

Coaching Leadagers: How Traditional Leadership Development is Killing Leadership Development

By Dylan Emerick-Brown

Leadership Development is Failing

As an executive and organizational performance coach, I encounter one theme requested from clients more than any other and I know it's the same for other coaches in similar specialties: leadership development. This is a growing trend in organizations and one many coaches, consultants, and everything in between are quick to jump on. Where there's a demand, there's a supply.

However, for those of us who are paying close attention to the *impact* of that work, there should be some difficult soul-searching happening. According to LEADx CEO Kevin Kruse in an article he wrote for Forbes, "75% of leadership development professionals estimate that less than half of what they train gets applied on the job." This, and other statistics, came from the 2024 Leadership Development Benchmark Report. And as if that data wasn't enough to get the attention of coaches and executives, "a concerning 17% indicated that less than 20% of what they train gets applied on the job."

Many coaches attribute this to the shrinking budgets of companies they work with. Less money equals less opportunity to make a difference. In fact, "the average budget and team size both decreased by over 70% since 2023," according to the same report. And yet, can shrinking budgets and team sizes be the simple cause of this problem? Emphatically, no.

Leadership vs Management – The Traditional View

The problem stems from the trend, itself, of leadership development. According to Statista, as of "May 2024, about 161.08 million people were employed in the United States." And organizations can often have hundreds, if not thousands, of employees. How many of them need to create visions for their teams? How many of them are projecting future trends in their fields? How many are inspiring followers? Very, *very*, few.

On the contrary, how many of these employees are dealing with constant issues of efficiency? How many are tackling the complexity of ever-changing consumer needs and government regulations? How many are responsible for ensuring accountability in outcomes for their teams? The vast majority.

So, the issue here isn't just that leadership development isn't particularly effective – more on that soon – but that what most employees in organizations really need is management development. And yet, this doesn't have to be the either/or scenario it's so often painted as. It can be a yes/and.

Leadership *and* Management – Leadagers

In his acclaimed article, “What Leaders Really Do” from the *Harvard Business Review*, leadership professor John Kotter writes, “management is about coping with complexity...Leadership, by contrast, is about coping with change.” While most employees will face issues of complexity far more than they will of change, there will be times when leadership mindsets and skills are called for and wouldn’t it be great if those employees could rise to the challenges of both?

Leadagers are leader-managers, people capable of such agility. Depending on the context, leadagers can appropriately assess their situation and adapt to the mindset and tools best suited for the moment. It isn’t a simple arithmetic of someone who can lead *and* manage; leadagers are greater than the sum of their parts. They are a unique hybrid who can ask and answer the following questions:

- **Upstream:** how do we get upstream on what needs to be done (look for root causes instead of resultant symptoms)?
- **Future Vision:** what is the clear vision to be achieved for the future?
- **Present Direction:** what do we currently have and need to achieve that future (what needs to change and how do we streamline complexity)?
- **Alignment and Motivation:** how do we identify key stakeholders and communicate effectively with them the future vision (and create urgency) and present direction to achieve engagement and accountability?
- **Triage:** when things go awry, how do we get upstream on the issue (expand variability – inductive reasoning), communicate effectively with key stakeholders to create solutions (reduce variability – deductive reasoning), exercise promise management (who will do what by when?), and learn fast?

The Tool-User vs The Tool – Coaching

These are people who are curious, open-minded, and “we” oriented. When we coach, these are concepts that inevitably come up. We want people to be genuinely curious about the person or situation they’re with. Their perspective is one of many, so we encourage the asking of open-ended questions we don’t know the answers to and to replace judgment with a yearning to grow. And those questions are simply doors to nowhere if we aren’t open-minded. Allow yourself and your perspectives to be changed if an insight reveals a better way forward. Consider the impact over the intention and value being effective over being right. And when deciding, consider the ripple effects, both intended and not; who will be impacted? The most efficient way to embody a “we” mindset is to revert to being curious, ask questions, and bring others in with an open mind. I call it having a COW (curious, open-minded, and “we” oriented).

Kevin Kruse noted in the 2024 Leadership Development Benchmark Report that “less than half of leadership development professionals measured behavior change (39%) and business impact (22%). Yet, nearly 90% measured learner reaction.”

This brings me to my last point regarding why leadership development isn't always particularly effective. Most workshops and trainings focus on teaching the tool – and measure the learner reaction to it – when the real sustainable impact of growth stems from developing the *tool-user*, i.e., coaching. It isn't enough to simply teach the ideas and hope that they stick. One cannot facilitate a workshop then leave the participants with handouts and articles. The work needs to be habit-forming, social, and scalable.

This requires workshops and training that bring in real-world, real-time contexts for the participants to work with. Instead of teaching the skills and encouraging them to use them in their work, have them bring their work into the teaching of the skills. And then there's 1:1 coaching sessions with participants that complement the themes of the workshops. In doing so, we help the participants synthesize the skills by encouraging them to shift their perspectives. There is no one-size-fits-all workshop that will work long term. Each individual needs to anchor themselves to the new skills and mindsets being introduced, and this is where coaching is essential. And lastly, there needs to be follow-up. I don't mean post-workshop surveys and check-ins. We're in need of that in-depth follow-up with the individuals and groups/teams to explore what's working, what's not working, and how do we get what's not working working? This may require more 1:1 coaching or workshoping as a group/team.

Box Checked or Transformation Achieved?

At the end of the day, a single leadership development workshop can be an energizing and informative experience. And with shrinking budgets, it can be a cost-saving solution to checking the box on a valued initiative. However, if the development isn't sustainable then what is the point?

We cannot afford to focus on leadership while neglecting management, or vice versa. We need to effectively merge the two – leadagers – and teach people adaptability in a similar way to how we coach them. The goal in coaching isn't to have these clients for the rest of their lives. It's to encourage them on their transformative journey into becoming the best version of themselves they want to be; we get them thinking about their thinking and focus on the tool-user, not the tool. That same agility in shifting mindsets, employing curiosity, and keeping an open mind are all qualities that develop in the best of coaching sessions.

And if we're going to truly develop people, then it needs to stick. There are cost-effective ways to do this from utilizing retainers, hiring coaches in-house, and co-creating with appropriate stakeholders a tailored way to achieve the future they want to live into. There can be no long-lasting development without real-world real-time contexts, social engagement with colleagues, and individual attention to ensure the perception shifts required to most effectively use the tools that have been taught.

If we can focus on this level of quality in the development – no, transformation – of employees within an organization, then the impact will be incredible and the ripple effects will be vast.

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