



# Why Most Leadership Training Fails and What Actually Works

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**COO Forum**<sup>®</sup>  
EMPOWERING OPERATIONS EXECUTIVES

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# INTRODUCTION

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Lifting your organization's capability has never been more important than right now. Your survival might literally depend on your ability to evolve, improve, re-engineer, transform – buzz words that mean one thing: adapt. Your ability to adapt will be driven or blocked by how good your operational managers are. Upskilling your operational managers is the key to sustained change that delivers better business results.

The problem is that most organizations underinvest in developing in their leadership skills, and when they do invest in training, the models used are outdated and ineffective. This ebook will introduce you to a leadership development model that actually works. This model will improve your outcomes and see your operational managers improve their skills permanently and significantly. They will transform your business from the middle out.



# 1. THE DISCONNECT

## THE COG THAT DRIVES CHANGE

We focus on operational managers because they're the conduit in the organization. Direction and culture are decided by senior leaders, but those decisions are executed (or not) by people on the production line, at the counter, behind the scenes, the people who make the organization work. The link between the direction from the top and execution on the ground is the operational manager.

We've seen this often in real life: when Tier 3 managers participate in our Active Manager program, their skills improve and the organization works better. When Tier 4 managers, team leaders and supervisors engage in our program, culture is transformed and performance lifts at every level. Our Active Leadership programs help to create a culture of contribution where people come to work every day to prove and improve themselves.

### TRAINING INVESTMENT BY LEVEL (PER PERSON)

Mid market \$18,826	SME \$5,780	Corporate \$3,285
C-suite \$23,690	Mid-level \$8,035	Junior \$3,640

## OVERLOOKED AND UNDERINVESTED

Another reason for focusing on operational managers is that they're too often overlooked. According to the ELMO/Australia New Zealand HR Industry Benchmark Survey Report 2019, mid-market organizations invest more heavily in senior leaders than corporates do and spend three times as much per person on their C-suite as on their mid-level.

Feser, Nielsen and Rennie (2017) highlight what's involved in shifting the behaviors of an organization across the board. They call it achieving "a tipping point for new leadership behaviors to take hold" which is based on engaging "a critical mass of pivotal influencers across all levels of the organization".

According to the authors, when it comes to transforming performance, leadership development programs that cover the whole organization are 6.4 times more likely to succeed than more narrow initiatives.

In simple terms, if you want to radically improve performance, develop all your leaders.



# 2. WHAT'S NOT WORKING

## WHAT'S NOT WORKING

Research data on training is clear on what's not working. The point of training is to get better results by changing management behaviors, but there is a massive gap between the investment being made and the return generated.

Barely 10% of the \$200B outlay on corporate training and development in the US delivers concrete results  
(Source: [HBR](#))

70% of employees report that they don't have mastery of the skills needed to do their jobs  
(Source: [Gartner](#))

Only 25% of respondents to a recent McKinsey survey said that their training programs measurably improved performance  
(Source: [McKinsey](#))

50% of senior leaders believe that their talent development efforts don't adequately build critical skills and organizational capabilities  
(Source: [HBR](#))

Highly credentialed professors Mihnea Moldoveanu from the Rotman School of Management and Das Narayandas from Harvard Business School reported in "The Future of Leadership Development" that several large-scale industry studies, along with their own in-depth interviews with clients, indicate that more than 50% of senior leaders believe that their talent development efforts don't adequately build critical skills and organizational capabilities.

The key reasons are that providers aren't teaching the soft skills needed and what's being taught is too hard to apply in the workplace.

# 3. THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM

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“Not only is the majority of training in today’s companies ineffective, but the purpose, timing, and content of training is flawed”

Steve Glaveski (Source: HBR)

## THE FRAMEWORK IS FLAWED

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Moldoveanu and Narayandas say the fundamental problem is the gap between where people learn and where they apply what they learn, but we think it’s even deeper than that.

It starts with the framework: teaching vs learning. Traditional training focuses on teaching content rather than how people learn.

We call it the transmit model where knowledge is broadcast, usually through immersion in a block of content sessions. It underpins a lot of training models, including workshops, classrooms and e-learning courses. They all start with the content. Many have shifted to online rather than in-person, but they employ the same philosophy.

A lot of training providers talk about the 70-20-10 model for learning and development:

- 70 percent of learning comes from on the job experience
- 20 percent derives from social interaction with others
- 10 percent comes from formal education and training.

But the transmit model is more like 70% content, 20% social, and 10% experience with no follow-through.

It doesn’t work.

In contrast to the transmit model is the idea of learning to learn. If people learn how to learn in their jobs, they work out for themselves how to apply the content.

## LEARNING ISN'T APPLIED

Let's look at what most people experience with management training.

They attend an off-site workshop, either with colleagues or with people from other companies. From the start, they're away from the environment where they will be applying what they learn. They get loaded up with content but don't get time to actually apply the concepts and ideas.

Being in a workshop with people from other companies helps them see that their issues in general are similar to everyone else. However their issues are also unique. That's why it's definitely better for skill training if they can learn with their colleagues – they'll share a language and an experience of their environment.

Other common training models are virtual classrooms and digitised learning, where everything is online. The trend away from in-person learning has been hastened by the pandemic and the speed with which we've adapted to working remotely.

Totally self-directed online learning works for technical skills, but soft skills require application and practice in the workplace in real-time, not on screen.

Online models are poorly suited for learning and applying soft skills. Moldoveanu and Narayandas note that soft skill transfer (“nonalgorithmic skills”) has to be mediated by personalized guidance – in other words, a person, preferably one from within the business.

AU/NZ Training Model	SME	Mid-Market	Enterprise
Face to face (internal)	73%	87%	90%
Face to face (external)	68%	73%	68%
learning courses (internal)	36%	35%	83%
learning courses (external)	47%	48%	51%
Virtual classrooms	8%	17%	32%

# LEARNING TAKES EFFORT

This is important: Ulrich Boser (2017) journalist, education researcher and author of “Learn Better” talks about how people have to learn by struggling with the idea as they make it make sense – learning is meant to be work.

Learning [is] a process, a method, a system of understanding...an activity that requires focus, planning, reflection...when people know how to learn, they acquire mastery in much more effective ways.

Also there are the limits of the human mind: according to the Ebbinghaus Theory of Forgetting if new information isn't applied, you'll forget about 75% of it after just six days.

The features of the learn to learn model are:

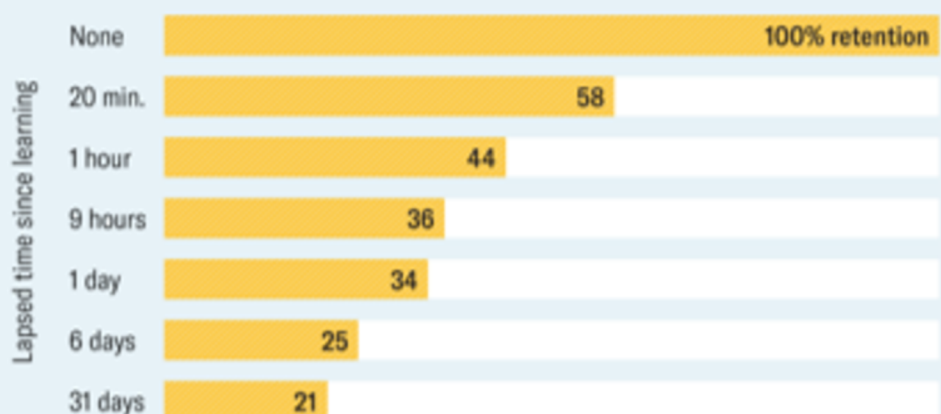
- Small chunks of material
- Apply to memory in different ways
- Maintain a regular cadence of spaced learning
- Learn, socialise and apply before moving on to new material
- Measure progress
- Celebrate success

It's also important to have a coach and learn with a group of peers to practice with people at your level.

The ability to learn is the master skill, it unlocks everything else. Too often we fail to teach people how to learn at work.

## The Forgetting Curve

If new information isn't applied, we'll forget about 75% of it after just six days.



Source: Hermann Ebbinghaus  
From: "Where Companies Go Wrong with Learning and Development," by Steve Glaveski, 2019

HBR



# 4. LEARN TO LEARN

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## A BETTER WAY TO DEVELOP LEADERS

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Here are our principles for really effective leadership development:

### 1. Focus on simple practical content

- Content should be easy to comprehend. Language shouldn't get in the way of understanding
- Content should be easy to absorb. Package it in easily digested chunks
- Content should be practical so it can be applied and practiced
- Don't insist on customizing content. Providing all the answers undermines the learning process. Working out how principles apply is how knowledge sticks.

### 2. Adopt best practice adult learning methodology

- Train people in their workplace, not offsite or in a training room (virtual or otherwise)
- Learning has to be a blend of online and in person. The content can be delivered digitally, but the process of applying the learning happens in-person and in collaboration with others
- Collaboration ideally is in-person, because the best collaboration happens when people have high levels of trust in each other.

### 3. Embed your learning system into your organization

- Train your managers in how to manage themselves, others, and their teams
- Make management development ongoing, not a one-off. Embed leadership development programs into your organizational structure and process
- Train all your managers – expect that 15% of your workforce should be on learning pathways over a 3-year period
- Use your leadership development platform to drive cohesion – link learning to your strategies and values
- Design your structure so that all participants' managers are not just involved but are accountable for providing coaching in an organized, deliberate and skilled way
- Make coaching a mandatory skill requirement for senior leaders and managers with career aspirations – and provide continuous training in the skill

### 4. Adapt your organization to the programs to align learning and behavior – not the other way around

- Establish professional development as a KPI at all levels of management
- Where necessary, adapt the systems, processes and culture to support the program, not the other way round
- Establish and maintain tough integrity between leadership values and behavior and the program
- Integrate your formal business mechanisms (recruitment, performance reviews, health and safety) with the program

## RE-THINKING HOW TO CHANGE

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Feser, Rennie and Nielsen (2018) say that the key to business transformation lies in leadership development.

They see four principles as key to success:

- Focus tightly on the few leadership behaviors that are most effective for driving performance
- Engage a critical mass of influencers across the organization to reach a tipping point for the change to become self-sustaining
- Design programs for lasting behavioral change, using the latest adult learning principles based on neuroscience
- Integrate the program into the broader organizational systems and measure the program's impact

To simplify: focus on the 20% of behaviors that drive 80% of the improvement. In our Active Manager Program, that's self-awareness and a learning mindset. We teach skills and participants learn self-awareness.

Feser, Rennie and Nielsen (2018) say to put 5-15% of the workforce on leadership development programs to achieve rapid transformation. Our experience is that 10% over a 12-month period has the kind of effect that they predict.

Focus on soft skills and how people learn. Our programs are designed to apply the fundamental skills required to manage through daily practice in real life, real time in the workplace.

Organizations have to embed learning from the development programs. We achieve this by building in coaching by the participant's leaders and socializing in peer groups.

“As a result of what I’ve learned on the Active Manager Program, I’m asking the right questions and we’re getting a lot more ideas because the team feels that they have a voice. They can change things rather than have to accept things the way they’ve always been. We’ve given them permission and now they’re comfortable with participation.”

Troy Jorgenson, Manager, Active VMA

## **ADAPT, EVOLVE, IMPROVE**

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All businesses need to constantly adapt, evolve and improve, and never with greater urgency than now.

Leadership development is as fundamental to that as it is to transformation. The difference is you can do it gradually, incrementally.

If you’re looking for transformation, enroll your entire wider leadership team (10% of your organization) in a well-designed leadership development program at the same time (no workshops!).

If you’re looking for incremental improvements, ensure that at least 20% of your leaders at all levels are engaged in a leadership development program at any one time.

Some things to consider as you consider developing your managers: What’s the business outcome you’re looking for?

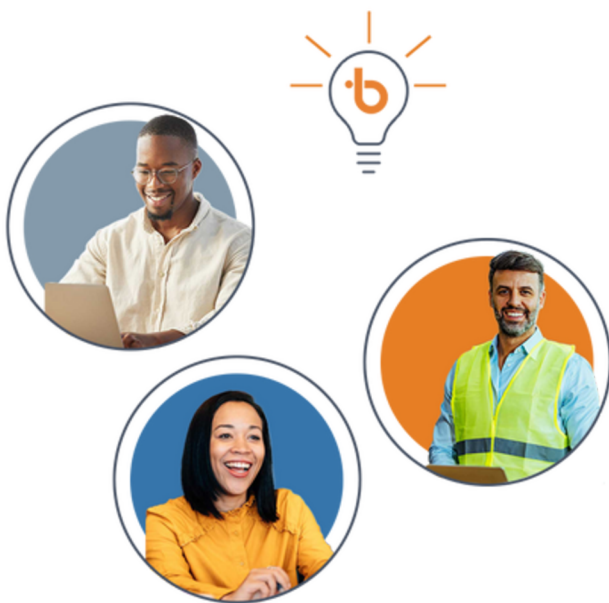
- Who’s in the wider leadership group?
- What are the learning pathways for each level of leadership, including those with potential for leadership?
- How much and in what way do you want to customize the learning?
- How can you embed the program so it becomes part of your DNA?

We’d welcome the opportunity to help you answer those questions.

# DISCOVER HOW EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT CAN TRANSFORM YOUR BUSINESS

Ready to turn your managers into skilled people leaders?

Contact us today for a no-obligation consultation.



## ABOUT THE BREAKTHROUGH CO

The Breakthrough Co specializes in transformational leadership development.

Our Active Leadership programs develop the core leadership skills of your managers to lift performance at every level – individual, team and organization.

- **Managers** – Become more efficient with their time, effective with their people and proactive in their role
- **Leaders** – Get 5+ hours back a week and focus on future growth
- **HR teams** – Deploy a ready-to-rollout system customized for their culture and values
- **Organizations** – Experience transformational change and high growth. Improve employee retention and productivity.

**Apata**  
TOGETHER WE'RE BETTER

**mikegreerhomes**

**OYSTER**

**PlaceMakers**



**URGENT**  
COUNSELLORS



**entec**

**RTL**



**scion**

**argentă**



**TILE SPACE**



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