

Where Can You Go to Learn “Leadership”?

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The best place is right there on your job! Despite advertising to the contrary, you can't learn “leadership” by attending a conference. Although some universities teach various aspects of leadership, most people can't attend the courses while maintaining their employment.

According to Michael Lombardo, Bob Eichinger, and Dave Ulrich in their 2004 book *100 Things You Need to Know: Best People Practices for Managers and HR*, 70% of all leadership learning occurs while performing a work assignment. Only 10% occurs in a classroom, at conferences, or in special team-building events. The remaining 20% are the insights gained from observing and emulating a role model or mentor.

Let's consider why acquiring “leadership” skills may be difficult. Most of us tend to think of “learning” in terms of technical or functional skills, like baking a cake or mastering the strategies of chess. Understanding step-by-step procedures and processing facts occurs in the frontal lobes of the brain. That kind of learning involves making new associations and expanding comprehension. Once the learning occurs, it's readily available in your memory.

Some concepts associated with leadership can be learned in a formal training session. For example, you might attend a one-hour course on the elements of trust or on how to resolve conflict. And you might perform well on a recall test of that information. But actually rebuilding trust after a betrayal or resolving conflict between yourself and someone else is a totally different experience.

Securing a coworker's commitment to a vision and related action plans requires building relationships. Skills associated with building relationships are processed in the limbic cortex of the brain (the central core buried deep within the cerebrum) and require repetition, not a one-time experience.

The bottom line is that learning leadership skills is very different from learning functional or technical skills. Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee cite dozens of research studies confirming this fact in their 2002 book *Primal Leadership*.

Learning leadership skills requires experimentation, feedback, and practice. And all that requires extensive motivation because it won't occur easily or quickly.

Experimentation. You start learning about leadership at a young age. Most of your early learning comes from observing what those in authority say and do. Some of those leadership role models may not be very good.

Even when your role models are good, you're not sure why they make the choices they do. Once serious about building leadership skills, you'll have to try a variety of behaviors to see what works for you and what doesn't.

Feedback. You may be tempted to conclude “what works” from your own perspective. Though you understand what you intend when you act a certain way, you can't know if that's the effect you actually had on other people.

Therefore, you have to observe their responses and seek direct feedback on “what works” from their perspective. Since each person “sees” the world from his or her unique vantage point, you may receive very mixed messages. Conflicting information may discourage your efforts to improve!

Practice. To transform a particular action into a reliable habit requires practice. You'll tend to lapse back into old habits until your new behaviors are rewarded and you start feeling comfortable. The limbic brain learns more slowly than the frontal lobes, where information often is comprehended in a single exposure. Slow progress may tempt you to abandon your efforts to learn the new skills.

Motivation. Your boss can send you to a class on some functional skill, and you'll probably come back “trained.” However, the experimentation, feedback, and practice required to effectively master any of the many attributes of leadership requires tenacity. External rewards usually are not sufficient to keep you going. The drive to improve your leadership skills must come from within.

The complexities I've identified help explain why few organizations have a planned leadership development process. It's just easier to tolerate whatever skills already exist. Further, many organizations don't realize that leadership skills are learnable. They figure that leadership skills develop naturally through extracurricular activities in school or from an individual's early experiences on the job.

The myth is that leaders are born, not made. The truth is that all leaders are made. A given individual may have some natural propensities that contribute to good interpersonal skills, but unless those tendencies are supported and nurtured, the potential will never be developed. The challenge and support of a good boss and/or coach is necessary for learning from on-the-job experiences!