

# Leadership Design

## Leadership

development workshops are very expensive. And I'm not just referring to the cost of facilities, materials, trainers, and food. When a company takes 20 to 30 managers out of the organization for several days, they are 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? I 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 here.

## Principle

### #1 - Research-Based Content

## Anyone

can piece together some interesting exercises and experiences, but to what end? We know the outcomes of great organization leadership...alignment, purpose, engagement, retention, productivity, teamwork, agility, to name a few. There is little mystery here. What many designers do not take into account 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.

### Principle #2 - Engagement

## The

turbulent pace that most managers face today has turned the otherwise calm and thoughtful participant into a restless, distracted bystander infected by a self-imposed form of Attention Deficit Disorder 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 hectic 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 game show, unless the workshop can successfully compete with the multitude of distractions facing today's manager, I 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.

### Principle #3 - Personal Experience

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

### Principle #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 incentive for personal change. And that's what leadership development really is...personal change. What limits the use of feedback in leadership workshops? Too often designers 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 they may be too insecure. We will lose control of the workshop. Emotions will run rampant. We will not be able to handle the resulting carnage. I always remember that the workshop is not about me; it's about the participant. I must be bold in creating a feedback-rich environment. The participants always thank me for the personal insights.

### Principle #5 - Appreciation

The challenge 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 combination of Mother Teresa, Gandhi or Jack Welch. I 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 talented for the challenge of leadership, and the role of the workshop is to help them identify and expand those talents. It is not my job to help them become the next CEO, 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.

## Principle #6 - Intense Experiences

I have 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.

(a)  
Reading and Research

(b)  
Performance Appraisals

(c)  
Coaching and Mentoring

(d)  
Challenging Experiences

(e)  
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 day.) Even though some really good designers are aware of these findings, there is a great temptation to fill the workshop agenda with content that is largely off the point 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 worthy, this information should be largely ignored. People can read. I give them the content either beforehand or during the workshop. I use the workshop as a learning laboratory where the participants are confronted with real leadership situations. I challenge them to challenge themselves and also to lead at higher levels. I 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 already read all the corporate tenets and many of the important books on leadership anyway.)

## Principle #7 - Peer Coaching

In my ongoing survey noted above, “Coaching and Mentoring” always comes in second. One-on-one learning processes are very powerful because, it really is all about them. 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 attempting 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, I get my body and ego out of the way and let the participants talk to each other.

## Principle #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. I put plenty of white space into the workshop design so the participant can personalize their learning. Most managers cannot remember the last time they took 15 minutes in complete silence to contemplate their own leadership journey. I give them time to observe, reflect and plan.

## Principle #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 with their head held high, performing like a laser-beam and skipping down the hallway. Change occurs incrementally and is fueled by short-term successes – a process that needs to start in the classroom. I don't let anyone leave until they have written down and are committed to making previously avoided tough decisions and have had at least ten performance breakthroughs. Real change starts in the training, not back in the office. I start the habit of experimentation and incremental change in the workshop.

## Principle #10 - Learning Accountability

I kick-off many of my leadership coaching assignments with the eternally irritating question: "So, if nothing changes in your performance what is likely to happen?" Besides the playful 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 asked at the workshop is "So, what have you learned about yourself and what are you going to do about it?"

My 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 I am a great facilitator? Most certainly. A great facilitator can turn almost any curriculum into an important learning experience. And it is also because I adhere to the above design principles which, in essence, tells me that the workshop is not about me...it's 100% about the participant.