

A Proven Process for Building Leadership Skills

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Organizations spend millions of dollars every year trying to build leaders through participation in conferences and other training events. Unfortunately, that approach doesn't work!

You've probably attended your share of sessions that pump you up, offering fresh approaches to influencing your team. Inspired, you return to an environment that hasn't changed.

Catching up and the daily rigors of problem-solving soon wear away any new insights that you gained. You lapse back into old habits. A few weeks later, you wonder why you weren't able to apply those great new concepts.

Richard Boyatzis, Professor at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University, has spent his life researching how to build leaders. His explanation of why the following process works (and why courses and conferences don't) can be found in his books *Primal Leadership* and *Resonant Leadership*. This is the system I install in the cultures of my client organizations.

The process starts with an assessment of your existing skills. We identify strengths you already have. Maybe they came naturally to you. Maybe you've developed them over time. How you obtained them doesn't really matter. These capabilities have brought you to where you are today.

We also identify those areas that are weaknesses for you. You know what they are because you've received critical feedback on these particular attributes. Or maybe you've struggled, knowing there has to be a better way.

Next, we imagine what your life might be like if you were significantly stronger in each of the attributes. Improving some of the weaknesses might be very obvious to you, but we also consider how we might expand those strengths that you may be underutilizing. This part of the process is fun! Imagining a more skillful you is a critical step in actually creating that reality.

You select two or three of the skill areas that will cause you to be more effective as a leader a year from now. Why only two or three? Remember, you still have a real job to perform. You may have optimistic energy to work on more areas, but reality will soon set in, and you'll be disappointed when you don't follow through on your expectations.

Using a variety of resources, we identify action steps that will lead you in the desired direction. One such resource is the *Successful Manager's Handbook*. In its seventh edition and edited by Susan Gebelein, this book should be a required reference for every person responsible for influencing others.

Next, we compile all the action steps for each of the two or three focus areas into a written learning agenda. This is essentially a large, one-year "to do" list. Out of the many options you generated as you considered possibilities, you select activities that you expect you will really execute. Further, you eliminate any options that have a probable low return on your investment of time and energy.

Hopefully, at each step to this point, you've involved your immediate supervisor, both so that you have tapped into his or her experience and you have buy-in regarding how you'll spend your time.

After several weeks of preparation, you are now ready to experiment with different approaches while performing your real work. Every couple of days, refer to your "leadership development plan" to remind yourself of changes you want to make. Allow yourself to evaluate what works for you and what doesn't.

About once a month, review with your boss the progress you're making. If you are running into obstacles, bring those out into the open and collaborate on potential ways to overcome them. Add to your plan any new ideas that you believe will help move you in the desired direction.

After six months or more, step back from the details of your learning agenda and evaluate with your boss the progress you've made. Celebrate your growth, then get ready to repeat the process. With two or three iterations, you'll find that you have much greater confidence and practical expertise.

Richard Boyatzis' research has determined that building leadership skills requires experimentation, practice, and feedback. These don't occur in training sessions or even the most inspiring conferences. If you want to guarantee that you progress as a leader, this process will work.

But here's a caution. The process won't work if your boss or someone else is forcing this effort on you. The ingrained habits you've generated over a lifetime have to be unlearned and something better substituted. You won't do that unless you are deeply motivated and the stimulus for your growth as a leader is coming from within you!