Developing Leaders

Practice six basic disciplines.

by Cal Wick and Richard Flanagan

LEADERSHIP TRAINING AND DEVELOPment is designed to produce better qualified leaders who improve business results. Effective executives manage business *processes* so that they yield optimal results. Converting training and development to business results, like any vital process, should be analyzed, managed, improved, and made more efficient and effective.

The measure of effectiveness of training programs is the *yield*—the quantity and quality of output in relation to the input, the extent to which the resources consumed (time and money) are converted into results.

Executive development represents an *investment* for which the organization expects a *return*. Effective executives ensure that training is managed in a way that maximizes the ROI in people. Unfortunately, in most companies, a major disconnect persists between what happens in the classroom and what goes on in the workplace. Only a small fraction of every dollar invested in training and development is ever transferred and applied in a way that makes a positive impact. The competitive advantage that ought to flow from development initiatives is compromised by failure to manage the process. Too little attention is given to the actions needed to close the learning-doing gap and facilitate transfer of learning.

The Learning-Doing Gap

For training and development to pay dividends in terms of better teamwork, greater productivity, and more effective leadership, it must first be converted to on-the-job *action* and *applied* to relevant work. In most training, however, there is a yawning chasm, giant learning-doing gap, between what is learned and what is done on the job.

On one side of the gulf is the program where initial learning takes place. On the other side is the work, where the learning needs to be converted into action and productivity. Too often, all the attention is directed to the program and not enough to the transfer process that is essential to achieve better results.

Practice Six Disciplines

To convert learning into results and get the greatest return on your training investment, practice six disciplines:

1. Define the outcomes in business terms. Clearly define the objective of a training program. Too many leadership training programs are implemented without a clear definition of the expected benefits. The program's "learning objectives" are usually defined, such as "at the conclusion of the program the participant will understand the situational leadership model." But how does this benefit the business? What will people do better or differently? The real objective is *more effective management* through application of a particular model or skill.

Define the expected outcomes of your development program in business terms. Don't allow programs to proceed unless you can explain the benefit.

2. Design the complete experience. Learning is continuous, starting before the training and continuing afterward. Although formal training can be an important catalyst of development, executives learn the most on the job. So, whether or not a development program delivers its promised benefits depends in large part to what happens at work.

A great training program is necessary, but insufficient to produce the desired results For example, the participant's manager greatly influences whether learning transfer takes place. Effective executives ensure that program designs include detailed plans for both the learning event and the post-course implementation. Maximizing the ROI depends on planning and managing the entire system—from the packaging and delivery of knowledge to the on-the-job support.

Insist that training programs address the complete experience and that program designs address how managers will support their direct reports, how learners will be assisted in their application efforts, and how the results will be monitored and improved.

3. Deliver for application. For training and development to impact results, learners must make the connection between classroom learning and job application. Only then will they apply their new knowledge to benefit the company. Whether the connection is obvious or not depends on how the material is presented. Too often, executive education is presented as a disconnected "parade of stars" or lectures that have little connection with the real work.

To improve the practical yield, the training needs to be delivered in a way that facilitates transfer and application. Each topic must be firmly anchored by relevant business needs and illustrated by applicable examples. Well-designed simulations and action-learning programs are more effective than lectures.

Effective executives review proposed programs to ensure that there is tight coupling between the classroom and the real work of participants. They ask: How will on-the-job application be illustrated? Will learners practice the skills in simulations? Do the trainers understand the business challenges?

4. Drive follow-through. Unless the learning is practiced, continued, and reinforced on the job, performance rapidly falls back toward baseline, and most of the potential value is lost.

Effective executives actively manage
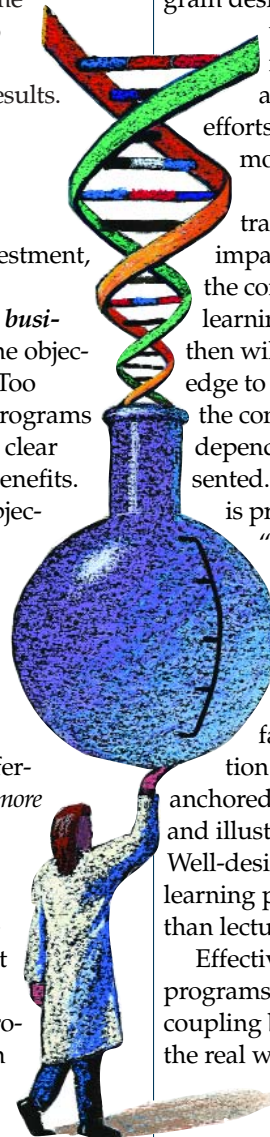
the post-course follow-through period. They treat learning objectives like business objectives. Learners *and their managers* need to be held accountable for following-through to deliver expected outcomes and ROI. Companies that implement post-course follow-through management see dramatic results. Participants put forth greater effort, have more discussions with their managers, and make greater progress. There is a high correlation between follow-through and improvement.

5. Deploy active support. Ensure that there is support and accountability for follow-through. Program participants are more likely to try new skills and approaches if they feel they can succeed and are assured that there is help available as they need it. Support from direct supervisors requires that the participants' managers endorse their direct reports' development objectives. Nothing undermines a training program faster than a manager's indifference regarding performance against learning objectives. A well designed program ensures that managers know and agree with their direct reports' development objectives and that they support their achievement.

Senior management sets the tone by endorsing the training and ensuring that the new learning is applied on the job. Without such support, the investment in learning will be squandered.

6. Document results. Effective executives measure and evaluate the results to ensure that the investment is producing adequate return for shareholders. Without measurement, you can't drive continuous improvement. Training and development cycles can only be improved by comparing the actual results to the expected results and assessing the variables that most influence outcomes.

Practicing these six disciplines will sharply increase the effectiveness of learning and development initiatives.

Executives should hold their training and development to the same standards of excellence as they do other departments. They should not accept measures of *activity* (such as number of courses or people trained) as substitutes for measures of *productivity*, on-the-job performance, maximum ROI, and sustainable advantage. **LE**

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