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Leadership Development:

10 Common Mistakes to Avoid…

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Leadership Development is a massive industry. In the US alone, over $160 Billion is spent on learning and development (ASTD 2013) to put this in perspective, this is equivalent to the GDP of New Zealand; globally the figure is far higher.

Are organisations getting value for money? Are they getting *positive behaviour change* in the people who hold the keys to the organisation's success? All too often the answer is no.

Consider the following (de-identified yet true) story:

> *A Global FMCG Organisation recently approached us to discuss ways to improve their leadership development practices. The previous year they had spent upwards of $600,000 on a three-day offsite and coaching for their executive team. They had used a reputable, well-branded consultancy, 'experts' in the latest research on leadership. The feedback after the program was overwhelmingly positive. 12 months later however, the program had delivered no demonstrable change in behaviour, no lasting outcomes for the business and over half the team had been 'moved on' or had left.*

What they later realised was that they had bought an 'Executive Entertainment Program' dressed as 'Leadership Development'.

Many organisations are consistently falling into the same traps; their leadership development practices are broken.

Why? The following represent our observations of the most common mistakes made by Australian organisations:

1   Programs lack business purpose

It sounds obvious, but it isn't. Studies indicate that over 40% of leadership development programs don't even align with the organisation's strategy. (Boyle et al 2011).

Leadership development should be for a specific business purpose. Without this focus, the program is disconnected from reality, lacks urgency and is theoretical in nature. Without practical context, the learning doesn't connect with the right parts of the brain and so behaviour change is unlikely.

Confirming a clear and specific business purpose for a leadership development program not only lifts the likelihood of real behavioural change, it also helps to:

- Clarify what skills and changes are needed to succeed

- Stop the program being seen as time 'off the job'

- Confirm who should be in the room and why

- Measure meaningful return on investment

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2   Pre-selection criteria are not used

Many leaders on development programs are there only because they are a leader in the business. The following are overlooked:

1. **'Motivation to learn'** – without this, a program begins with the 'prisoner mentality', participants feeling they have more important places to be. Leaders need to choose to attend the program and have a desire to change or develop. To help them make an informed choice, program leaders should clarify the business purpose, value and opportunity, preferably with simple but thought provoking questions.

2. **Potential/capability of participants.** A program needs to challenge participants just enough to achieve change. Criteria should be established and leaders should be matched accordingly to ensure it stretches and does not embarrass.

3   Expectations are weak

When an organisation invests in the development of a leader, it is reasonable to discuss expected outcomes for both parties. This benefits both the organisation and the leader who becomes more engaged, more likely to make courageous changes, and plays a more active role in their own development.

If leaders expect a program to be 'informative' rather than a true opportunity to develop and change, they are likely to create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## 4   Programs are theoretical and overcomplicated

Organisations don't need leadership experts, they need good leaders who can prepare their followers for current and future challenges.

Leadership boils down to a set of key skills, executed with authenticity by credible individuals.

Any *complex* theoretical programs should be viewed with great scepticism for two reasons:

1. **It's probably marketing spin.** Due to 'uniqueness theory' organisations will often fall for whatever theory is 'new' in an attempt to get ahead. Having a fleet of 'experts' on a new leadership theory is unlikely to deliver results.

2. **They don't work.** The human brain is extremely limited in its bandwidth. Presenting complex theoretical information to leaders for an extended period of time is like asking them to drink from a fire-hydrant - most is wasted. On average, from a 1-day program, participants only retain 2-3 key points.

For programs to work, concepts need to be limited and impactful. Key learnings should be discussed in practical terms, key skills must be practised with structured feedback and working application should be obvious.

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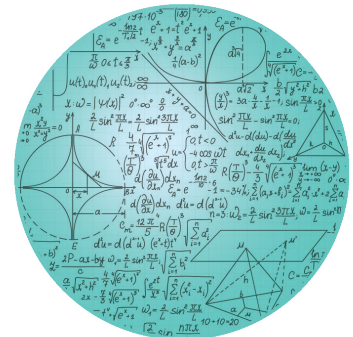
5   Programs miss 'human flaws'

Keeping things simple is critical; both working memory and attention span in our brains is incredibly limited. However, there are many other potential 'human flaws' which limit our ability to learn, grow and develop.

Often overlooked is the Dunning Kruger effect, which reveals that for a given skill, 'incompetent' people will:

• tend to overestimate their own level of skill

• fail to recognise genuine skill in others

• fail to recognise the extremity of their inadequacy

This is in addition to other common issues such as 'oppositional reflex' (inability to take on board feedback) and confirmation bias, all affect a program's chance of success. With specific strategies, these 'human flaws' can be managed, without them; a program will normally fail to achieve desired change.

6   Focus on convenience over outcomes

Short modularised programs in 1-2 hour blocks can be very tempting. Leaders often request them, and they can be perfect for knowledge transfer. Typically though, they will fail to result in a sustainable change in leadership behaviour.

Similarly, online programs and learning via teleconference can seem attractive due to cost saving and convenience. Again though, they are unlikely to lead to behaviour change.

The desired outcome and its value should govern the length of the program and how it should be delivered rather than the other way round.

7   Leaders' leaders are not involved

Having an executive leader sit with their teams through traditional 'leadership training' programs is normally a poor use of their time. Conversely, it can be invaluable to have an executive work *with* the group within a structured program. It achieves the following:

• It adds 'weight' and importance to the program

• It drives focus onto the business outputs of the program, lifting the urgency for change

• The executive gains are better understanding of the bench-strength of their leaders and what is required to succeed

8   Programs lack consequences

Many organisations will simply turn a blind eye to leaders who actively disrupt development initiatives. Some leaders will use training as an opportunity to catch up on emails, phone calls or to drink to excess the prior evening.

Organisations that overlook unacceptable behaviour convey a powerful and damaging message that leadership development is a discretionary entitlement and of little importance.

9 Leader opinions are valued over outcomes

The 'success' of many leadership development programs is measured by the opinions of participants rather than the amount of positive change or business outcomes. As a result, focus turns to 'pleasing' the leaders rather than creating the appropriate conditions for leadership development.

Leaders need a clear and stretching business challenge to work on or practice their approach towards. They also need open and honest feedback as well as a clear opportunity to achieve a tangible outcome. Business outcomes are ultimately the true measure of a program's success.

10 Programs lack ongoing support

There is often a significant rift between what is learned on a leadership development program and what is done back on the job (especially when no-one is watching).

Depending on the skill and the person, the time taken for an ability to become 'neurally wired' and to 'stick' takes 18-254 days (Lally et al 2009). As a result, without focused and continual effort, old habits are more likely to be used by leaders when under pressure.

Organisations that keep supporting the development of their leaders for 3-6 months after a program, will realise much stronger outcomes.

Conclusion

Leaders who make courageous and insightful decisions, drive change and prepare their followers for future challenges are an incredible asset to an organisation.

Organisations invest heavily in the hope of developing such leaders yet many fail due to one of the mistakes listed above. Capable program design, management and facilitation is needed to achieve real change.

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