What most companies get wrong about leadership development

Introduction

Investing in an organization's leadership means investing in its engagement, performance and profitability. A strong investment in leadership is a critical step in moving an organization forward.

So why do only 10 percent of CEOs believe that their leadership development initiatives have a clear business impact?

It isn't for lack of trying. But unfortunately, most leadership development programs miss out on key features that would help participants retain their learnings and integrate those learnings into their everyday work life.

One size doesn't fit all

🔍 The problem

Many times, executives choose leadership development programs designed to be one-size-fits-all — not programs tailored to the specific needs of their company. While this approach allows program creators to crank out products at a faster rate, it glosses over the fact that leadership goals vary by organization — as do the goals of individual employees within an organization.

A study from McKinsey designed to examine what executives felt made for an effective leadership development program revealed that their organizations

> " **often fail to translate their company's strategy into a leadership model specific to their need."**

So while decision makers may choose a training program based on company strategy, if that training is not tailored to the specific company (and that company's employees), it has a slimmer chance of affecting change.

The solution

An organization that performs an in-depth analysis to clarify its needs before embarking on a lengthy or expensive training will likely have the most success with a leadership development program. Think of it like buying a house. You can execute all the glossy renovations to make it dazzle your future guests — stainless steel appliances, hardwood floors, fancy lighting fixtures — but if you haven't done a home inspection, you might be completely blindsided by a serious problem with your home's foundation six months after you move in. Without putting in the hours upfront, you could rubber-stamp a high-dollar, good-on-paper training that is completely out of touch with what your organization really needs.

Before you begin, figure out what you need. It sounds simple, but so many companies overlook this crucial step. Administer a diagnostic test to determine where you are out of alignment, and/or partner with a cross-section of your employees to get to the root of what's working (and what's lacking) from their perspective. (Of course, enlisting a third party is strongly recommended for this.)

In this stage, it's vital that leaders actively listen and solicit feedback — and then, act on that feedback. Without leader participation and assurance that feedback is heard, there's little to no chance that their employees will become the needed change agents to ensure success. Later on, messaging from senior leaders will be key to gaining buy-in from lower levels in the organization.

# It's more than just coursework

🔍 The problem

Of course, there's another simple reason why leadership training doesn't stick: the content lacks *context*. When a majority of programs involve a set (i.e., non-customized) curriculum, taught over a short duration in a classroom setting removed from workplace realities, participants don't gain the benefit of connecting their learnings to real-life (and real-work) scenarios. Without context for the content, learnings will never make it out of the classroom.

To quote author and leadership expert Deborah Rowland,

> **If leadership development begins in the head, leaders will stay in their heads."**
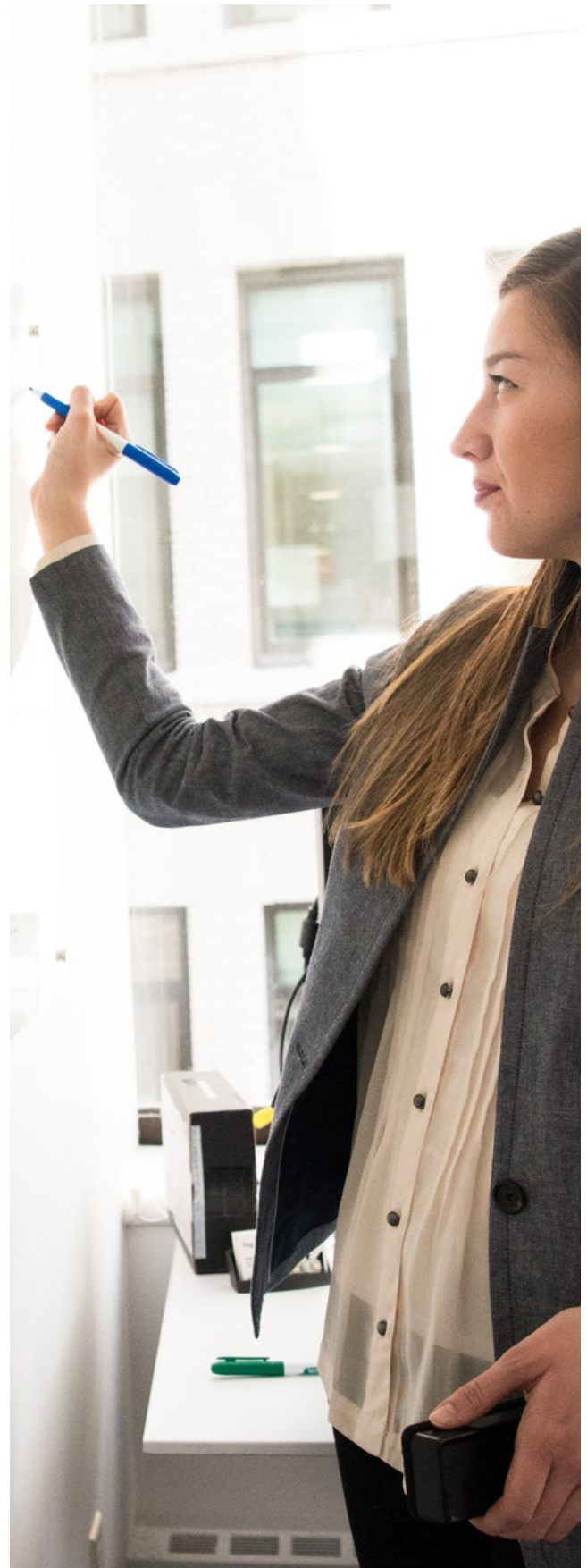
The solution

A valuable training program is one that:

A

Meets your identified needs as determined in the first stage of planning

&

B

Speaks to the broader strategic objectives of your organization

As such, it should be embedded within your organization — that is, reinforced by managers and senior leaders, continually referenced and supplemented with additional training when necessary.

Training that lasts leverages baked-in accountability measures with tangible goals and action plans. In fact, research shows that the mere act of writing down goals increases the chance of those goals being realized. For the greatest impact, **leaders set the stage ahead of time, facilitators deliver training, and leaders reinforce it**, following up with regular check-ins to ensure the desired change is implemented.

Leaders set the stage → **Facilitators deliver training** ↔ **Leaders reinforce it**

Choose the right people

🔍 The problem

While undoubtedly everyone in your organization could benefit from leadership development training, not everyone in your organization is a leader. So — how do you determine who gets trained?

Equally important to choosing the right program is choosing the right people to participate in that program. To whom will this training be most effectively deployed? Where will it do the most good?

And do those participants you have in mind even want to participate? (You can hopefully get them on-board with top-down, commitment-based messaging, but still, be prepared for some employees to drag their feet.)

So, how do you ensure the training you choose lands with the chosen audience?
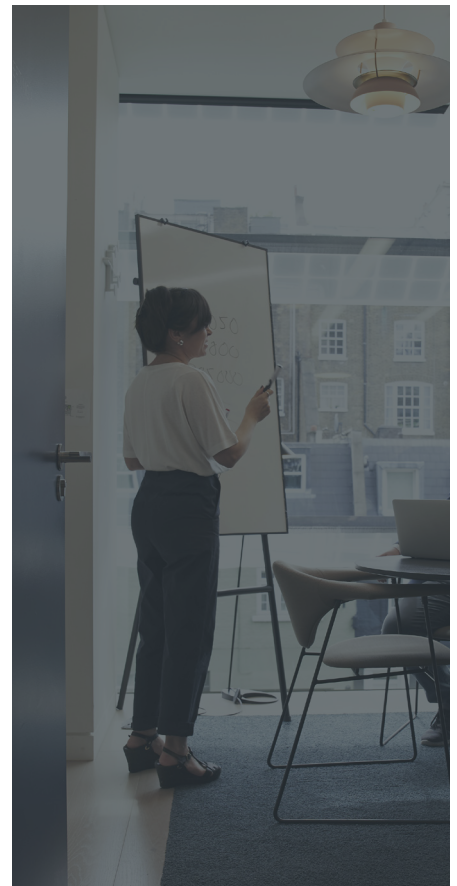
The solution

Ideal candidates for training will be those who have a strong desire to grow their leadership competencies and those who are relatively new in their leadership or management roles. It is likely these categories overlap. Too often, high performers are promoted to the next level of their careers and then left to figure things out for themselves. Higher-ups assume that because an individual excelled in their previous role they'll excel in their new role — even if that role has changed significantly. Of course, this is just not so, and no one should be promoted without a support plan in place.

When determining which employees would make the best fit, ask yourself the following:

| What are the employee's main motivations to change? Or if they're opposed to change, what are their reasons? | When receiving feedback, does the employee take it seriously? | What needs to be done to set this employee on the right path toward their journey of change? |

Once you've homed in on the people who are prime candidates for leadership development, invest in their success. Improving leadership abilities at any management level will produce results, but doing so at the middle management level is shown to increase employee engagement, which in turn has a positive impact on both employee and customer satisfaction, retention and profitability.

Be transparent

🔍 The problem

Have you ever seen significant organizational change take place when the organization's leaders are clearly not bought in?

Probably not. Without enthusiastic buy-in from the top, the mechanisms for change are highly unlikely to find firm footing at lower levels. Or to put it simply:

> **If *they* don't care, why should I?"**

But of course, change can be scary. And if leaders aren't confident in the change, they won't champion it. So — how do leaders become change champions?

🎯 The solution

Organizations that successfully manage change view it as *transformational*, not dysfunctional. Leaders that recognize the need for new systematic behaviors will champion the change agent, not see it as a disruption — "one more thing" to add to their busy calendars.

Research shows that the efforts of additional training are most effective when senior leaders are transparent about the change, championing an environment that motivates employee learning by creating space for them to apply what they've been taught (and encouraging improvement along the way).

This transparency should go both ways — within the supportive environment provided by leaders, employees will have more confidence that their feedback and opinions are heard. Real behavioral change should be strengthened through regular, frequent feedback across all organizational levels.

As you've probably gathered, true organizational change cannot happen within a department or hierarchical tier. If change is going to last, it must reach far and wide, stretching all the way to the top. **This will require some vulnerability — or transparency — from all parties**. But through leader transparency, you gain employee trust.

Leader   **Employees**

Conclusion

As anyone who's ever failed at a New Year's resolution can tell you, change is hard. But for any training to take root within your organization, it must be purposeful and viewed as a systematic behavioral change — one that is supported by actual need, reinforced in context, deployed to the right people and championed through leader transparency.

Don't be fooled by a glossy pedigree or wowed by a high-dollar price tag. Without the internal organizational work needed to create an environment hospitable to change, that fancy leadership training is probably not worth your company's time or money.

However, if you are looking for leadership and management training that is effectively tailored to your team, we would be glad to help. Contact us to discuss our approach to leadership development and how we've seen it positively impact organizations long-term. To find out more, visit our website: www.kwicomm.com.

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