning process, consider including participants that are earmarked for future promotion in a leadership development program.

b) Competency models

If your organization uses a particular competency model/language, keep this consistent in the leadership development program. Specifically, one should align the 360 questionnaire with the competency model (the 360 is typically a superset as it must be broad enough to deal with all aspects of leadership to properly diagnose root causes of behavioural challenges).

In addition, there should be appropriate links/customization between the organizational competency model and any skills training that is part of the program.

c) Performance management

To eliminate confusion, ensure that there is alignment between personal development goals identified in the leadership development program with those that are developed as part of the performance management cycle.

If the 360 is to also be used in performance management, consider sharing the report with each person’s manager and/or HR (note that this may come at the expense of participant buy-in).

3. ENSURING ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

a) Getting buy-in from top management

Do not expect top management to invest in leadership development unless a strong case can be made for it. It is important that HR is able to make strong links between actual business problems or opportunities and leadership competency in order to do this. Remember that persuasion is not a one-shot effort, but rather a process that needs to be managed over time.

b) Getting buy-in from participants

Many leadership development programs do not achieve their full potential, simply because senior leaders fail to show adequate support. Senior leaders can show support by engaging in any of the following behaviours:

- By taking part in the leadership program themselves.
- By introducing the program and/or individual sessions.
- By role-modelling the desired behaviours themselves.
- By notifying participants that their attendance is more important than attending meetings, even the ones that *they* schedule.
- By regularly checking with any of their direct reports that are participating on the program.
- By talking regularly about the program and its importance.

4. DESIGN THE PROGRAM USING TOOLS THAT WORK

Try and avoid a condensed, training-only approach to leadership development. A study performed on over 350 companies by Warren Bennis and Linkage, Inc. yielded the following response to the question¹:

“Please indicate the top four key features that most impacted the success of your leadership development program.”:

Action learning:	73%	Global rotations:	13%
360-degree feedback:	67%	Informal mentoring:	7%
Exposure to senior management:	67%	Internal case studies:	7%
Exposure to a strategic agenda:	53%	Executive MBA:	7%
Other (Personal development plans, training, cross-divisional networking, sharing best practices, etc.):	46%	Formal mentoring:	0%
External coaching:	26%	Accelerated promotion:	0%
Cross-functional rotations:	20%	Conferences:	0%

¹ Linkage Inc.'s Best Practices in Leadership Development Handbook

Let's examine the tools that really make a strategy work...

SPREAD LEARNING

People cannot “drink from a fire hose” – they learn in bite-sized chunks. Programs that compress all learning into consecutive days (typically for logistical reasons) are unlikely to yield maximum benefit for your investment. Learning should be spread over time, and the ideal duration ranges anywhere from 4 to 10 months.

360-DEGREE FEEDBACK

Research has consistently shown that 360-degree feedback is one of the most effective tools available for developing leaders. The main benefit is that it develops the essential self-awareness that motivates people to develop themselves. The implementation of 360-degree feedback is non-trivial and needs to be done correctly to achieve its benefits. Please ask for our white paper on “360-degree feedback best practices” for a comprehensive description of the necessary steps.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

People cannot improve on a “laundry list” of development areas. A critical component of any leadership development program create a personal vision and identify the key 1-2 leadership competencies that will help them get there. These competencies become the overarching focus of the individual and are transformed into actionable steps and followed up throughout the program.

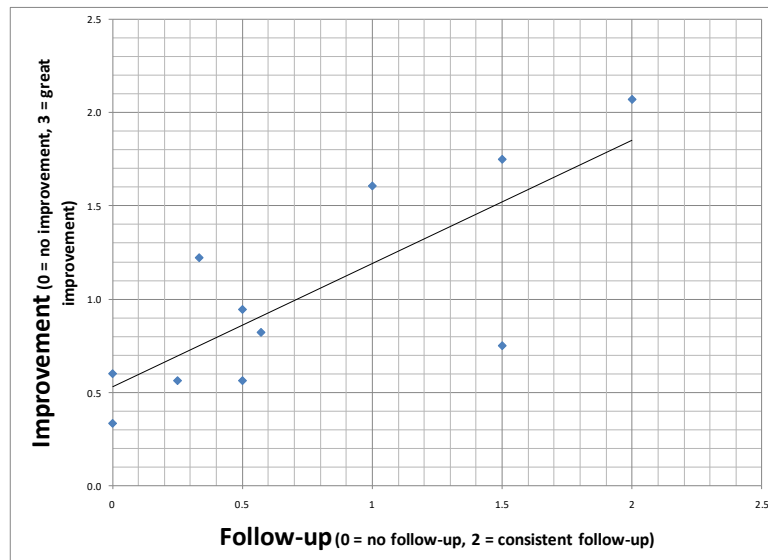
MANAGER INVOLVEMENT

There is a strong correlation between getting the support of one's manager and being able to improve as a leader. A leadership development program should include some formalized level of manager involvement to ensure that the manager knows and agrees with what the participant is trying to get better at, while providing ongoing support over the duration of the program.

Note that while it is important that there be open dialog regarding the development goal, it is typically not necessary for participants to share their 360 reports with their manager.

INVOLVING OTHERS

In the words of Marshall Goldsmith, “leadership is a contact sport”. Individuals tend to make little progress when the entire plan is kept in their own head. It is essential that individuals be encouraged to share their development goal and action plans with those around them, and ask for regular feedback. Our own experience shows that individuals who do this show up to three times more improvement than those who do not involve others in their journey. The graph shown demonstrates this point by showing a 360 measurement of an actual group that completed a leadership development program:



COACHING

Any good leadership development program should include an element of coaching to assist participants with formulation and implementation of development plans. There are three main options:

1:1 coaching

Having a great personal coach can be far more powerful than attending the best training. More and more organizations are making use of personal coaching for leadership development. Key ingredients of a great coach are training, relevant experience and objectivity. For the latter reason, it is often advisable (if budget permits) to use an external coach, who is not subject to internal biases and can act 100% in service to the participant. Alternatively a trained individual from another part of the organization such as HR can be used. This is typically the highest cost option and is used more often with senior participants.

Peer coaching (self-directed or facilitated)

Peer coaching can be implemented by designing facilitated or self-directed sessions whereby participants provide coaching to each other. Participants almost always enjoy peer coaching, and develop high levels of camaraderie through the sharing that happens in the sessions.

Self-directed sessions are the lowest cost option, while having a facilitator present can bring many of the benefits of 1:1 coaching (objectivity and professionalism) for a moderate cost (approximately 25% of the cost of 1:1 coaching).

TRAINING

Certain skills, particularly anything interpersonal such as conflict resolution, performance management, coaching, presentation skills, etc. are best learned in a classroom environment. Targeted and well facilitated training is an essential leadership development tool, and this is the most important part of the leadership strategy to customize to the needs of the group. Great training requires great facilitation above all else, and should emphasise experiential learning concepts such as group discussions, case studies, skills practice and simulation. In addition, tools and techniques taught must be practical and Peasy to remember.

ACTION LEARNING

Action learning has two very different meanings/implementations in leadership development:

Team-based approach

The team-based approach involves putting participants into groups (called action learning teams) and having each team solve a strategic challenge for the organization. The outcome is typically a recommendation to senior management that is either accepted or rejected.

Examples of typical action learning topics include employee attraction, retention and engagement, improving customer satisfaction, process improvement, mentoring programs and telecommuting.

For action learning to be successful, here are some simple guidelines to follow:

1. Topics must be relevant to what is important for the organization
2. Topics must be broad enough so that members of cross-functional teams can relate to them
3. Each team should have an executive sponsor to provide guidance as needed
4. Teams must be self-directed
5. Action learning projects should commence with the development of a team charter that outlines roles & responsibilities as well as guiding principles that are agreed on
6. Expectations on the time commitment should be set up front
7. The project should have a fixed end date

The barriers to implementing action learning include a relatively large time commitment on the part of participants, as well as the need for executive time and mindshare.

Individual approach

The individual approach involves providing structured “homework” after each program step, which is typically followed up in the following program step.

This approach requires considerably less time and coordination and is typically favoured over the team based approach as a result.

5. PROGRAM MEASUREMENT

Workshop feedback forms (also known as “smile sheets”), are generally not a sufficient measurement of a leadership development initiative. The Kirkpatrick model is a framework that is often used instead.

The levels of evaluation in the Kirkpatrick model are listed below along with how we measure it using a combination of:

- Same-day assessments done at each learning event (by participants)
- The mini-feedback survey (multi-rater assessment)
- A post-program survey (completed by participants and their managers)

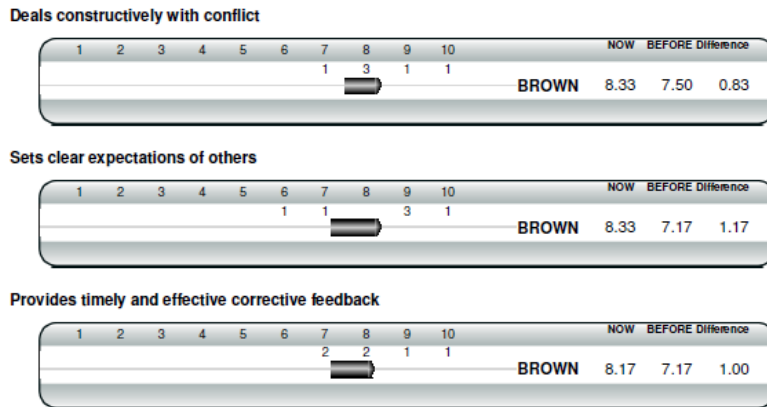
Level	Measures...	Measurement method
Level 1 Reaction	The degree to which participants find the training favourable, engaging and relevant to their jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measured via same-day assessments after each learning event.
Level 2 Learning	The degree to which participants acquire the intended knowledge, skills, attitude, confidence and commitment based on their participation in the training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reported by participants and their managers via the post-program survey. • The survey asks for a rating of skill levels (on a before and after basis) in each of the skill categories targeted by the program.
Level 3 Behaviour	The degree to which participants apply what they learned during training when they are back on the job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measured via the mini-feedback survey, a multi-rater assessment customized to the development goals of each participant. • Anecdotal feedback from participants and their managers is also measured via the post-program survey and reported out.
Level 4 Results	The degree to which targeted outcomes occur as a result of the training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reported by participants and their managers via a post-program survey. • A set of organizational outcomes are agreed on up front, and responders are asked to gauge the extent to which the program has affected each. • Examples include (but are not limited to): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Employee engagement ○ Customer service ○ Efficiency

MINI-FEEDBACK SURVEY (LEVEL 3 MEASUREMENT)

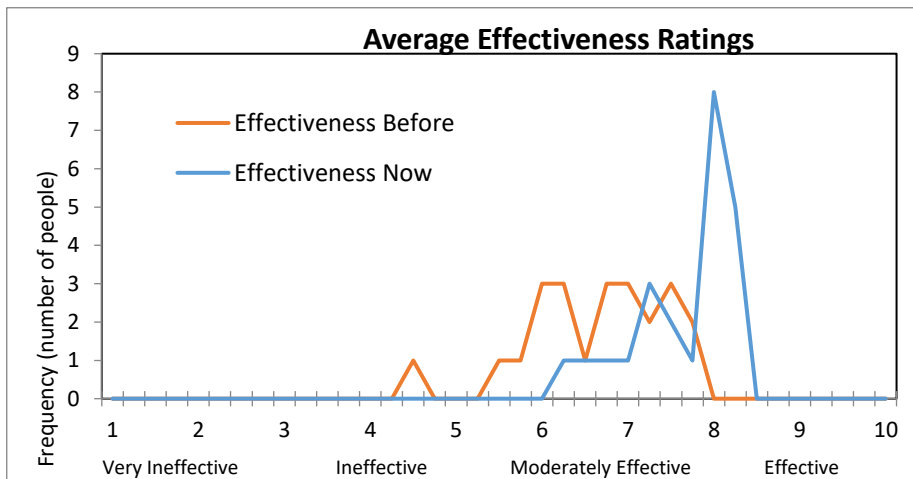
Put simply - “what gets measured gets done”. Participants in our programs are expected to take action and to share their development goals with a relevant group of colleagues who act as observers. These observers are invited to confidentially report progress to participants at the close of our leadership development process.

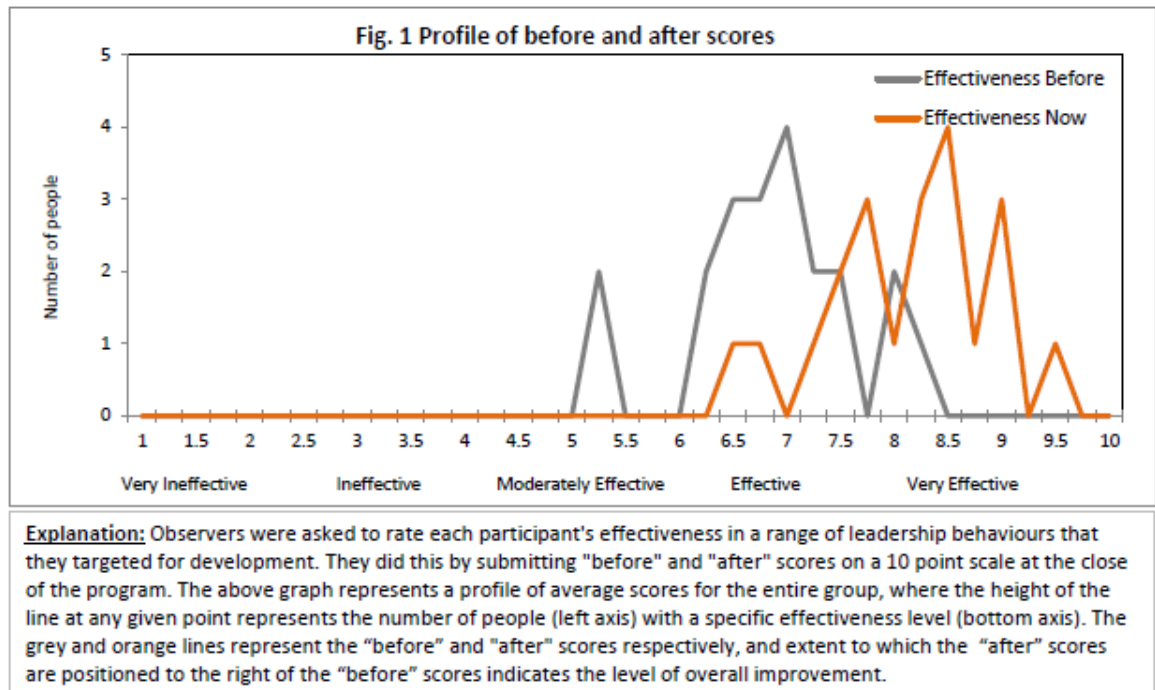
This is achieved using our innovative ‘mini-survey’ process. The mini-survey is executed in a similar way to a 360, however it is a shorter, participant-developed survey that just focuses on their development goal and is completed by their targeted set of observers.

The following graph is an excerpt of the report, which shows the extent to which a participant has improved with respect to 3 chosen behaviours. Average before / after scores are shown, as measured by a group of reviewers:



When working with groups, a composite report is also generated that helps stakeholders understand to what extent the program has met its objectives and delivered a return on investment. The following diagram is an excerpt of the report that shows a composite histogram of before and after scores for the entire group:





6. SUSTAINMENT

A number of strategies can be incorporated to ensure that people sustain their learning once a program completes:

a) Performance management system

Ideal leadership behaviour should be defined and measured through the performance management system. This will ensure that regular conversations are held about how leaders are leading themselves and interacting with others to achieve their goals.

b) Role modelling

By far the most important long-term determinant of leadership culture is role modelling by senior members of the organization. If senior leaders are not participants of a leadership program, then at a minimum they need to understand the key content and the role they need to play in sustaining the desired behaviours organization-wide.

c) Post-program sustainment events

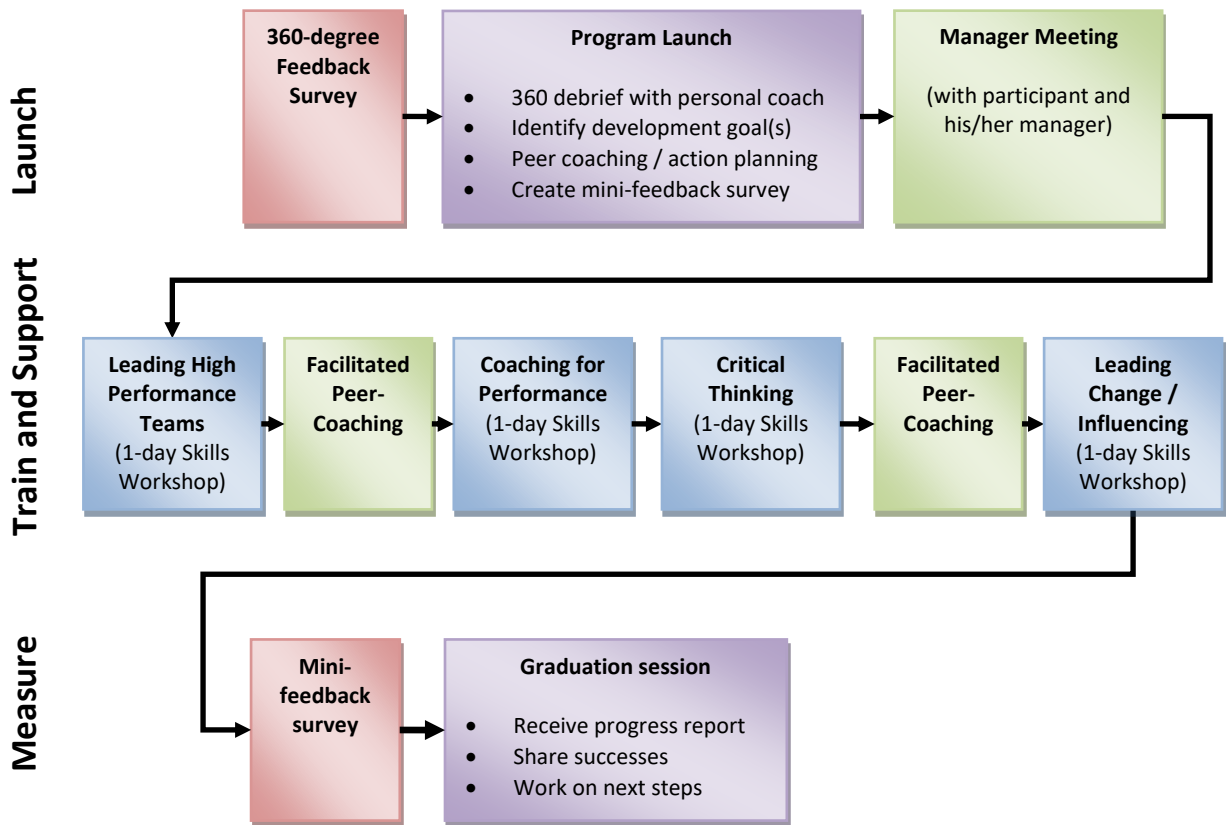
Post-program sustainment events are an innovative way to maintain a culture of learning and growth among participants that have completed a cohort-based leadership program.

Unlike typical skills workshops that are focused on content introduced by the facilitator, these events are orientated towards participant-driven research on a specific topic, the sharing of specific participant challenges and identification of strategies to overcome them.

The events are generally 90 minutes long and held once per quarter.

A SAMPLE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

To help visualize what a program might look like, the following sequence illustrates a sample leadership development program that incorporates many of the best practices that we have discussed. The choice of training topics is typically customized to the needs of the organization and the learning needs of participants themselves.



Duration: 7-10 months

SUMMARY

The success of any organization is highly dependent on its leaders. While there is no substitute for choosing the right leaders to begin with, leaders can become more successful through the development of a sound leadership development strategy. Strategy starts with understanding what is important for the organization, and where the gaps are. With the right understanding of needs and support from the top, a leadership development model can be developed that works. To be effective, the model should incorporate best practices such as spread learning, 360 feedback, personal development planning, training, coaching and measurement, while internal programs can also benefit from the power of action learning. Your return on investment, which should be measured as part of the program, can be maximised by selecting participants based on potential, and by linking the program to other HR processes such as succession planning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Russel is one of Kwela's two founders and his expertise includes leadership development, team development, executive coaching, and training on a wide variety of topics. He has worked extensively as a leadership consultant / trainer since 2004 across a wide variety of sectors, including government, publically-held, private and non-profit. Russel's experience also includes 14 years in the high technology/engineering sector, where he held management roles in product development, marketing, customer service and training. Russel holds a Master's degree in Engineering from the University of Cape Town, South Africa.

Russel can be contacted at (604) 839-8916 or russelh@kwelaleadership.com