

The Evolution of Leadership Development: Insights from the Field

Introduction

The state of leadership development in major organizations presents a paradox: While companies consistently emphasize its importance, they struggle to create lasting, effective programs that truly develop capable leaders. We recently spoke with a 30-year veteran of corporate learning who has worked at many large organizations who pointedly observes: “Every year it’s like, we’re going to do leadership training next year, and we’re finally going to crack the code and it just never gets cracked.”

Current State

This manifests differently across organizational levels. At the first-time manager level, companies often maintain structured programs. One such program exemplifies this approach, offering a six-month curriculum combining traditional management topics with collaborative lab work. Notes our expert, “the best part is these labs with your coworkers where they tell these stories of the team members that they have to manage.”

However, the picture changes dramatically for positions at the director-level and above. Despite research showing that senior leaders typically receive twice as much training as supervisors and managers, our expert’s experience suggests the opposite: “I don’t know of any leadership training that is consistently applied at director and above.” This gap points to a fundamental disconnect between investment and impact in leadership development.

Challenges

The challenge extends beyond program structure to the very competencies being taught. Michael Rochelle, Chief Strategy Officer and Principal analyst, reflecting on Daniel Goleman’s groundbreaking work on emotional intelligence, notes that “70% of what we chase for leaders to know has nothing to do with being a better leader.” He illustrates this with a powerful observation: “When was the last time you talked to someone that worked for you that said, ‘What I love about my leader the best is he or she is an extraordinary task manager?’” Instead, employees consistently value leaders who demonstrate empathy, listening skills, and self-awareness.

Complexities

Technology presents another frontier in leadership development, though organizations approach it cautiously. Many organizations are adopting a careful stance on AI tools, driven by privacy concerns, highlighting the broader tension between innovation and risk management in leadership development. Our expert observes that while AI tools show promise, “Our organization won’t unleash the power of AI [inside] because they’re so worried about releasing private information.”

Insights

Looking forward, successful leadership development programs share several key characteristics:

- They begin developing leadership capabilities early, rather than waiting until employees reach senior positions.
- Perhaps most critically, effective programs require clear alignment with senior leadership vision. This alignment becomes particularly crucial in organizations with frequent CEO transitions, where leadership development programs often change with each new chief executive.

The evolution of leadership development reflects a broader shift in how organizations view leadership itself. While traditional programs focused on tactical skills and competencies, successful modern approaches emphasize emotional intelligence, inclusivity, and early development of leadership capabilities.

However, our expert’s experiences across multiple major organizations suggest that many companies still struggle to implement these insights effectively, creating a persistent gap between leadership development theory and practice.

— Matt Pittman, Principal Analyst, Brandon Hall Group™

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