

Leadership development: why it fails

WHY IS LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IMPORTANT?

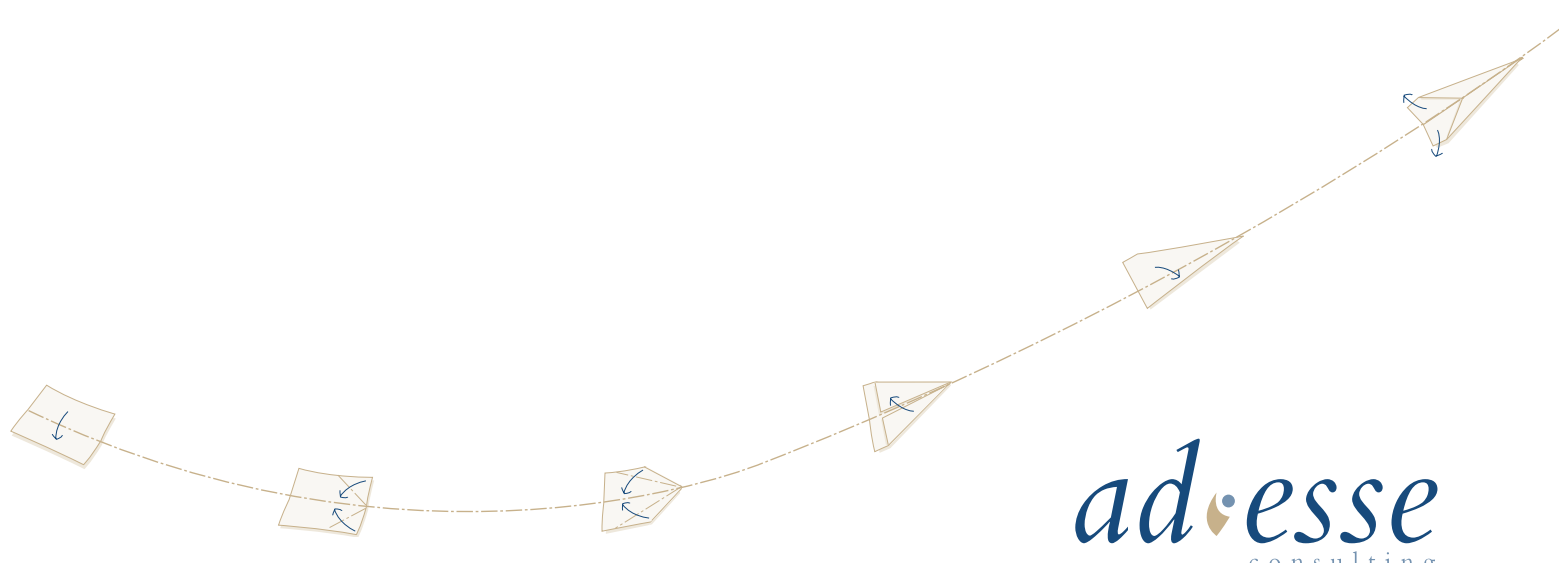
There are few business leaders, organisational models, or management publications that don't recognise the importance of leadership. Strong and powerful leadership has been seen as vital for millennia, and has now even achieved celebrity status. Alan Sugar's 'The Apprentice' has regularly attracted audiences of millions, and whilst some of us may not sign up to Sugar's particular style of leadership, it does at least raise our awareness of the impact of leaders.

All of you reading this will have been led, some of you may feel you have been badly led or even mis-led; some of you will currently be leading others. We know good leadership when we see it – that inspiring confidence we have when our leaders consistently demonstrate that they 'know what they're doing', and make us want to achieve more. Numerous examples tell us what is possible when excellent leadership is in place, and we all know how challenging our organisations are, and how much we need to be led.

So if we agree leadership is important, surely leadership development is important?

WHY THE CYNICISM?

The main problem with leadership development is that fairly regularly it doesn't actually make sufficient impact on the organisation, performance and achievement of objectives. Simply put, the results are disappointing or negligible at best and positively damaging and costly at worst. Perceived as a waste of time by many senior managers, supported by some, often including Human Resource managers but with no tangible data to prove their point, provision of leadership development is often a cause for argument in the senior team. **So just why does it fail?**



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WHY DOES IT FAIL?

Sadly, the reasons are numerous.

They include:

- Line managers are not convinced of the value
- Participants can't really see what's in it for them and feel under more pressure because they are away from the operation for a number of days
- Participants feel disenchanted with the organisation, feel that their fundamental values are being challenged, and the programme turns into an opportunity to criticise the next level of leaders/the sector/ any other stakeholders
- The programme does not take into account the individual differences of participants – both in terms of leadership style and learning preferences, and individual perspectives
- The programme does not take into account the cultural uniqueness of the organisation, so again is perceived as abstract
- The content is too theoretical, with little linkage to the real challenges that leaders face on a daily basis
- The programme does not link sufficiently to existing systems – performance measurement, appraisal, operational process management, so opportunities are missed to lock learning in
- Even if real examples are used, and action plans are designed, nothing really changes when the individual participants return to the work place due to a sense of overwhelming work pressures
- Programmes are purely about leadership without any reference to management or vice versa, effectively making it difficult for participants to understand about how to link leadership learning to practical actions
- There is little follow up, so even if participants are briefly motivated the momentum is soon lost.

A WAY FORWARD

So, can these problems be addressed or will leadership development remain a good idea in theory...? In our experience it is possible to deal with the issues and provide leadership development that is not only well received by everyone involved, but has a direct impact on performance. Here's what we do...

For us there are four key principles:

1. A consistent business results focus
2. Recognising the need to integrate leadership development with existing systems and improvement approaches
3. Customising materials and methodology to address individual differences
4. Recognising that the programme is not just about delivering some workshops.

APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES

(I). PRE-PROGRAMME

Preparation is all. To ensure that whatever we design absolutely addresses the organisation's leadership development needs we engage in the following activities:

- Close working with the client organisation to identify
 - the precise aims and performance targets of the organisation
 - the key cultural issues and what it is that challenges individual values – be it in the organisation or the sector
 - what systems currently exist to measure leadership's contribution to business success, and how performance is managed and improved

- Work with participants to identify
 - individual perspectives
 - individual issues and perceptions about the organisation
 - preferred learning style
 - personal leadership challenges
 - personal challenges to individual values

Participant data is collected by a number of methods and will be selected according to client need. They may include full psychometric profiling (Meyers Briggs, Occupational Personality Profile, or similar tests), Learning Style testing (such as Honey & Mumford) and simple training needs analyses

- Analysis of data to be able to draft outlines that can then be modified and agreed with the client organisation
- Agreement of a measurement and follow-up methodology
- Information for all participants to prepare them fully in advance, which may include
 - requests for them to bring information with them to the programme
 - managing their expectations in terms of effort required and what they might expect to achieve
 - roles and boundaries of all stakeholders

(II). PROGRAMME

All of our programmes are highly interactive, utilise a variety of delivery methods depending on learning preferences and consistently attempt to deal with participants authentically. By taking a brief rapidly with the client organisation, it allows us to develop rapport with participants quickly, yet allows us to challenge assumptions and negative perspectives that may be acting as a barrier to leadership development.

Creating a safe environment where people can openly share their issues is essential so that they can confront the more difficult problems that might be hindering true progress. Participants are still sometimes surprised and encouraged to realise that they are not the only one struggling! Understanding that they are not alone, and bringing together different perspectives can often help to remove the log jam and develop creative approaches to old problems.

Personal objectives are established at the start, with clear measurable personal performance targets linked to business objectives. For example:

'By the end of this month, I will share my vision for the team, acknowledging the barriers and how we might overcome them, with all of its members (at the team meeting), to put into context the problem-solving team we are setting up to address the amount of time we waste in our appointments process. I will measure this in 3 ways

- 1. by asking each member to rate their clarity of understanding about what we are trying to achieve, during supervision, before and after the vision meeting*
- 2. the number of people who volunteer to be part of the team compared with the last project of this kind I set up*
- 3. the delivery of a workable solution on time'*

Programmes are usually modular, but with each module linked to the next. Time is given between sessions to enable the participants to put their learning into action, reflect and feedback with a view to improving.

During the course of the programme we meet with line managers to discuss purpose and progress, so that they can express their interest and commitment, pick up issues and lend support on a practical front where needed.

Individual reflection is vital so that participants can truly improve. To achieve this we encourage the use of learning logs, used for noting specific learning points and almost as a diary to note reactions, thoughts and ideas for future work. We also allow plenty of time for reflection, which may be regarded as a luxury, but we consider an essential to give people some perspective on their daily work, and allow them to see a wider picture, thus being able to work out how to address issues.

The content itself will address specific leadership needs but will typically establish the context then deal with the various components of leadership. We differentiate between leadership and management, move between establishing principles and giving people simple but effective, practical tools to create improvement.

(III). POST PROGRAMME

As with most successful learning programmes we establish follow up and measurement of success at a number of levels, including:

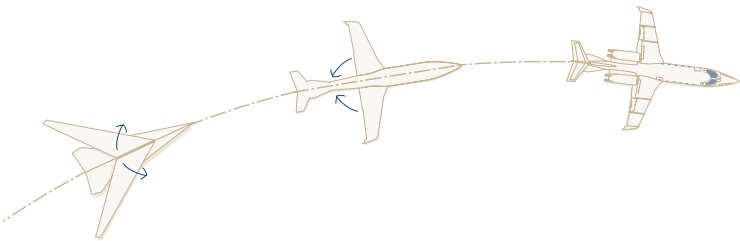
- **'reactionnaire'** at the end of the last module, along with discursive feedback
- A meeting with participants at an agreed point (usually around 12 weeks) to review progress and achievement
- A meeting with line managers to discuss changes to individual performance and achievement of organisational business targets
- Review with client contact other measures e.g. staff survey results, overall business performance
- A mechanism of support through e-mail and telephone contact between us and individual participants

FINALLY...

Achieving sustainable improvement is not easy – it requires consistent and integrated attention to all aspects of your business, of which leadership is a part. Surely those people you have appointed to lead your organisation to better results in a yet more challenging future deserve the best you can give them?

The last word goes to a recent client whose follow up e-mail said...

'Thanks again for all your work on this programme. I am very excited about it and the changes I am hoping to see. I think you have done a wonderful job and will be pleased to say so to any others that want to contact me.'



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