What Makes Leadership Development Programs Succeed?

Citation
Yemiscigil, Ayse, Dana Born, Horace Ling. "What Makes Leadership Development Programs Succeed?." Harvard Business Review.

Published Version
https://hbr.org/2023/02/what-makes-leadership-development-programs-succeed

Permanent link
https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37374468

Terms of Use

Share Your Story

What makes leadership development programs succeed?

It is estimated that organizations spend $200 billion on corporate training and development in the US and leadership development claims 35% - the largest share - of training budgets. But it is not clear what return these investments yield for leaders and companies. Does leadership development actually work? Does it change leaders in a meaningful way? If so, how long do these changes last?

As educators who have been creating leadership development experiences for years, we are familiar with enthusiastic reports of learning and growth in program evaluations. These are often enough for program developers and employers to say 'our program works'. Yet, we weren't convinced that these evaluations were giving us an accurate or full picture of the change – if any – that participants could be experiencing.

In our ongoing and published research, we wanted to unpack the black box of leadership development, examine its impact and explore for whom leadership development may be beneficial and why. During the past five years, we used experiments and longitudinal surveys and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data from over twenty cohorts comprising six different leadership development programs offered in companies and professional schools. Our sample included more than one thousand employees and leaders with diverse backgrounds, tenure, and rank.

Our research shows that under the right circumstances, leadership development can create personal transformation and have a sizable positive impact on mental health and well-being, by leading to an improved sense of personal growth, a clearer sense of self, a renewed sense of meaning and purpose in life and at work, greater happiness, and reduced stress. However, there are limits to what can realistically be achieved. Our research reveals that practitioners need to pay attention to the following factors in their program design and delivery to realize the true potential of leadership development programs.

1- Explicitly focus on whole-person growth
Leadership development is less about learning skills to solve specific technical challenges, it aims to prepare leaders for adaptive challenges which requires transforming leaders' whole selves and general behavioral tendencies. Our studies showed that efforts to bring a whole-person approach to leadership development are recognized by employees and provides a greater return in terms of positive outcomes. As one executive said, "This program is transforming not just how I lead but how I live." Another participant mentioned "This program opened up not only the possibilities in my career, but the possibilities within myself." So, programs should explicitly help employees integrate and develop their professional and non-work identities and teach generalizable skills that are applicable in all areas of life, at work and beyond. One

participant noted the value of this approach when they said "I identified opportunities to improve the way I engage with others on teams. I also recognize opportunities to engage more effectively with my teenage kids."

2- Provide opportunities for self-reflection, meaning-making, and insight
One of the main reasons employees derive value from leadership development is the opportunity to take a pause from the daily grind and pressures at work and reorient their self, work, and life. As one participant said: "The program helped me slow down and intentionally consider my purpose in life. It was the first time in years I allowed myself to consider why I am here, why I do what I do, what my purpose is, how I show up in the world, and how I want to show up moving forward." This has direct implications for employees' relations with work: "I am clearer and more focused about what I want to accomplish at work. I am enjoying my work more than I did before." To capitalize on this pause, it is crucial to give employees plenty of opportunities for structured self-reflection, encourage meaning-making on professional events and milestones and create time and space for life-changing insights to emerge. [As Dov Seidman says](), "When you press the pause button on a machine, it stops. But when you press the pause button on human beings they start— start to reflect, rethink assumptions, and reimagine a better path."

3- Offer programs especially when acute or chronic stress is high
Our research demonstrates a boost in happiness and significant stress reductions after leadership development, mostly due to the fresh focus and direction participants gained in programs: "Remembering to focus on my purpose in life and actively identifying how the tasks I perform relate to my purpose has given me more peace with the work I am (and am not) performing. As a result, it has positively contributed my long-lasting happiness." Participants also note being energized due to a pause from work "I figured out that I was burned out. I had a chance for a pause and I could I appreciate what I had in life. It gave me energy."; "[The program] recharged my battery." Notably, these reductions in stress were larger in programs that were delivered during the pandemic and in which participants had high stress at baseline. We also found greater stress reductions for leaders with high emotional variability – a personality trait that is also known as neuroticism and tends to be associated with chronic stress. Employers should prioritize leadership development offerings when stress is high due to collective events or personal reasons to effectively destress employees and build psychological resources in the workforce.

4- Achieve more in shorter, intensive programs
One of the more interesting findings in our studies was that shorter programs yielded surprisingly large changes. The magnitude of improvements was equivalent to, and sometimes even larger in shorter programs that lasted two to four days compared to longer ones (i.e., a four-week program). What's more, some of these improvements in well-being were on par with what is observed in [therapeutic mental health interventions](). These findings suggest that program

developers (and participants) can achieve more by using less time and financial resources and should actively work on shortening programs to offer intensive development opportunities.

5- Pay attention to groups who may resist growth
Professionals with different gender, race, age, and tenure benefited from leadership development to an equal extent in our studies, and some racial minority groups even benefited more, which shows the potential of leadership development for providing equal opportunities for growth in workplaces. Yet, we found *less* favorable changes among those with highest clarity in their sense of self, and these individuals tended to have higher income and reported being more conscientious. Perhaps, having too clear views about oneself could prevent leaders from being vulnerable and developing. Practitioners need to recognize and address the psychological barriers among such leaders with lower developmental readiness.

6- Achieving long-term changes is hard, consider new strategies for sustained impact
Psychological evidence shows that well-being changes that are initiated by life events often fade away over time as people adapt to new realities. Consistent with this 'adaptation theory', we found changes in well-being in leadership development to disappear over time. If this is the nature of well-being, short term improvements can be evidence of 'success' instead of failure. However, for practitioners, this shows the necessity to capitalize on the initial changes, for example, by establishing long-term habits during this boost or through reminders and continued engagement after the programs.

7- Offer online programs to increase efficiency and maintain the impact of the in-person
Since our studies have been running for a long time, we collected data before, during, and after the pandemic, which enabled us to answer a burning question that practitioners have: should we offer our development program online or in-person? Some appealing features of online programming include reduced costs and ability to reach out a larger audience; yet, there have been reasonable doubts about whether online programs can be as effective as in-person programs. Our studies showed no significant differences between online and in-person programs when it comes to personal growth and well-being. There may be other differences between in-person vs. online programs that we did not study, however, our findings are some of the first to answer this critical question and highlight the promise that personal and leadership development can happen as effectively in an online format as in an in-person venue.

Conclusion
Companies need to show the return on their massive investments in leadership development, and to do so, they often they look at performance outcomes. Our research shows that leadership development can lead to personal growth and boost the happiness, meaning and vitality people experience in life and at work. As employers are struggling to create real engagement and connection in the post-pandemic world, they should appreciate these new metrics of success in

leadership development both [for their own sake](#) and due to their potential impact on greater work [performance](#) and [retention.](#) Leadership development may be an overlooked source for well-being, but, if and when done right, it can be an effective means for creating engagement and flourishing among workers at a time when they need these the most.

Ayse Yemiscigil, *Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior at Gabelli School of Business at Fordham University, Research Affiliate with The Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University and a Research Fellow at the International Humanistic Management Association. https://www.ayseyemiscigil.com/*

Dana Born, *Faculty Chair, Senior Executive Fellows Program at The Harvard Kennedy School of Government, Center for Public Leadership and a Distinguished Fellow in Moral Leadership at The HOW Institute for Society.*

Horace Ling *is the Program Director for the Senior Executive Fellows Program at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and he holds master's degrees from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and the Harvard Graduate School of Education.*