

Developing Leaders: To train or not to train?

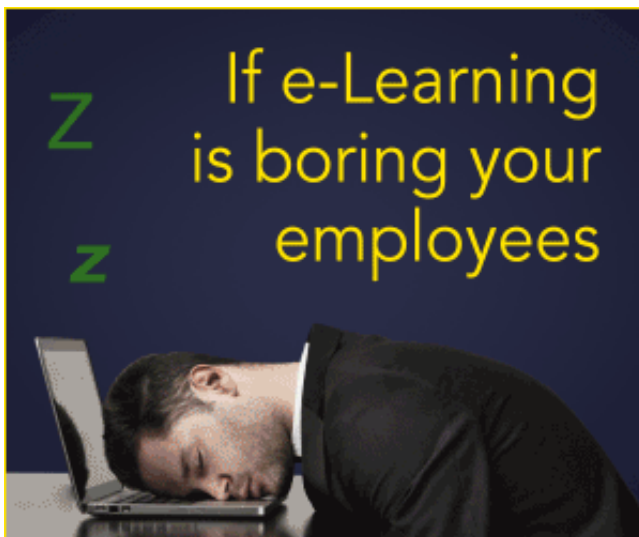
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[Shawn M. Galloway](#)
[ProAct Safety Inc](#)

Improving the capabilities of those in a leadership position is viewed as a top initiative in many organizations. More and more companies are moving their focus in management from compliance cop to performance coach, due to the realization that if there isn't an understood correlation between what performance obtained the results, the outcomes are due more to luck than purposeful effort.

More often than not, the first approach investigated to increase leadership capability is training. *Disclaimer: from board members to front line supervisors, I have trained thousands of individuals to improve their leadership capabilities, but training is only as effective as the reinforcement that follows.*



If your plan to develop leaders is anchored on training, a different perspective is encouraged. Begin first with outlining your strategy to determine what will reinforce or conflict with the training. Any time I am contacted to lead workshops for organizations, one of the first questions I ask is: how will this be reinforced following the event? If motivators and demotivators are not clearly captured and outlined, then the training is potentially a roll of the dice.

Safety is not alone in the over-abundance of programs of the month. When results aren't quickly recognized, they are discontinued, furthering the, "This too shall pass," and "Wait and see," attitude. In general, initiatives rarely fail in theory, they fail in application. Moreover, projects do not fail in the end, they fail in the beginning because the identification of what will work to support and what will work against is omitted.

Consider past training or even leadership development initiatives if you are not getting the desired performance outcomes, why? Addressing performance challenges are not as simple as providing new skills or retraining. Thinking of past efforts, consider answering the following questions:

1. Did the individuals see the rationale in the training objective?
2. Did the training provide immediate recognition of value-add to the individual or were only the organizational benefits outlined?
3. How much creative input did the targeted audience (or at least a representation of) have in the development of the training and expectations of outcome?
4. How were the individuals that participated in the training proactively and positively held accountable for what was expected following the training?

5. How were the systems, performance management/review approaches and measurement aligned to support and reinforce the change?

If answers to the above questions were not captured previously and great results were obtained, congratulations; you are luckier than most. One of the first principles in navigating a journey is to determine your starting point.

Management is often defined as getting things accomplished through other people. Leadership is inspiring people to do more than what they think is possible, and more than what they feel they need to do to keep their job. If your goal is to develop leaders, prior to searching for training and workshops, first assess and recognize the starting point of not just your targeted level in the organization, but of all of those in a leading position.

It is common knowledge supervisors are often in a difficult position, juggling hyper-competitive priorities, changes in leadership and pressure from the employees. Many organizations will help first-line supervisors improve their leadership skills, as this is seen as the greatest and potentially most transformative opportunity. I tend to agree; however, the performance and capabilities of the supervisors are a direct result of the current or past management team. Supervisors are either being developed and held accountable for their increase in capabilities or are assured that what they are doing is accepted, reinforcing the belief that how they are currently leading must be working well.

If a group's performance is viewed as undesirable, do you know what went wrong? Were they the wrong people placed in that role, were they not provided the skills to be great leaders, or were they not being proactively and positively held accountable for the leaders they need to be?

Starting with the supervisory level first can potentially be a mistake if the organizational layers above are not going to be playing from the same sheet of music. The reinforcement, vital for sustainability, will not occur. Consider the different layers of management in your organization and answer the following questions:

1. What percent of each level inspire and drive change?
2. What percent of each level maintain the status quo?
3. For levels below CEO or most senior executive, who does each of these individuals report to, a driver of change or maintainer of status quo?

Mapping this out has been helpful to many clients to determine development opportunities, at group or individual levels. This approach often indicates the best opportunity to shape leadership might not be with training. Desirable leadership styles, beliefs and an interest in more effective approaches might already exist with some individuals, but are being suppressed by a boss that isn't a driver of change.

Most people are more than happy to improve their capabilities and become leaders. Rather than first searching for training to motivate behaviour, outline and neutralize the current demotivators to desirable leadership performance. Consider gathering a cross representation of individuals from the different levels in your organization and pose the following three questions:

1. Level by level (executive, manager, supervisor, etc.), what would you see someone doing or saying that lets you know they are one of the best leaders this organization has?
2. What currently motivates someone in a leadership position to be the best leader they can?
3. What currently demotivates someone in a leadership position from being the best leader they can?

Questions similar to these have been very effective with many clients to identify the starting point, what the end results of excellence will look like, and prioritize a path to fill the gap. My military experience taught me it was a bad idea to start down a path prior to identifying the potential snipers nests, landmines and ambush points. Leading for business success is no different. **LE**

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Author Bio

Shawn M. Galloway is the President and Chief Operating Officer of ProAct Safety. As an international consultant, professional keynote speaker and strategist, he has helped hundreds of organizations achieve and sustain excellence in safety, culture, and operational performance. He is also the host of the highly acclaimed weekly podcast series, Safety Culture Excellence®.

Email info@ProActSafety.com

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