



CAN YOU **TEACH** **LEADERSHIP?**

by Adrian Furnham

**Leaders – Born or Made?
Or a bit of Both?**

Can you turn a brilliant technical person (accountant, engineer, lawyer) into a manager and a competent, even inspirational, leader of that function? This is a simple question but one which has exercised many in business, most of all those responsible for helping select, promote, and assess leaders (often HR), as well as those

who work out costs and return on investment (finance). In short, is it really a waste of money?

Hence there are *enthusiasts* and *sceptics*. The former believe that leadership, like anything else, is perfectly learnable and trainable. They are to be found, of course, among the many groups offering this service, especially business schools, coaching academies, consultants, and trainers. They used to quote the 10,000-hours idea that anyone can be “super-proficient” at anything with enough practice. The question is, are you prepared to sponsor 1,250 days to achieve that for a “super-leader”. For many, it is self-evident that leadership can be trained, so there is no need for any accurate, dispassionate empirical evidence.

It is an art or a science? Or perhaps a gift? The question is how, when, and where to teach potential leaders?

The sceptics believe that, with someone around 25 years old, “What you see is what you get.” They talk about going to school reunions, often many decades later, and finding that the only change in the classmates was that they became wider, greyer, and wrinklier. Some are cynics who were once sceptics – sort of atheists who were once agnostics. The argument is usually from personal experience; they have seen one fad after another, large amounts of money spent, and little if any result. How can you teach something you can’t even define?

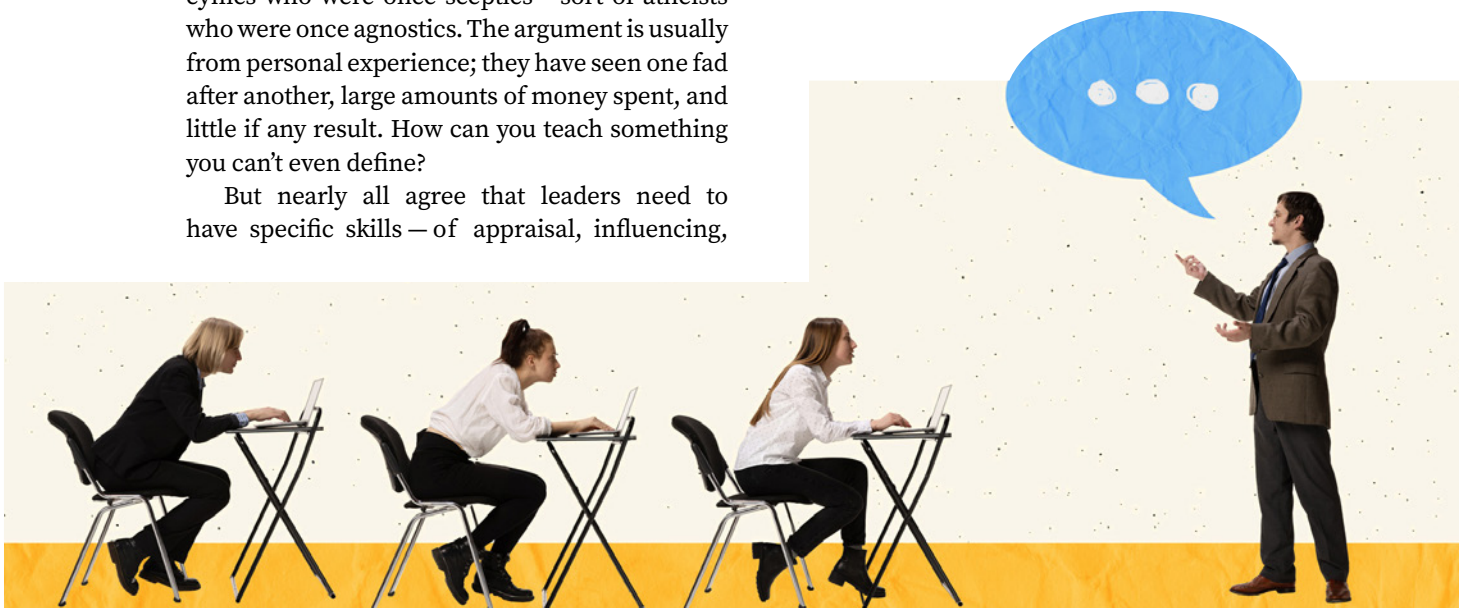
But nearly all agree that leaders need to have specific skills – of appraisal, influencing,

negotiation, strategic planning, etc. Yet the concept of leadership – creating high-performing teams, having clear strategies, tumbling numbers – is bigger and vaguer than a collection of specific skills. It is an art or a science? Or perhaps a gift?

The question is how, when, and where to teach potential leaders. Some organisations are completely committed to leadership training. The military often assume that everybody, whatever their rank, is *always* potentially on a training course. Skills training never ends. Indeed, it gets more intense as you climb the military hierarchy. This is in stark contrast with the complacent executive who believes that his three-week course at a famous business school has equipped him for life.

For some, training is a reward – a jolly – while for others, it is a punishment. Are you sent on a (leadership) training course because you can’t hack it? Or to top up and polish your potential?

Of course, we all know that the real benefit of a residential training course is the post-dinner conversations in the bar with the tutors, people from other companies, and one’s colleagues. These real conversations, which are often very disclosive, can give real insights into all sorts of issues. It may be the best way to bond with colleagues. But is this leadership training, or a mixture of personal benchmarking, networking, and “shooting the breeze”?



As regards business leadership, some favour differentiating between the high-talent group and the rest. To him who hath shall more be given. So, if you are talented, you receive invested in, while those with less of this mysterious quality have to try a bit of self-help. Some argue that it is the less talented (talentless) who, by definition, need the most training. And anyway what are the “talents” associated with leadership?

A preferred way for the recipients, although not the finance department, is a two-week course at a prestigious business school, perhaps topped up by a personal coach. The cost of this possibly exceeds £20k per person. Some organisations have their own “business school” and a menu of internally approved, if not delivered, courses. So to get to middle- or senior-management positions, a person needs to have attended the core courses, perhaps even with some electives. It becomes an HR “tick-box” exercise to check if you have been appropriately “sheep-dipped” into accepting the role.

Those with less talent (dare one admit it) may be encouraged (or mandated) to go a number of short courses in a local hotel, usually led by a consultant. They get “processed” and have their card marked “done all the courses, and is therefore a competent leader”. If only!

Leadership training is a huge business. Guesstimates reach many millions. But does it work? Is it a good investment? The paradox is that, although we know a lot about what works and what doesn't, training purchasers still fall for business-school and consultant hype and marketing and neglect the academic literature.

MAKE THINGS WORSE?

Can leadership training actually backfire and make things worse? It is all very well trying to improve self-awareness by a number of exercises or sexy psychological tests, but can trainers deal with the consequences of “opening a can of worms”? Could it lead to a breakdown, and then costly litigation?

In three careful studies conducted by my colleagues in Norway, their data suggested that some organisations enter a dysfunctional relationship with external third-party providers, namely business schools, consultancies, etc. The client's organisation is usually ready to pay considerable sums of money for a process in which the professional requirements are left entirely to the external service provider: teacher knows best. They promise to understand what is required and how to do it. Can you check this? And how?

In order to secure useful, beneficial effects from leadership development activities, organisations need to start using in-house competence to ensure sufficient contextual relevance.

However, because they need to justify their exorbitant fees, some leadership consultants *turn up the emotional heat*, but with questionable effects for the participants. They can certainly take things apart—teams, processes, managers—but can they put them back together again?

My colleagues concluded from their carefully collected and analysed data that, in order to secure



useful, beneficial effects from leadership development activities, organisations need to start using in-house competence to ensure sufficient contextual relevance. They must then subject the processes to qualified evaluation routines that match the resources invested. Start with some clear, well-thought-through objectives and then find the people to deliver them. Beware the gurus who offer magic through quirky psychobabble!

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TRAINING

So how do you measure the effectiveness of training? Does training work? This is the same question asked by therapists and consultants from all backgrounds, including medicine. This is why we have something called “evidence-based medicine”. What would “evidence-based leadership” training look like?

First, start by deciding on some outcome. Many will know Kirkpatrick’s four levels:

1 Did participants like the programme? Reactions.

The questionnaire, or “happy sheet”, is the most common method of evaluating training. The advice in order to get better results is to word questions carefully, measure only one topic at a time, and leave room for comments. But we all know that an “entertrainer” gets top scores for funny stories, sexy slides, and riveting videos. Learning takes effort, it can hurt, and some don’t do it very well. Enjoying a course is not the same as acquiring a skill. “Happy sheets” are not enough. Indeed, some argue they may be an indicator of how challenging the course was: easy, fun, low challenge, little learning – but very positive feedback.

2 Did participants learn skills?

Here you need to do a before/after analysis: assess skill level before the course and then afterwards. A job or task simulation is an excellent way of validating training. This involves a lot of effort, so it is not often done. People who teach presentation skills do this. They video-record you before the training, and then at the end. People love it; it is a clear record of their improvement. You can do the same for training in appraisal skills. But it is not so easy for negotiation skills. Of course, having or showing



a skill at the end of a course does not mean it will be manifest in the workplace some time later. But at least it is behavioural evidence of learning.

3 Did participants use the skills on the job? Generalisability from classroom to workplace.

That is, is there good behavioural or observational evidence that when people *come back* from a training course, they do things differently, hopefully better? To obtain objective opinions, it is important to choose managers and subordinates who know, and regularly interact with, the trainee. Do they detect differences as a function of the training? It's best if they did not know anything about the course, or even that the person in question had been on one. The advice is, take pre-training measurements 30 to 90 days in advance, maintain confidentiality, *measure only what is actually taught*, and measure all the skills taught, not just a few. This is very difficult to do, which explains why it is so seldom done.

4 Did the programme affect the bottom line?

This validation demands observable, quantifiable, tangible, and verifiable facts that show specific profit or performance results. That is, in the ideal world, people on three sites doing the same job undergo three types of activity: specific training, a placebo group doing something irrelevant, and the third no training. Six months or a year later, the output on those sites is measured, given that all other factors are constant. The trouble, of course, is that there are so many factors, some controllable, some predictable, but most of which affect the bottom line, that it is impossible to disentangle the training from other factors. But, after all, that is what the training is for, isn't it? To improve the bottom line?

WHAT DOES THE SCIENCE SAY?

Over the years, academics have asked about and tested some important features of all types of training. Some questions: does much depend on the **learning content** – are you teaching ideas, skills or motivation? What is the best **training method** – information-giving, practice, combination? How important is **feedback** – yes/no, single-source/360? Should you begin with a **needs analysis** – yes/no? What about the length and frequency of training, called **spacing effect** – longer/shorter, spaced/massed? Which is the best **setting** – virtual/face-to-face? Where should the training **location** be – on/off site? And what about **attendance** – voluntary/compulsory?

This is what the research literature suggests:

Use multiple delivery methods. Always a good idea. Lectures, discussions, videos, games, etc. But don't get too gimmicky and don't expect the delegates to do all the work. A nice, well-thought-through combination of chalk-and-talk, individual assessment, and group exercises. The trouble is that trainers have their personal preferences. Some think you can drone on with PowerPoint, others that it is best taught in muddy fields. Some put people into groups to discuss things and simply record their opinions. The method

should fit the learning expected, not the personal preference of the trainer.

Conduct a needs analysis first. Beware of guru hype, fad and fashion, magic-bullet training. Be clear – with evidence – about who needs what. What do the future leaders need: understanding how teams work, understanding themselves, improvements in personal resilience? Don't look at training courses like a Chinese takeaway menu. Decide, and be able to articulate and defend, what the training needs are.

Hold on-site, not at some expensive hotel or business school. Yes, that may involve some inconvenience but it massively affects generalisation. *You remember most and find it easier to apply where you learned it.* This may involve having areas dedicated to training, subject to appropriate occupancy levels. Consider using carefully written situational judgement tests that describe sticky, complex situations, directly relevant to the client group.

Provide as much **feedback** as you can on skill development. This means recording behaviour and getting assessors to give quality, detailed feedback to each individual. This may be done by peers as well as teachers. The feedback needs to explain what behaviours need to change, be maintained, and be improved.

Mandatory attendance. No excuses, no exceptions. Yes, and that means the board and the most senior managers. The military have always done this. In so many businesses, the “grown-ups” can provide a myriad of reasons why they can't attend. It not only sends the wrong message but assumes that it is only second-level leaders (who may well leave the organisation) that require or deserve training. Compulsory, not optional: amen.

Have multiple sessions; always spread it out. A three-day-long, weekend or three-week business school is very suboptimal. Monday, Monday, Monday is much better than Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. And a three-week course should be split into six two-and-a-half-day sessions. Yes, the hotel does not like this and there are other costs, but the data are very clear: *spaced not massed learning is better.* Preferably with a homework exercise.





Provide as much training as possible (longer is better). Don't go for the half-day intensive sheep dip, however attractive the cost and promise. Remember the 10,000-hour rule. It is not like a driving licence – passed at 21, still driving at 71. Business, technology, competition, and clients change. This means updating insights and skills regularly. Have a target – say, 12 days a year.

Include **soft skills** (i.e., intrapersonal, interpersonal). The paradox is that it is harder to teach soft skills than technical skills.

And yet they certainly count for much. You can teach people to be more perceptive of their own and others' emotions, to be more resilient, etc. It takes time and effort, but it is a course requirement for leadership.

SO ... IF YOU WANT ANY TRAINING TO WORK ...

Start with some learning objectives. What skills and insights do people need? Conduct a needs analysis and identify the desired outcome(s) based on stakeholder goals before designing the programme. Use multiple delivery methods when possible (e.g., information, demonstration, and practice) and if limitations prevent this, choose practice instead of other delivery methods. Provide multiple training sessions that are separated by time, rather than a single, massed training session. Make the training mandatory and

conducted at the workplace. Make training a reward and not a punishment. Leadership skills **can** be taught, but only under specific circumstances. [EBR](#)

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