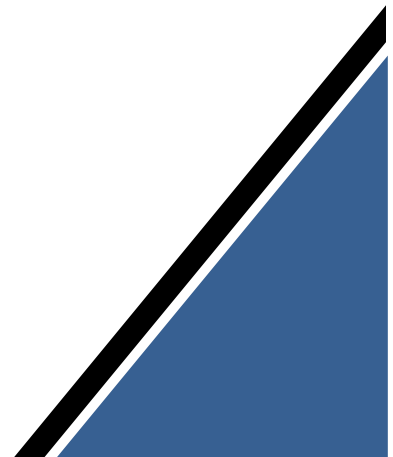# CURPHY LEADERSHIP SOLUTIONS

Why is the Leadership Industry Failing?
(And How to Fix It)

By
Gordy Curphy
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Background

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.
-- William Shakespeare

It seems like all of our major institutions--government, military, business, or religious--are suffering from a leadership crisis. Japan has been in a recession for 20 years, countries in southern Europe are on the verge of bankruptcy, corruption and nepotism runs rampant in many Asian and African nations, and some form of dictatorship is now in place in seventy percent of the world. The approval rating of the United States Congress is in the low teens and sexual harassment, loose nukes, and bloated weapon acquisition programs are endemic in the United States military. Private sector institutions have been associated with insider trading, industrial accidents, or outrageous pay or severance packages for senior executives. Hundreds of serial pedophiles have been protected by the Catholic church and moderate Muslims and Hindus have failed to control the violent extremists in their midst. These issues are not just fodder for our daily discussions; they have real world consequences. The Department of Veteran's Affairs has a backlog of over 900,000 unprocessed claims[1] and across the globe there are now over 300M people under the age of 25 looking for work[2]. Of those lucky enough to have jobs, around 70 percent report being disengaged or actively disengaged at work[3]. The consequences of poor leadership are pervasive and tangible.
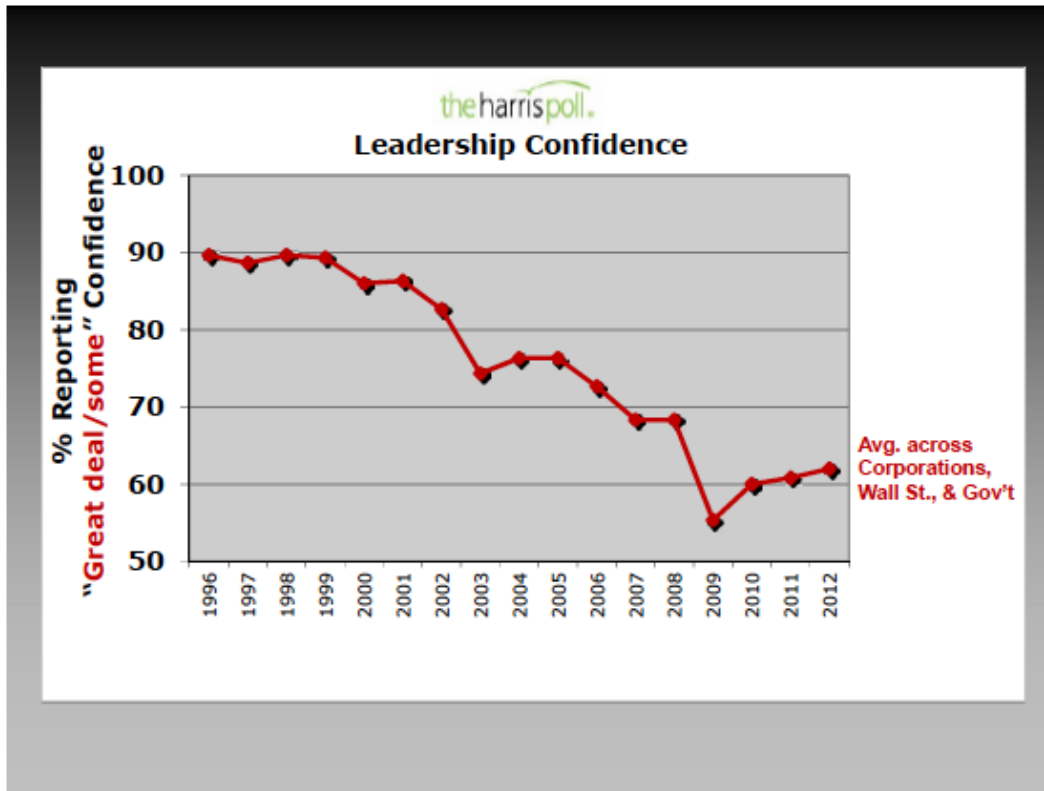
Perhaps even more alarming, our leadership problems are only getting worse. Harris poll data show that confidence in government, military, and business leaders has steadily eroded over the past 20 years and a recent Harvard Kennedy School of Government survey showed that 70 percent of the respondents felt that the United States was suffering from a leadership crisis.[4,5] Putting the wrong people into leadership roles and providing inadequate leadership training are two root causes for this crisis. There is no doubt that many organizations could do a better job hiring and promoting those individuals with a real talent for leadership. Selection and promotion systems work best when there are many qualified candidates to pick from, yet most organizations state that a lack of leadership bench strength is one of their biggest challenges.[6] This implies that organizations cannot hire their way out of this problem and will need to develop whatever talent they have.

Leadership development is big business. Between collegiate and executive education programs; HR and corporate university offerings; and the classroom, experiential learning, coaching programs offered by consulting firms, American organizations spend over $14B annually on leadership development.[7] This represents a nearly two-fold increase over the last fifteen years. The good news is that both the public and private sectors are willing to spend money to fix their leadership problems; the bad news is that there is little evidence that this investment is worth it: annual spending has gone up, but confidence has dropped off.

U.S. Leadership Dev't Spending & Confidence in Leadership
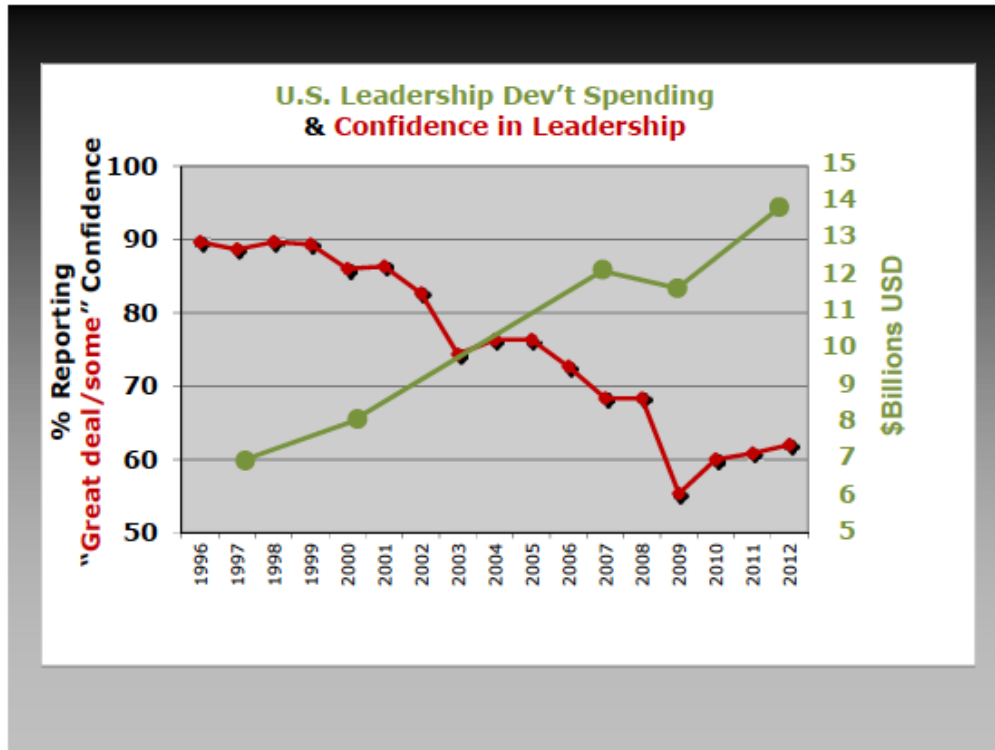
This paper describes six reasons why most leadership development programs fall short and what organizations can do to get higher returns on their development dollars. These include:

(1) Adopting better definitions of leadership;
(2) Selecting the right people to attend leadership development programs;
(3) Developing programs with the right content;
(4) Delivering programs using the right pedagogy;
(5) Doing programs for the right reasons; and
(6) Rigorously evaluating program effectiveness.

Any leadership development program, be it a university executive MBA program, a corporate or consulting firm offering, or an e-learning module can be evaluated against these six criteria. Those in charge of leadership development often have direct control over many of the fixes we describe.

1. **The Definition Problem: What is Leadership?**

Yesterday I learned on a big leadership conference call that leadership means, "Pretend things are okay." I was not familiar with the Ostrich model of leadership (Dipschitz, et. al., 2013) but it is quite popular with the senior leadership team.
--VP of Marketing for a Global 1,000 Firm

You rarely see an organization or consulting firm define leadership, and if you do not know what you are looking for then you will not be able to hire or develop it. We define leadership as having two fundamental components, which are the ability to build cohesive, goal-oriented teams and get results. The former is the "how" of leadership—people who move into positions of authority are usually in jobs where they cannot do it all themselves. Because virtually every significant human achievement has been the result of collective effort and groups and teams are the building blocks of modern organizations, the best leaders are those who can build winning teams. The latter is the "what" of leadership—people should be put in positions of authority to achieve some objective. The best leaders not only get things done, they achieve results that are consistently better than the competition. Most of those in positions of authority have trouble with one or both of these components.[8]

If public and private institutions define leadership they do so using competency models. A competency model is a list of the knowledge, behaviors, and skills needed to adequately perform a job or role. Examples of popular competency models can be found in Table 1, with each competency being further defined by four to six key behaviors. These models are usually developed by asking leaders to identify the competencies needed to succeed at different organizational levels.

And therein lies the problem. Because most people in positions of authority have trouble getting results or building teams, asking these same individuals what it takes to be an effective leader is like asking your doctor for investment advice. He or she will likely have an opinion but it may not be any good. Even more troubling, the opinions offered by these individuals may say more about what it takes to manage one's career than effectively manage teams.[9] The ability to build teams that get results is difficult to discern from the competency models found in many organizations. In fact, not a single competency in the four example models even mentions teams. This causes many organizations to spend a lot of time and money spinning their wheels—assessing, providing feedback, and conducting training on competencies that are vital to getting promoted but secondary to getting results and building teams.

How to Fix the Definition Problem? There are several practical fixes to this problem. The first is for organizations to adopt a simple but powerful definition of leadership, as most competency models are neither memorable nor effective discriminators of leadership performance. We defined leadership as the ability to build teams and get results. This definition is readily

understood and makes it easy to distinguish between high- and low-performing leaders. We encourage organizations to adopt a similar framework.

Common Leadership Competency Models

Profilor	Benchmarks	Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire	Leadership Mirror
Think Strategically	Strategic Perspective	Idealized Attributes	Coaching
Analyze Issues	Being a Quick Study	Idealized Behaviors	Decision-Making
Use Sound Judgment	Decisiveness	Inspirational Motivation	Delegating
Apply Technical/	Change Management	Intellectual Stimulation	Gaining Commitment
Functional Expertise	Leading Employees	Individualized Consideration	Driving for Results
Use Financial Acumen	Confronting Problem	Contingent Reward	Change Leadership
Establish Plans	Employees	Management-by-Exception (Active)	Establishing Strategic
Drive Execution	Participative Management	Management-by-Exception (Passive)	Direction
Manage Change	Building Collaborative	Laissez-Faire	Executive Disposition
Drive for Results	Relationships		Selling the Vision
Lead Courageously	Compassion and Sensitivity		
Influence Others	Putting People at Ease		
Coach and Develop	Respect for Differences		
Engage and Inspire	Taking Initiative		
Foster Collaboration	Composure		
Build Relationships	Balance Between Personal		
Manage Conflict	and Work Life		
Foster Open	Self-Awareness		
Communication	Career Management		
Listen to Others			
Inspire Trust			
Demonstrate Adaptability			

Note: These models include few if any specific competencies for achieving results or building high performing teams.

Second, those who build competency models need to remember that one half to two-thirds of the incumbents at any leadership level have trouble building teams or getting results. This is true for first-line supervisors to C-suite executives, so gathering inputs from everyone at a particular organizational level is a recipe for mediocrity. Leadership development and human resource staff should focus on only interviewing those with proven track records of getting results and building teams when building competency models. For example, Buffalo Wild Wings, General Mills and other companies, carefully identify and interview only their most effective incumbents when building leadership competency models. Third, leadership competency models need to highlight the ability to build teams and get results. It may be that these two super factors are comprised by subsets of competencies found in many models, but the ability to get result and build teams should be made explicit.

2. The People Problem: Who Attends Leadership Development Programs?

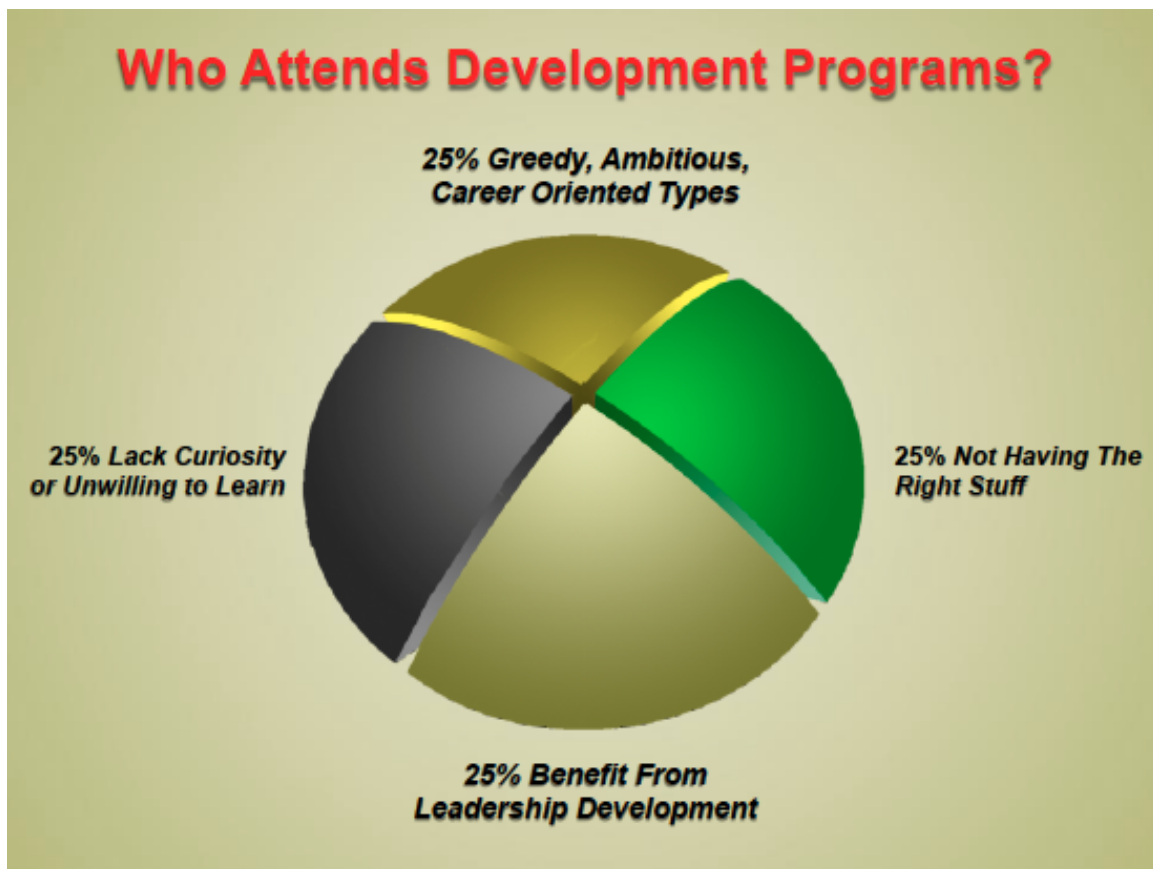*Only when the tide goes out do you discover who's been swimming naked.*
--Warren Buffett

Promotions, occupying positions at particular organizational levels, and getting nominated to high-potential lists are common reasons for developing leaders, yet it turns out that many of the wrong people attend leadership development programs. This is largely driven by the rewards of

a leadership position. Those in charge are conferred greater status, pay, and benefits; the average CEO in the United States now makes 200 times more than their average employees.[10] These help to attract and retain talented leaders, but are also appealing to career-oriented individuals who know how to play the game but have no talent or interest in building teams that get results.

There is a widespread assumption that anyone can learn leadership skills, and accordingly there is a wide range of talent in most leadership development programs. Some participants do not have the "right stuff"—they may lack mental horsepower, self-confidence, interpersonal skills, tolerance for ambiguity, or possess dark-side traits that disrupt the relationships and corrupt the judgment needed to build and guide a team. Others may not be interested in learning—they are arrogant, defensive when given feedback, incapable of reflection, or lack inquisitiveness and persistence. Between the career oriented types and those lacking the right stuff or unwilling to learn, we estimate that only 25 percent of the participants are capable of achieving better results and building stronger teams by attending leadership development programs. Currently there is little data to back up the 25 percent figure, yet most leadership development deliverers would admit that some percentage of participants should not be in their programs.

Who Attends Development Programs?

25% Greedy, Ambitious, Career Oriented Types

25% Lack Curiosity or Unwilling to Learn

25% Not Having The Right Stuff

25% Benefit From Leadership Development

How to Fix the People Problem? Inclusivity has been the bane of competency modeling and likewise led to some muddle-headed thinking about leadership development program attendance. Many organizations put a premium on fairness and have everyone at a particular organization level attend a leadership development program. This approach is "fair" to the potential attendees, but arguably unfair to direct reports, the organization, and shareholders, who may expect that every participant will change when in reality, only a minority benefit from leadership training.

To fix this problem, organizations need to rethink how they select leadership development program participants. Selfish, career-oriented types as well as those with real leadership and learning potential can be identified through a combination of interviews; personality, work values, and intelligence inventories; and business simulations. Organizations should also identify those positions critical to strategy execution and ensure high-potential leadership talent staff these pivotal positions.[11] Johnson & Johnson is one company that allocates significantly more funding to programs for those with high leadership and learning potential before placing these individuals in pivotal leadership positions. It spends relatively less time and money developing those in non-critical positions or with lower leadership and learning potential.

3. The Content Problem: What should be taught in Leadership Development Programs?

For every person who is a manager and wants to know how to manage people, there are 10 people who are being managed and would like to know how to make it stop.
--Scott Adams

Leadership program proliferation is a malady found in many large institutions. Human Resources or Leadership Development staff develop and deliver programs to meet customer needs and are often asked to create separate versions for different functions, organizational levels, geographic regions, and business units. Consulting firms are more than willing to help scratch the "but we are different" itch. Over time corporate universities morph into multi-million dollar empires that offer hundreds of classroom, e-learning, and coaching programs. In reality most of these programs are more similar than different and miss the mark when it comes to teaching participants how to win or build teams.

Competency models drive leadership development program design, so content gaps occur if they do not include achieving results and team building competencies. A review of the courses, programs, and popular publications listed in the next two tables show that few specifically address these two fundamental leadership components. Some might argue that mastering microeconomics, strategy, executive presence, and the like are needed to get results and build teams. We concede the point but would argue that many of these courses and publications are peripheral to building teams that achieve superior results. Because of these gaps, many leadership development programs may be more beneficial to politically astute, career oriented

types than those with the talent and interest in building cohesive teams that outperform the competition.

Typical MBA and Corporate University Curricula

Top 10 MBA Program	Top 25 MBA Program	Major Telecommunications Company
Data and Decisions	Financial Accounting	Adversity Quotient I and II
Microeconomics	Data Analysis and Statistics	Collaborative Leadership
Leading People	Business Ethics	Communicate to Influence
Problem Finding & Solving	Operations Management	Crucial Conversations
Financial Accounting	Marketing Management	Driving Results Through
Introduction to Finance	Financial Management	Accountability
Marketing Management	Strategic Management	Executive Conversations
Leadership Communication	Managerial Accounting	Executive Presence
Operations Management	Managerial Economics	Extraordinary Coach
Macroeconomics	Organizational Behavior	Financial Leadership
Strategic Leadership	IT Management	High Stakes Decision Making
Ethics in Business	Enterprise Course	Innovation Lab
Electives	Electives	Leading Change
		Leading Strategically
		Building High Performing Teams

Note: These programs include few courses for building high performing teams.

Common Leadership Publications

Publication	Number of Chapters/ Publications On Teams	Total Number Of Chapters/Publications
ASTD Leadership Handbook	1	33
CCL's Handbook of Leadership Development	1	14
CCL's Total Publications through 2012	14	271
For Your Information	1	68
Successful Manager's Handbook	0	32
Top Leadership Textbooks:		
Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy	2	16
Northouse	1	16
Yukl	1	15

Note: These publications include relatively little advice for building high performing teams.

How to Fix the Content Problem? Modifying competency models so they explicitly call out the need to build teams that win are important steps to resolving this problem. Because the challenges of winning and building teams are quite different for first-line supervisors and mid-level managers, functional and business unit leaders, and senior executives, separate models should be created for these organizational levels. Organizations such as AT&T, Husky Energy, and CSA Group understand the importance of teams and offer leadership development programs that teach participants how to build teams that achieve superior results.

4. The Pedagogy Program: How should Leadership Development Programs be taught?

It is entirely possible to learn without training and equally viable to train without learning.
--Crispin Gardner-Webster

Most leadership development programs suffer from some several serious pedagogical shortcomings. First, many leadership development programs are "one and done" type events. Participants spend a day or so in programs with no follow up, support for applying the lessons, or accountability for doing so, so whatever was learned is quickly forgotten. Second, learning new skills and adding them to one's repertoire takes a considerable amount of time. It takes about 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert, yet we falsely believe attending one or two-day training programs or completing an MBA will do the trick.[12]

Third, research shows that the average age of a leadership development program participant is 40.[13] Attending leadership development programs at this age will likely have little impact on already ingrained behaviors. Fourth, HR staff, talent managers, and consultants who deliver most leadership development programs are generally individual contributors with no real experience building teams that achieve superior results. College professors, consultants, HR staff, and leadership development professionals may have extensive publication records or experience delivering hundreds of leadership development programs, yet most have not managed P&Ls, led startups or turnarounds, hired or fired staff, or led teams with track records that are consistently better than the competition. This lack of real leadership experience makes it difficult to translate theory into practice.

Fifth, although groups and teams are the building blocks of modern organizations, they rarely attend leadership development programs as intact entities. Teams need to work together in order to achieve results, yet only those in charge participate in leadership development programs. Because of this, teams often lack the critical mass needed to reinforce lessons and improve team efficiency and effectiveness.

How to Fix the Methodology Problem? Good leaders beget good leadership, so those with a track record of building teams that achieve superior results should teach some leadership development program components. Those in positions of authority because of political savvy or favoritism should not teach leadership, as they have little to offer. Because of their content and adult learning expertise, consultants and Leadership Development staff should design programs and deliver the remaining components. Pepsico, General Electric, and TE Connectivity are some of the companies that have effectively used consultants, internal staff, and effective business leaders to design and deliver leadership development programs.

Organizations need to build accountability mechanisms into all leadership development programs. At a minimum bosses should ask participants to explain what they learned from

completing programs; participants should build development plans to apply their learning back at work; and regular one-on-one meetings should be held to review progress. Johnson & Johnson is one company that does a particularly good job holding participants accountable for applying what they learned back on the job.

Two other methodological fixes include action learning and intact team training programs. In action learning programs groups of high-potentials are put into temporary teams to solve vexing organizational issues. During the program participants get feedback on their strengths and weaknesses, build development plans and practice targeted behaviors, learn how to build high performing teams, get exposure to unfamiliar aspects of the organization, gather benchmarking data, and formulate strategies and plans needed to win. Well-designed and executed action learning programs, such as those implemented by 3M, Waste Management, and US Cellular, teach participants how to build teams, solve real organizational problems, identify those with true leadership talent, and have high ROIs.[14]

Because groups and teams are the mechanisms by which things get done, intact teams should participate in leadership development programs. Some of this content should include learning a model of team effectiveness and providing the team with feedback on its current level of functioning. Some time should also be spent helping the team gain alignment on the context in which it operates, formulating team goals, clarifying team rules and team member roles, gaining buy-in, and developing the strategies and action plans needed to win. Even more traditional leadership development topics, such as delegation, coaching, or communication skills, should be taught to intact teams of middle to senior leaders. This would enable bosses to deliver some of the content, ensure everyone has development plans in place, and create a critical mass of leaders needed to drive change.

5. The Rationale Problem: Why do Leadership Development Programs?

The best executive is one who has enough sense to pick good men to do what he wants done, and enough self-restraint to keep from meddling while they do it.
--President Theodore Roosevelt

More often than not, the impetus for launching leadership development programs has little to do with organizational strategy, its definition of leadership, or the ability to build high performing teams. Many programs get launched because the CEO reads a faddish leadership book and believes it to be the pathway to organizational salvation, someone feels a leadership development program is needed to teach "best practices," or a Vice President wants a coach as a perk for reaching a certain level. These programs cost millions of dollars, but there is little evidence that they improve organizational results or leadership bench strength.

How to Fix the Rationale Problem? We believe leadership development programs should be delivered for the following three reasons:

1. To help leaders acquire knowledge and skills needed to build winning strategies and tactics to beat the competition.
2. To help leaders learn the blocking and tackling skills needed to build teams at their organizational level.
3. To help teams build the knowledge and skills needed to improve team efficiency and effectiveness.

Launching leadership development programs for other reasons will likely be a waste of time and money.

6. The Evaluation Problem: Do Leadership Development Programs Actually Work?

If you can't measure it, then you can't manage it.
--Peter Drucker

A dirty little secret in the leadership development industry is that most programs do not undergo any formal evaluation. Although collecting participant reactions (the most basic type of evaluations[15]) is commonplace, examining behavioral change or business impact (the more relevant types of evaluations) of leadership development programs is quite rare. Of the tens of thousands of leadership development programs delivered over the past ten years less than 200 have been included in rigorous research studies. Two-thirds of the programs reviewed reported positive reaction or knowledge outcomes; one-third reported no change in these two criteria and only a handful looked at behavior change or results.[16,17] Because the programs in these studies were going through formal evaluations, they were likely carefully designed, yet only one-third reported positive participant reactions or changes in their knowledge. And since they weren't examined, behavior change and performance results for almost all 200 programs are largely unknown.

The sad fact of the matter is that no one really wants to know if leadership development actually works. Many participants would rather be entertained or learn simple tricks for getting a leg up than be pushed outside of their comfort zone, consulting firms find it easier to sell slickness over effectiveness, program budgets are taken up by design and delivery considerations, formal evaluation is hard work, and senior management is not held accountable for the leadership bench strength in their organizations. This is a big opportunity loss for those organizations facing shortfalls in leadership bench strength, as without formal evaluation they will continue throwing money at the problem but have no idea whether their programs are having any real impact.

How to fix the Evaluation Problem? It will be difficult to fix this problem as long as leadership development program proliferation persists in organizations, as the sheer number of programs

being offered makes formal evaluation prohibitively expensive. It is also worth noting that the returns on investment estimates for Level 4 program evaluation are highly specious. The problem with these estimates is that most leadership development programs are targeted at individuals and it is difficult to accurately determine whether individual-level interventions have any impact on team or organizational level outcomes. Criterion contamination and flawed assumptions cause most business leaders and financial professionals to rightly question leadership development program ROI estimates. Insisting on versus truly understanding the limitations of returns on investment estimates are two different things.

Organizations wanting to fully understand the impact of their leadership development programs should do two things. First, they should shift their development budgets towards action learning and intact team training programs, as the links between team-level interventions and team and organizational outcomes are more direct and easier to determine. Second, they should include formal evaluation in all action learning and intact team training programs. Companies like 3M and Waste Management have done in-depth return on investment analyses for their action learning programs and typically find highly favorable results.

Using the Six Criteria to Evaluate Leadership Development Programs. Hopefully this paper has provided a number of ideas for improving leadership development programs, but it might be helpful to provide a succinct framework for evaluating any leadership development offering. This framework takes the form of a pipeline, where the intent is maximizing the number of leaders capable of getting results and building teams. There is a section of the leadership development pipeline that corresponds to each of the six criteria described in this paper. Drawing a pipeline in the process of evaluating a leadership development program helps illustrate where improvements need to be made.

An example of a completed pipeline evaluation for a two-day mid-level leader program designed and delivered by external consultants can be found below. This example indicates that doing a better job selecting participants, adjusting course content to include more team building modules, making the links between the program and business strategy more explicit, and including formal evaluation would greatly improve program outcomes. Most of these improvements are within the control of Human Resources and Leadership Development staff and are relatively inexpensive to implement. Instructions for evaluating programs against the six criteria can be found in the appendix.

Definition — People — Content — Methodology — Reasons
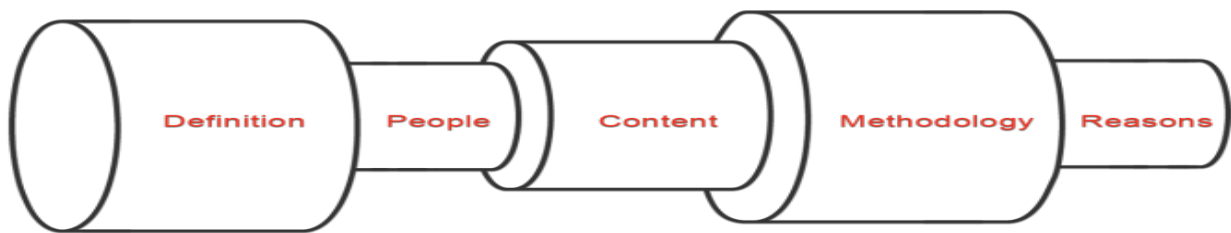
Conclusion

Leadership is the most important issue facing us today. Who is in charge determines the fate of a nation, the freedoms enjoyed by its citizens, the success or failure of organizations, win and loss records of teams, employee engagement, and the life and death of soldiers. Yet there is a general level of discontent when discussing leadership—people are unhappy with the federal, state and local government officials, those running public agencies or businesses, etc.

Properly preparing people to assume positions of authority is vitally important, yet it is a responsibility that most organizations take far too lightly. Many send the wrong people, build programs for the wrong reasons that include the wrong content, outsource leadership development delivery, do not set expectations or hold people accountable for what they have learned, and do not evaluate program efficacy. As a result leadership development has become a black hole in many organizations. Too many Human Resource departments measure their impact by the number of courses offered, participant satisfaction ratings, the size of staff and budgets, annual per participant spend on training and development, adherence to "best practices", or other measures that tend to be far removed from the real issue, which is building teams that beat the competition.

Leadership development has become a big business, and many benefit from this spending. CEOs can tell their boards they take succession planning and leadership development seriously, Human Resource departments get a seat at the table and are granted larger budgets, consulting firms see higher revenues, and trainees feel they are getting the attention they deserve. The only two groups that see little benefit from these development dollars are those that may be the most important to organizational success: employees and shareholders. We've outlined what can be done to fix the problem, it remains to be seen whether all the parties who currently benefit from the status quo are truly interested in making these changes.

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Appendix: Evaluating Leadership Development Programs

Any leadership development offering can be evaluated using the definition, people, content, pedagogy, reason, and evaluation criteria described in this paper. Take the following steps to evaluate a program:

1. Write in the name of the leadership development program at the top of the diagram below.

2. Evaluate the program using the rating scale found on the next page. Make sure you award a 1-5 score for each of the six criteria.

3. Use the six criteria scores to build a pipeline diagram for the leadership development program. Do this by shading in the appropriate areas for each section of the pipeline. For example, if you awarded a 1 for definition then you should shade the +1 to -1 area in the definition section of the pipeline below. If you awarded 3 for the people criteria then you would shade in the +3 to -3 area for that section and so on. Continue this process until all six sections for a leadership development program have been shaded in.

4. Identify those sections of the pipeline that are the most constricted and identify solutions and plans for program improvement.

Program Name: _____

Leadership Development Pipeline Analysis

Program Evaluation Rating Criteria

Criteria	Rating Scale	Overall Rating (1-5)
Definition	1 = Our organization has no definition of leadership. 2 = Our organization only has a vague definition of leadership. 3 = We have leadership competency models that were built inclusively. 4 = Our leadership competency models were developed by interviewing effective leaders. 5 = Our leadership competency models explicitly highlight the need to build teams and get results.	
People	1 = This is an open enrollment program. 2 = Participants must be at a certain level/role to attend this program. 3 = Managers nominate who attends this program. 4 = Trendy but less rigorous assessments (MBTI, Strengthfinders, DISC, etc.) are used to determine program participants. 5 - Rigorous assessment is used to determine program participants.	
Content	1 = The program content is unrelated to building teams or getting results. 2 = Program content is only tangentially related to teams or results. 3 = About half of the program content is related to building teams or getting results. 4 = More than half of the program content is related to building teams *or* getting results. 5 = The program focuses exclusively on building teams *and* getting results.	
Pedagogy	1 = This is an individually oriented one-and-done program with no pre-work or follow-up. 2 = This is an individually oriented program that includes some pre-work and minimal follow-up. 3 = This is an individually oriented program that includes a development plan with no requirement to review it with the boss. 4 = This is an individually oriented program that is delivered over multiple sessions and includes formal development plans and review sessions. 5 = This is an action learning or intact team training program.	
Reasons	1 = This program is unrelated to organizational strategy. 2 = This program is only tangentially related to organizational strategy. 3 = This program is somewhat related to organizational strategy. 4 = This program has solid links to organizational strategy. 5 = This program is critical to the success of organizational strategy.	
Evaluation	1 = This program does not use any type of evaluation. 2 = This program only uses reaction data to gauge program effectiveness. 3 = This program uses knowledge assessments to gauge program effectiveness. 4 = This program uses behavioral assessments to gauge program effectiveness. 5 = This program uses bottom line results to gauge program effectiveness.	