

Perspectives for Managers

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Getting the Most Out of Your Leadership Program



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You've heard that leadership programs can be an intense, unique and deeply rewarding experience. And so, you decided to clear your busy schedule, take time from work and family, and sign up for one. Now that the course is about to begin, you find yourself wondering what you are getting yourself into – "Do I really want to do this? What are we going to do? What is leadership anyway? What can I do to get the most out of this experience?" If you are pondering any of these questions, this paper is for you!

and Check your attitude



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As you arrive for the program, your attitude – and those of the other participants – probably falls into one of five general categories: prisoners, tourists, consumers, dedicated students and explorers. Each attitude presents obstacles and opportunities for learning. Let's examine them one by one.

Prisoners are unwilling conscripts. If you are a prisoner, you've usually (a) been 'sent' to the program by your boss to get 'fixed', or (b) felt pressured to work on some personal 'gaps' for career development. You therefore arrive with all the enthusiasm of someone going to the dentist to have a cavity drilled.

Tourists want a vacation. The program is a welcome break from daily routine. If you are a tourist, your learning expectations might be low, but your social expectations are probably high. Fresh air, good restaurants, a pleasant classroom ambience – these are all appreciated by the tourists – and anything that interferes with a party atmosphere is resented.

Consumers expect service. They've paid their fee and look at the program staff as suppliers: "Give me the leadership take-away for Monday morning!" If you are a consumer, you're most comfortable with familiar questionnaires, straight-forward theories, lists of bullet points, and ready to use 'tool kits' – and least comfortable with personal involvement in the learning.

Dedicated Students are among the most motivated participants – at least at the start of the program. They are enthusiastic about business bestsellers and management gurus, and appear eager to apply their concepts. If you are a dedicated student, these very models can unfortunately interfere with your capacity to genuinely get in touch with your personal experience.

Explorers have an orientation to learning, are open to experimenting and to discovering surprises, and actively work to integrate their experiences. If you are an explorer, you may find yourself caught between wanting to explore what is happening in the here and now, and the resistance of some other participants – and even some faculty!

As the program progresses, attitudes shift. For example, once the initial suspicions of the prisoners are overcome, they can be among the most valuable and straightforward members of the learning community. On the other hand, tourists and dedicated students often shed their initial enthusiasm when asked to set aside their party hats and management models, and can reveal a remarkable resistance to getting in touch with their immediate experience.

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Over the years, we have discovered that participants learn best if the class is as diverse as possible, both in terms of socio-demographic variables and in terms of attitude. A balanced mix of the attitudes mentioned above provides everyone concerned with a richer learning opportunity, as it accurately mirrors the reality of organizational life.

The Primary Task of the Leadership Program

The primary task of *any* leadership program that fosters meaningful and long-lasting development is **to provide you with a chance to deepen your understanding of leadership, and to develop your capacity to exercise it effectively and responsibly.** You'll have numerous opportunities to learn about exercising leadership, followership and working in groups. You'll be able to increase your awareness of your individual styles and motivations, of the way you manage interpersonal relationships, and of the complex structure and dynamics that occur within and between groups.

How will you learn all this? Case studies, readings, lectures and questionnaires are not enough. Learning about leadership takes practice, involvement, and the willingness to question *yourself*. In short, it requires learning through personal experience. Learning from experience does not mean accumulating knowledge, nor even successfully completing concrete exercises within the program. Developing the capacity to lead involves the messy job of exploring your own and others' behaviour as it unfolds in the here and now.

Collaboration, Curiosity, Confidentiality

A thinly veiled 'assessment mentality' is deeply entrenched in contemporary corporate and business school thinking, and can be seen in the ubiquity of competency models, and in the obsession with measuring managerial performance – performance evaluations, performance reviews, and pay for performance. Many executives – and management professors – therefore approach leadership training with the same mentality, and rely on cognitive-rational models to capture behaviours, assess them,

and recommend solutions for improving performance. Yet the main purpose of any serious leadership program based on experience is **development**, not assessment. In other words, working to enhance your capacity to lead responsibly through understanding and integrating rational and emotional factors.

To do this, we have found it helpful if both faculty and participants **work together** to build a culture of **curiosity** rather than one of judgment. This creates a relatively safe space to explore the domain of leadership and teamwork. Only then can the program become a learning space where it is possible to be curious about, and 'play' with, relatively unfamiliar and uncomfortable material – an environment where it is possible to experiment and be clumsy, without judging and being judged, and without getting overwhelmed or over-reacting.

To create a relatively safe and stimulating environment, the faculty needs to be dependable without encouraging dependency, i.e., they must provide a space that challenges without creating unnecessary stress, and that offers security without giving unnecessary reassurance. Unnecessary reassurance can inadvertently "rescue" participants from their own, immediate experience, and too much stress interferes with the ability to learn.

A clear and explicit **confidentiality contract** among faculty and participants is essential. Nothing about managers' behaviour is to be shared with the sponsoring company or other staff outside the program boundary.

Useful assumptions about leadership

Early in the program, it is generally helpful to dispel some common – and incorrect – assumptions about leadership in favour of those upon which serious development can be built. The statements below may sound simple, but they are nonetheless fundamental.

There is no gene for leadership. To our knowledge, completion of the human genome project has revealed no gene for leadership. No one is a 'born leader'. Innate traits and early experiences are important, but the capacity to exercise leadership can be developed and refined throughout our lives.

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Leadership is not the preserve of the executive suite. Leadership is not the preserve of individuals in positions of formal authority at the helm of large organizations, such as Prime Ministers and CEOs. Leadership is exercised at all levels in any organization – from the shop floor to the boardroom.

Leadership is not a style one adopts. Leadership is not simply a ‘style’ one learns to adopt and apply to a certain situation, like new clothes for a party. It is a dynamic exchange of emotional energy to further some task within any social system. In order to exercise leadership effectively and responsibly, we need to understand how organizations function socially and psychologically, how small groups and individuals work – and especially, how we ourselves operate.

Leadership really happens in small groups. Although there might be organizational aspects to leadership – such as giving a ceremonial speech at an annual meeting – leadership is really exercised every day in the context of the small group. Small groups, usually 4 to 12 members – family sized – are the fundamental decision-making unit of any collectivity, whether tribe, organization or nation.

Teaching leadership is not particularly effective. Leadership can’t be taught, but the capacity to lead can be developed – less from academic study and imitation than from repeated cycles of experience and reflection. Technical and strategic skills can be learned from others, i.e. teachers, or through others, i.e. role models, but lasting behavioural skills are best developed through integrating personal experience with others.

Leadership is not only a rational endeavour. Covert and unconscious forces are a central influence on individual and collective behaviour. Learning to recognize, understand, and work with these influences is the only way to avoid being inadvertently surprised, disturbed, or unwittingly controlled by them.

Leadership is timeless. The fundamentals of leadership do not change with culture, century, civilization, sector or industry. Effective leadership is a timeless and

universal human phenomenon, and its essence has not changed in millennia.

Leadership isn’t simply about change. It has become fashionable nowadays to talk about leadership as if it were synonymous with change. But a realistic view of history shows that while some changes are positive, others can be catastrophic. It takes wise leadership to recognize when the pressure for action and change is detrimental to the health of an organization or society. Effective and responsible leadership is just as much about stability as it is about change.

Leadership isn’t necessarily good. Leadership is as much a force for evil as it is for good. It takes as much leadership to destroy a building, start a war, or obliterate a nation as it does to create an institute, build peace or develop a society. This is why the primary task of a world-class leadership program is to develop the capacity to lead effectively and responsibly.

Taking Risks and Taking Responsibility

Maximizing your learning during a leadership program – like exercising leadership – requires authenticity, investment, commitment and a willingness to take certain emotional risks. The more naturally and spontaneously you behave, the more experiences you have available for your reflection and learning. **Authenticity** means voicing your thoughts and feelings as they occur. **Investment** means putting your heart into the work of learning. **Commitment** means leaving your heart there through good and bad moments. **Risk-taking** calls for moving outside your usual comfort zone.

We often begin working with a new group by asking the participants how much they would like to be challenged. More often than not, they understand the question in terms of physical challenges – with images of bungee jumping and abseiling down steep cliffs. We are, however, referring to a psychological challenge. The first critical step out of your comfort zone is not physical but emotional. This allows you to experience, express, and explore emotional material that we habitually avoid, dismiss, forget, or conceal behind the comfort of formal roles and familiar routines.

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In our experience – without exception – a class cannot be challenged any further than the degree to which individuals are willing to challenge themselves. Each participant possesses the capacity to explore and learn, and each has the ultimate authority and responsibility to decide how deep they want to push the exploration of their own behaviour. Hence, if meaningful and long-lasting development is what you’re after, it is essential that you **take responsibility** for shaping and discovering your own learning. You will be asked to articulate your expectations and concerns, and encouraged to actively pursue whatever you wish to get out of the program. The faculty provides a framework and several learning opportunities, but you determine what you learn, how much you learn, and the pace at which you learn.¹

Taking responsibility is helped immeasurably by working with a sense of freedom, willingness to take the initiative, courage to explore, and openness to being surprised by what you might find – as well as by the way in which you learn. Scepticism, reluctance and defensiveness are as natural and spontaneous as courage, openness and risk-taking. As long as you are willing to explore what provokes your behaviour, you will derive lasting learning from the program, and further develop your leadership capacity.

How can I get the most out of my leadership program?

So to summarize answers to the questions posed at the start of this paper, consider: (a) taking the opportunity seriously, (b) engaging in the program fully, (c) allowing yourself to explore, be surprised and rewarded with a richer emotional experience, and (d) taking the opportunity to reflect on and integrate that experience to draw a deeper understanding of how leadership really works.

Work hard to develop a more sensitive and precise inner compass, i.e. the ability to sense the unseen patterns that operate within social situations, develop the sensitivity to grasp the elusive aspects within yourself and others, and allow yourself the courage to trust your intuition. In the end, you will make more informed decisions, and find yourself exercising your leadership more effectively and more responsibly.

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¹ Eric Miller (1989) The “Leicester” Model: Experiential study of groups and organizational processes. Occasional paper N.10. London: Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. P.24