Upgrading Leaders Through Learning Solutions

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F̲ew doubt that leaders make a difference in organization results. They boost employee productivity; create organization capabilities; increase customer loyalty; build investor confidence; and ensure community reputation. To continually deliver these outcomes, leaders at all levels of an organization need to demonstrate agility, or the capacity to learn, grow, and adapt their thinking and actions to new business requirements. Organizations invest inordinate resources to develop leaders, yet we find the following often limits the outcomes of these investments:

- Nature/nurture: about 50% of how leaders behave is tied to their personal DNA (nature) and about 50% can be learned, so any leader's development is constrained by a predispositions
- Leadership learning formula (50/30/20): about 50% of what leaders learn comes from job experience (including coaching), 30% from training; and 20% from life experience (an update from the 70/20/10 formula), so investments in leadership improvements need to be multi tasked
- Limits of leadership experiences: Many companies lack the experiences that will help leaders fully develop; so leaders learn to lead from those who led them not from new situations.
- Leadership sustainability: About 20% of what leaders learn in training actually gets applied back on the job.

In light of the greater need for adaptive leaders and of the limits and challenges inherent in leadership development, we need to continually find new ways to upgrade leaders to respond to changing business conditions.

Many innovative leadership development initiatives exist from involving customers as participants and trainers (e.g., GE customer training) to using social media to connect participants (e.g., Accenture's global learning platform) to using philanthropy as a development opportunity (e.g., IBM service corps) to doing explicit development projects (e.g., P&G's leadership through experience) to tailored individual development plans that lead to internal promotions (e.g., General Mills) to targeting future leaders through talent

scouts (e.g., ICICI Bank in India) to coaching (e.g., Mobily in Saudi Arabia). No one of these isolated initiatives will be a magic bullet to fill the leadership requirements for the future, but these leadership innovations should be encouraged.

Developing leaders for the future requires balancing learning new insights versus application. Managing this tension becomes an important feature of future leadership development. Some leadership activities emphasize the new insights, e.g., lectures or presentations from trainers, case studies of other companies, 360 feedback on personal behavior. Other leadership investments emphasize application, e.g., coaching, job assignments, social responsibility projects.

The ability to combine insight with application has often been done through action learning. Much has been written about how action learning will help prospective leaders turn theory into action by applying the conceptual insights into their daily work routines either as individuals or as teams. Many companies have organized leadership experiences around action learning and many leadership training courses weave action learning into the curriculum.

However, in our work, we think that there is an evolution from action learning to learning solutions that will be a part of investing in future leaders. The differences of the two approaches are laid out in Table 1. Having done action learning for decades and now experimenting with learning solutions, let me try to illustrate the difference of the two approaches.

In one company, we were trying to build a more disciplined approach to managing change. To help leaders manage change, a faculty team was created to codify the lessons of change from heaps of research and practice. From this synthesis, faculty created a typology of 7 key processes for successful change. Participants attended the change leadership training program to learn these disciplines of change and were then asked to apply them to a problem within their business. As participants applied these lessons of change their projects, they were engaged in action learning effort which helped translate the ideas into action.

Table 1: Action Learning vs. Learning Solutions

Dimension	Action Learning	Learning Solutions
Starting point	Theory, insight, or tools	Phenomenon or problem
Begin discussion with	Presenting the theory or idea	Presenting the problem and asking a question
Focus	Applying tools to solve a problem	Understanding a problem and creating tools to solve it
Role of faculty	Present theory, insights, and tools (through lecture or case), then encourage actions based on the tools	Listen to problem; separate symptom from problem; co-create solution (have live mini-case studies)
Role of participant	Be prepared to learn and apply tools	Be prepared to define and solve a problems
Ending point	Take action based on learning tools	Solve problems based on creating new tools
Measures	Understanding and use of tools	Resolution of business problem

I have participated in similar action learning workshops on innovation, globalization, customer service, cost, and quality. The starting point of these leadership investments was a business process, with a distillation of the tools to make progress and an application to a project.

At a personal level, action learning also occurs, when an individual leader recognizes the skills, competencies, or abilities of an effective leader, then builds a personal action plan to improve on those skills.

Action learning has been appropriately lauded and offers a dramatic improvement over traditional learning approaches like lectures, case studies, readings, demonstrations, or discussion groups. But, in a rapidly changing business context, leaders need to learn how to learn. They need to carve out their business challenges into discrete, but connected problems; to separate symptoms from problems; to create insights from both their and others experiences and from theory and research; to continually develop ways to approach and solve on going business problems.

Learning solutions starts with leaders mastering how to define and scope a problem. This sounds easy, but is not. In the midst of many competing and complex demands on leaders, they need to distill the challenges they face and then recognize the underlying symptoms that they can address. Then, they need to learn how to solve that problem by examining theory and by accessing others' experiences into a solution that is tailored to their situation. As they then apply their insights to their problem, they are much more likely to have ownership of the solutions they craft. Instead of training being an event when they learn and act, it is an experience that teaches them how to think about and solve business problems.

We have worked to apply learning solution approaches within training programs. Individuals or teams come to the course with a business challenge. The challenge is something that is real to their business, that their sponsor recognizes, and that they have capacity to improve. Rather than impose a set of others' insights directly to this problem, the team is facilitated to rigorously analyze the problem drawing from faculty who are facilitators and from other members of the class. The team creates an approach to solve the problem that integrated both theory from faculty and experiences of peers. The team then applies this co-created knowledge to their problem to derive a solution that is both accurate and accepted. We have found that a learning solution approach to leadership development not only solves the presenting problem, but also helps leaders learn how to learn by knowing how to approach future problems that they inevitably will face.

We have used the concept of learning solutions for teams as well as individuals, in one or two day training events and in two week programs. Learning solutions requires that participants do the hard work of problem identification, make real commitments to actively solve problems in training rather than being passive listeners, and become engaged in the creation of applicable insights that will help leaders improve. Faculty play a dramatically different role. Rather than rely on teaching notes for lectures, tools, or cases, they have to facilitate learning among the participants. They are required to bring theory, research, and experience of other companies working on the problem participants identify. They ask more questions than give answers. They co-learn and they do live consulting to help participants make progress. Then, the draw conclusions about how the learning solutions process can be applied after a workshop.

Learning solutions supplements other leadership investment techniques. It will not be a panacea for help leaders lead, and in requires dramatically different commitment from leaders and skills from faculty. But, coupled with other innovative leadership investments, it may help leaders adapt to the changing business requirements.

About the Authors

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Dave has consulted and done research with over half of the Fortune 200. Dave was the editor of the *Human Resource Management Journal* 1990 to 1999, has served on the editorial board of four other journals, is on the Board of Directors for Herman Miller, is a Fellow in the National Academy of Human Resources, and is cofounder of the Michigan Human Resource Partnership.

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