



Leadership Training that Makes a Difference

The key is to focus on mindful leadership development.

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Leadership training is no small investment. The Leadership Development Fact Book reports an average annual expenditure of \$500,000 per company on leadership development activities. The annual per participant cost of leadership training runs between \$2,000 and \$ 7,500 per person. For large corporations, that amounts to millions of dollars.

Organizations committed to training their leaders have two legitimate concerns. Their primary question is: Will it “take?” Is a manager who’s been in a leadership role for a period of time likely to make big, effective behavioral changes after attendance at a one-week workshop, a couple of classes, or a blended developmental experience? A second and no less important concern is: What is our ROI? How will we know whether or how our investment influences the bottom line?

During our 35 years of designing and delivering leadership training, we’ve discovered what makes a difference: what “takes” and what produces bottom-line results. And it is more about context than content. Context not only creates amazing results; it builds mindful leaders. Content shifts as theory becomes first popular, then common, and finally old hat. What doesn’t change is the context, the framework, and perspective essential to effective leadership. Context is what makes for breakthroughs in learning, leadership, and results.

More than three decades ago, our leadership workshops were built on five critical foundations:

1. Intention
2. Reflection
3. A push to the edge

4. An information-rich environment
5. A focus on being and doing

These five foundations create a transformative and mindful experience—and when embodied by those in attendance, they contribute to the development of mindful leaders. We were one of the first to use the term, “mindful leaders.” Truth be told, way back then, we didn’t know it existed and certainly didn’t recognize that our workshops were teaching leaders how to be more mindful. What we did then—and continue to do today—was to focus on creating a context for leadership training that results in improved performance, purpose, productivity, and profitability. This article discusses the how to’s for designing and delivering leadership training and developmental experiences that “take” and make a bottom-line difference.

Intention: No Deposit—No Return

Intention drives action. It is the difference between butts in the seats and committed leaders looking to enhance their skill and development.

Potent development occurs when leaders are clear about the difference they want to make in the workplace. It drives their “deposit” in and “return” on leadership training. Intention starts before people enter the classroom and needs to be solidified and codified before the real work beings.

To ensure intention:

Start with a contract between the instructor(s), the individual participants and among and between all participants. A couple of the guiding principles often found in a contract are:

- Behavior in the classroom is indicative of behavior on the job. Actions are a reflection of the choices that participants make. When someone takes an action that is seen as ineffective, inappropriate, or if the intent of the action is not clear, the facilitator or a participant can surface it and engage that person in a conversation about what was observed.
- Defensiveness limits learning. To learn, you must try new approaches, behaviors, and methods of operating—and risk failure. Rationalizing is simply behavior that signals someone is not ready to learn or open to the experience. Be open.

Ensure the intent of each training module is twofold:

1. To focus on the development or improvement of a key leadership competency required for success in the organization.
2. To enable leaders to take action back on the job that makes a difference. Therefore, at the close of each module, learners should be able to develop and commit to a step-by-step plan to make a difference and achieve meaningful and measurable results. If unable to do so, we (the collective) have not done our jobs.

Clarify intended outcomes. The intent of development is threefold: To enrich (enlighten) the leader, to enable him/her to make a difference, and to pay it forward. The price of admission is to make a positive, discernible difference upon return to work. Prior to attendance, each leader spells out a planned “return” and focuses his or her development experience on getting what is needed to make that return a reality.

Intention is a core aspect of a powerful, mindful developmental experience. It places responsibility in the hands of the learner. When leaders engage in the learning experience with intention, it allows for focused concentration, more appropriate choices, and ethical leadership.

Reflection

Reflection is a misunderstood and under-used leadership skill that is taught, practiced, and perfected during the best leadership development workshops. Reflection is rare in most developmental experiences because the focus is on activities rather than the experience and the meaning of that experience.

Intentional, mindful leadership development occurs when people own their journey. It occurs when participants look deep inside to uncover significant strengths and developmental opportunities; to capture learning and insights and determine how to best act upon them; and to assess where they are, where they are headed, and the significant steps needed to get there.

The best development experiences tap into the power of reflection on three levels.

- **The individual: The inter-view.** The best leaders (and those who experience the most significant personal transformations) are those who have a remarkable capacity for self-reflection. Better stated, they have a remarkable capacity for deep insight—the ability to conduct a merciless self-interview that questions actions, choices, and values/beliefs. A few techniques for building that self-awareness include:
 - Assessments
 - Journaling
 - Feedback
 - Socratic Questioning

Reflective leaders share three traits: They learn in the moment, have a marked capacity for continuous improvement, and they are intentional about their development.

A director of aeronautical engineering who attended a one-week leadership development workshop wrote to us three months after the program. He stated, “The daily journaling and reflection we did in the workshop are now an important, integral part of my routine. Every day I learn a little bit more about who I am as a member of the universe and the impact of my thoughts and feelings on those around me and on our results.” That’s self-awareness!

- Another level of **reflection is collective.** It is built upon development experiences that bring multiple perspectives to the fore—and encourage people to examine and build on those perspectives to find new solutions to complex organizational problems. When leaders demonstrate collective reflection, they recognize that individual ideas of a leader are often narrower, and sometimes much less significant, than the results when two or more smart people looking at age-old problems from different perspectives.
- The third level of reflection is on decisions, constructs, and the world out there. It is **reflective judgment**—the capacity to explore one’s thinking, uncover implicit assumptions, and broaden one’s basic view of the world. Reflective judgment is driven by questions that cause leaders to explore taken-for-granted frames of references and long-held assumptions.

A learning environment grounded in reflection enhances self-awareness and builds the skill necessary for both personal and organizational insight, growth, and transformation. Mindful leaders are skilled reflectors who are able to drive focus on the here and now, explore multiple perspectives, and eliminate background noise such as historical baggage and emotional reactions that drive inappropriate decisions, and thus become more adept sensemakers.

A Push to the Edge: Significant Aha’s

We’ve all been in workshops where the experiential activity was fun and/or unique, but the learning from the experience was minimal, focused on skills you already mastered, or provided

nothing more than a unique experience (and certainly no lasting leadership capacity and/or insights).

Powerful experiential activities and simulations illustrate key concepts and provide significant aha's that pave the way for transformational change. It's long been known that adults learn through experience. The quality and challenge of the experience relates directly to the depth of learning and insight.

Experiential activities must provide for deep learning and insight. In addition, they should:

- **Be appropriately situated**—be backed by content and context setting that encourages people to be gutsy risk takers, open to new experience, and reflective learners.
- **Open the door to mindful contemplation**—providing appropriate intellectual, emotional, and motivational challenge. Without that, learners do not have the inquisitive desire to learn more, the gut-level need to understand more, or the psychological drive to uncover it all.
- **Utilize the experiential learning model**—starting with an exploration of each participant's experience, followed by the activity that fully engages the leader, and closing with a debriefing process about what happened (and their reactions and behaviors) and ultimately linking their observations to specific on-the-job application.

When development experiences push attendees to the edge—to a place where old skills and previous practices are inadequate—significant learning occurs. Needless to say, that push needs to be provided by a seasoned and skilled professional. The journey and consequent development builds assured and mindful leaders who step into ongoing development activities, assignments, and business venues that challenge and stretch them well beyond current levels.

An Information-Rich Environment

Like the world of work, information comes from many sources. The more sources, the more likely there's something of import. A rich developmental experience is built on the same premise.

Most developmental programs position the participating manager at the top of the hierarchy—looking down into the bowels (intentional) of the organization. The focus of development then

becomes how to manipulate the organization based on your view—how to influence others to see things your way. The best development experiences have always been mindful of a proven (but hard to accept) fact: There’s a lot of untapped organizational potential and latent energy unintentionally held at bay by the people in the room or those above them. Information, not influence, is the missing ingredient.

The key to unlocking that potential is an information-rich environment that helps inform leaders about what is needed. Aside from assessments (mentioned previously), other common elements include:

- **Multi-level feedback** about their mindfulness via 360- or 540 degree feedback.
- **A focus on how to seek, receive, and provide feedforward:** Clear, constructive, compelling recommendations enhancing leadership effectiveness and results.
- **Skill building in “no-need-for-feed” strategies:** Questioning techniques that uncover the answers from within, rather than providing answers from without (feedback and feedforward).
- **Executive sponsors, guest instructors, and others** who share their view about the current environment, where the organization is headed, and what’s needed from leaders now.
- **Peer coaching.** No one knows the “organizational book” on managers better than their peers. And, unfortunately, colleagues are the least likely to reveal that essential information. The best developmental experiences are designed to enable peers to coach each other based on observable workshop behaviors and to tie those behaviors back to real-life on-the-job examples. An IT manager made significant positive changes based on her peer coaching that was initiated at a recent Take Charge leadership workshop. She said, “Peer coaching helped me to love my job again. Based on my 540-degree feedback and coaching from two trusted peers, I rewrote my job description to maximize my strengths and minimize my limitations. My focus has been on identifying and acquiring new products, and I trust my deputy to handle many of the day-to-day management issues in which I was previously involved. Things are running much more smoothly now.”

When experiences are information rich, people get the input necessary to more fully understand the current environment and what’s needed. That information allows them to target their development in order to make a difference. As people look to each other for feedback, coaching, support, and challenge, they begin to regard the workplace as a library of human knowledge. All involved become more mindful listeners. They learn to listen better and with more open-minded humility. “Yeah, buts,” justifications, rationalizations, and excuses are eliminated. And

ultimately there is a shift from the inherent impatience for what already may have happened to a focus on what CAN begin to happen.

A Focus on Being and Doing

Application is another element that separates the good developmental experiences from the grand. Most experiences focus on “What will you do?” A few focus on “Who will you be?” And almost none on both “doing” and “being.” The best experiences call leaders to transform at two levels.

- **First and foremost is “Who will I be?”** Remember, intention drives action. Purpose does not originate in structures and systems, business plans, or performance goals. It originates within the mind and heart of a human being. A noble purpose is a leader’s highest calling—the desire to make a worthwhile, lasting, positive impact on the organization—leaving it a better place than he or she found it.

Asking leaders to reflect on and define their noble purpose unlocks transformative potential. It motivates both the leader and others to achieve something great, to serve with honor and pride, and leave a legacy. Performance and results naturally follow as do passion and commitment.

- **The second focus relative to application involves doing.** If you’ve learned it, you can do it. If you can do it, you can measure it. Yes, we recognize and capitalize on the fact that the mastery of a skill causes people to feel good about themselves. Leadership training—to some degree—is based on the premise that the gratification of learning energizes people to meet difficult challenges. To capitalize on that premise, ask people to identify those difficult challenges prior to attendance and to meet with an immediate supervisor to identify significant, measurable goals to be met as a result of developing the leadership competencies taught in the workshop. This enables the sponsoring organization to measure the results of training and development—not based on how participants report they have changed but on bottom-line results.

A focus on doing and being takes us back to where we started—with intention. In the developmental experience, intention produces two outcomes: a more enlightened leader and results. When embodied by leaders, it ensures clarity of purpose and value-driven action. Integrity, authenticity, and alignment are the outcomes.

The gift of great leadership can seem magical. The underlying theory is not. The key is to focus on mindful leadership development. To be intentional about process, content, and outcomes—to

take leaders on a deeply personal journey that starts with a courageous look inside to reflect on their humanity and a fresh look outside to connect with other leaders to solve thorny and complex organizational problems. To engage them in powerful activities that build on their personal experiences and reveal previously unknown methods of operating. To expand their understanding of what's needed from leaders now and how they can take dramatic steps to make a difference. And to maintain a laser focus on purpose and skill application to improve the bottom line. Then, and only then, can leadership training take, make a difference, and meet the promise of stretching participants beyond current levels to unlock transformative change.

Rosaria Hawkins, Ph.D., is president of Take Charge Consultants, a 35-year-old firm founded by Filomena Warihay, Ph.D. Take Charge provides leadership development and consulting solutions that help organizations build mindful leaders—that is, leaders who transcend previous performance levels, establish strong productive relationships, maximize business results, and successfully navigate complex environments.