

# Leadership Training In Fewer Than 140 Characters!

Often, when I am asked to facilitate a leadership training workshop and I tell my client that it will take three days, I will be asked, “Can you do it in two days?” Or, if it is a two-day workshop, they will want it in one day, etc., etc. I, of course, am very respectful and try to explain my reasons for the length of the class. Being at my most diplomatic, I explain how the workshop delivered as designed will be more likely to meet the client’s needs and so forth. In my mind, however, the dialogue is a little different. My private, unspoken conversation goes like this. “One day? Why so long? Let’s just do the 30-minute version. If all you want to do is say you offered leadership training, why go to all of the trouble of having people actually learn the skills. Even better, let’s do the Twitter version: 140 characters! If your goal is mediocrity, this should do nicely.” So, anyway, here goes (the 140 character version): “Leaders must have a vision. They must listen, play fair, tell the truth, be accountable for their decisions, and give unambiguous feedback.” (See! Only 139 characters – WITH SPACES). What else could you possibly need? It’s a breakthrough! We can now train 190 million people in less than a minute!

Sarcasm aside, this dilemma occurs often. Organizations have legitimate concerns about the length of time people must be away from their jobs, the expense of such training, and the political risk to its sponsors within the company. The challenge for the facilitator, of course, is that it is difficult to demonstrate unambiguously how much the training will improve performance. While, overall, the evidence is clear that organizations whose leaders demonstrate good communication skills (effective listening, constructive confrontation of unacceptable behavior, and win/win conflict resolution) will be more productive than those who don’t, showing a direct, cause-effect relationship to the bottom line is always problematic. Most successful training occurs in an organizational climate where learning, change, innovation, and teamwork are already valued. Often, other learning opportunities are also available, or required, for those in leadership roles. They may have internal, organizational coaches who help leaders apply their new skills. In other words, there are multiple efforts designed to encourage and support

positive, constructive leadership behavior. With so many things going on, it is difficult to pinpoint the contribution of any one action. Even though you may believe that the training is essential, you cannot say, “If you don’t do the training, the improvements won’t happen.” Nor can you say unequivocally that shortening the workshop will ruin the effort. People learn these skills at different rates. For some, everything is brand new. Perhaps, they have worked only in organizations with a heavy-handed, hierarchical organization where you just did what the boss said. For these people, it may take more than three days to really learn the skills. Others may have learned many of the skills in childhood and carried those abilities with them into the workplace. For them, a one day refresher might be sufficient. Most, however, have encountered some of the skills along the way but mastered only a few. For them, learning the skills in context is extremely important. Not only do they need to learn some new skills and polish their existing skills, but they need to learn when to use which skill and when not to use it. They need to understand



the organizational conditions that require the use of the skill, etc. They may also need to “unlearn” some old habits that are counterproductive

to the implementation of team-oriented leadership within a company.

The best leadership training teaches these skills as part of a total system of behaviors with a method of determining when to use which skill or set of skills. It is also important to keep in mind that the skills are being learned by adults who have their own needs, requirements, skepticism, habits (good and bad), expectations, blind spots, and opinions. Successful training, of any kind, will take into account the amount of time needed to address these issues. Facilitators should take into account that certain principles apply to adult learners.

- Adults want practical ideas and skills that they can put to work in their lives on a day-to-day basis.

- Adults have a lifetime of experience. They need to incorporate new learning into that reservoir of knowledge.
- Adults want to be given a choice about what is important or not important to them. They don't want to be lectured or scolded.
- Adults are individuals who want to be treated as such, not as another cog in the wheel.
- Adults want an opportunity to challenge new concepts and ideas. They are critical thinkers and resist being "spoon-fed."

While it is easy to "cover" material, it takes time for people to think about what they are learning, formulate questions and challenges, integrate the idea into their own set of experiences, and determine the practicality of the skill. If you rush this process, you waste everyone's time and resources.

Some kinds of training can be thought of as modular. That is, by learning one concept or skill, the participant can, potentially, be more effective or productive. For example, if your company has a program designed to recruit high potential engineers, it may include training on scouting, evaluating résumés, interviewing, retention strategies and such. Participants who may be involved only during interviews might benefit from learning just the interviewing skills. A new software implementation may include programs for production control, payroll, safety, purchasing and procurement, sales, etc. Manufacturing supervisors may benefit by learning just the production control programs. Leadership training, on the other hand, is often more systems oriented. That is, to be an effective leader, the participant needs to understand and acquire the total set of skills. It won't work for a leader to be an effective confronter if he or she cannot listen to the team member's reaction. The leader might be a great listener but unable to meet his or her own needs as a supervisor. He or she might be unable to resolve conflicts. It is important that the leader understand the whole model and be prepared to use the appropriate skill at the right time. It is also important that the leader be able to use the skills with confidence. That means that he or she has had their questions answered, had time to integrate the

ideas into their unique experiences, been able to challenge those parts of the model that are foreign to them, been allowed to speak their mind, get feedback on their progress, and develop strategies for implementing the skills into their own work circumstances. That takes time.

Developing skills is more time consuming than learning concepts or theory. While most leadership training includes some theory, the best programs emphasize skill development. People don't learn skills by reading a book or by listening to a lecture any more than a person can learn to play golf by watching a video on golfing technique. The lecture, the book, or the video may be useful but you cannot learn a skill until you actually perform the skill, receive feedback, try again, get more feedback, etc., etc. That takes time.

No one knows exactly how much time is required for a group of fifteen or twenty people to adequately learn a new set of leadership skills. But, it is clear that there is a threshold below which little can be accomplished. Trying to teach a new leadership model to a group of fifteen people in one day is unlikely to do much but satisfy a paper requirement for training and it is likely to annoy the participants. Such abbreviated approaches can lead to greater problems in the future. Participants will be more skeptical of future attempts to "educate" them. The organization will encounter more resistance to change efforts, and the amount of time needed to execute changes will lengthen. Just as with quality improvement efforts that exhort leaders and team members to "do it right the first time," the same principle applies to leadership training. Spending the time to get it right the first time will prevent many problems and greatly enhance your chances of successfully implementing a team oriented leadership process. If the workshop is designed to be most effective in three days and the program has a history of success, then it is probably wise to allow three days. A few cents saved now can cost a great deal in the future. So, be a good leader and remember, "Leaders must have a vision. They must listen, play fair, tell the truth, be accountable for their decisions, and give unambiguous feedback." So, everyone can go home now.

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