

DESIGNING GREAT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS

BY GREGG THOMPSON

Leadership development workshops are very expensive. And I'm not just referring to the cost of facilities, materials, trainers, and bagels. When a company takes 20 or so managers out of the organization for several days, it is making a significant investment in their development. Those of us who are the architects of these workshops need to ask ourselves the question: Have we designed a workshop that is worthy of this investment? We at Bluepoint have been delivering leadership workshops for over twenty years and have learned that there are 10 core design principles that lead to a great learning experience. I would like to share these with you.



1. *Research-based content*

A colleague of ours once mused that many leadership workshops appear to have been created by two guys in a bar in Milwaukee and recorded on the back of a beer coaster. The truth is that anyone can cobble together some interesting exercises and experiences, but to what end? We know the outcomes of great organization leadership...

alignment, engagement, retention, productivity, teamwork, agility, to name a few. There is little mystery here. What many designers ignore is all the research that tells us what specific leadership behaviors, practices and approaches will create these outcomes. A good leadership workshop is grounded in this research and, as such, will equip participants with the capability to make an immediate, positive impact on their organizations.

2. *Engagement*

The frenzied pace that most managers face today has turned the otherwise calm and thoughtful participant into a skittish, distracted bystander infected by a self-imposed form of ADD with one eye on his or her Blackberry and the other eye on the door. It's not that these managers are disinterested in their professional development; they are simply products of today's frenetic organizations. To get their attention, they must be entertained. While describing a good leadership workshop as entertaining may sound like a call to design a boondoggle, unless the workshop can successfully compete with the myriad of distractions facing today's manager, we will simply be hosting adult day-care. The famous communications guru, Marshall McLuhan, made the connection even more direct with this statement: "It's misleading to suppose there's any basic difference between education and entertainment." Videos, stories, games, debates, physical experiences and colorful materials all play an important role in participant engagement.

3. *Story-telling*

Every participant comes to the workshop with their own unique leadership story that has grown out of their experiences, beliefs, fears, biases and aspirations. A great workshop challenges the participant to create a bigger story for him or herself and the people that they lead. This can only happen when the participant has the opportunity to tell his or her current story and have it honored in the classroom. Once this happens, a new story can be crafted. The greater the story, the greater the development.

4. Feedback

No workshop ingredient is more potent than feedback. Whether it be multi-rater assessments or direct one-on-one communication, feedback is a powerful stimulus for personal change. And that's what leadership development really is...personal change. What limits the use of feedback in leadership workshops? I believe it is largely our own arrogance. Too often we feel that the participant cannot handle the feedback. They are too fragile. They will somehow be irreparably damaged by our words or those of fellow participants. Or it may be our own insecurities. We will lose control of the workshop. Emotions will run rampant. We will not be able to handle the resulting carnage. Remember, the workshop is not about you; it's about the participant. Be bold in creating a feedback-rich environment. The participants will thank you for the gift, maybe not now, but someday.

5. Appreciation

The problem with many leadership development workshops is that there is an underlying assumption that the ideal leader needs to develop a predetermined set of corporate competencies while becoming some fantastic amalgamation of Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Gandhi and Jack Welch. Let's leave that idea to the boys at the bar in Milwaukee. We do not discard these elements entirely from the design process. Corporate culture and strategy rightly have a bearing on workshop design, and there is also much we can learn from the great leaders of the past. However, the best workshops are based on the assumption that all participants come uniquely gifted for the challenge of leadership, and the role of the workshop is to help them identify and cultivate these gifts. It is not our job to help them become the next Steve Jobs, but rather someone much more potent...the best leadership version of themselves. A workshop that is designed to help the participants accelerate the development of their natural strengths is much more potent than one designed to fix the participant or change him or her into the model corporate leader.

6. Intense experiences

I have now asked thousands of workshop participants to reflect on the following five items and select the one that had the most influence on their development as a leader.

1. Reading and Research
2. Performance appraisals
3. Coaching and Mentoring
4. Challenging experiences
5. Formal training

"Challenging experiences" was selected by over 90 % of the respondents. (It's interesting to note that "Performance appraisals" always comes in dead last, but that's a topic for another column.) Even though most designers are keenly aware of these findings, there is a great temptation to fill the workshop agenda with content that is largely extraneous such as succession planning models, managerial competencies, and corporate values. While the intention to provide material that can be applied back on the job is laudable, this information is largely ignored. People can read. Give them the content beforehand. Use the workshop as a learning laboratory where the participants are confronted with real leadership situations. Challenge them to lead at higher levels. Create a curriculum that exposes participants to intense experiences, and allow them to experiment with new behaviors and approaches. This will accelerate their learning and development. (By the way...most savvy managers have read all the corporate tenets and many of the important books on leadership anyway.)

7. Peer coaching

In my ongoing survey noted in section 6, "Coaching and Mentoring" always comes in second. One-on-one learning processes are very powerful because, for a period of time, it really is all about me. Because coaching requires no content knowledge, any participant can coach another with a little guidance. For those of us who make our living standing in the front of a classroom trying to be insightful, witty and sage-like, it is difficult to accept the fact that the average peer coaching session is much more effective than our most brilliant lecture. Whenever possible, get your body and ego out of the way and let the participants talk to each other.

8. Self-awareness

It has been said that leadership development is an inside-out game. I like the way Manfred Kets De Vries puts it: "Healthy leaders are passionate...They are very talented in self-observation and self-analysis; the best leaders are highly motivated to spend time in self-reflection." (Harvard Business Review, January, 2003) The leadership development workshop provides the perfect opportunity for the leader to step out of his or her chaotic schedule, put it in neutral, and take a long, fresh look inward. After all, the only thing participants can work on to improve their leadership is themselves. Put sufficient white space into the workshop design so the participant can personalize the learning. Most managers cannot remember the last time they took 15 minutes in complete silence to contemplate their own leadership journey. Give them the 15 minutes.

9. Performance breakthroughs

The most frequently voiced dissatisfaction with leadership workshops is the lack of application on the job. It's not because workshop participants do not want to change; it's just that real change is so difficult. The pressures of the job, lack of support from their manager, no time...the list goes on. Significant improvement in leadership effectiveness rarely occurs in one big leap. We don't see the freshly-trained leader walking through the hallways wearing saffron-colored robes, musing about shared community values and throwing rose petals on others (metaphorically speaking, that is). Change occurs incrementally and is fueled by short-term successes – a process that needs to start in the classroom. Bar the classroom door and let no one leave until they have demonstrated at least ten performance breakthroughs (again, metaphorically speaking...I think). Real change starts in the workshop, not back in the office. Start the habit of experimentation and incremental change in the workshop.

10. Learning accountability

I kick-off many of my leadership coaching assignments with the eternally irritating question: "So, Sally, if nothing changes in your performance what is likely to happen?" Besides the mischievous delight I take in tormenting my clients, I have learned that I can serve them best by insisting that they take full responsibility for their actions, decisions, learning and future. Unless they take personal accountability for their development, there will always be someone else to blame...their board, their staff, their customer, their mother. So too with a leadership workshop. The question that needs to be oft asked at the workshop is "So, George, what have you learned about yourself and what are you going to do about it?"

Our clients often report that the two or three days spent in our leadership development workshops were some of the most important days of their careers. Is this because we have great facilitators? Most certainly. A great facilitator can turn almost any curriculum into an important learning experience. But it is also because we try to adhere to the above design principles which, in essence, tell us that the workshop is not about us...it's about the participant.



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