

Leadership Activities

Perry Burns discusses how to run a leadership activity.

The big buzz in L the Learning and Development community is about Leadership development. “if only we could train good leaders,” goes the argument, “we would be beating the world”

This belief is so well ingrained that hardly anyone stops to question it. But when you step back for a second, there are a number of huge questions. For example:

1. If leaders need training, who trained Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin?
2. If leaders can be easily trained, why are there any followers (which begs the question :)
3. What is so great about being a leader anyway?
4. If everyone understands how to lead, doesn't that cause a problem when followers are led badly?

We all know good leaders. We knew them when we were in the playground; and when they conceived a mischief, we followed. We probably tried our first clandestine cigarette at the behest of a leader and pursued our childhood interests at their bidding too. So it is clear that leadership qualities are not only apparent from a young age but are an important part of our development.

So why do we think that we need to train leaders? Well for several reasons. Firstly, although leadership may be an innate talent, like all natural gifts, if it is not channelled correctly, bad habits develop and blossoming potential can go unrealized. Secondly, there is more need for leadership than there are candidates. Playground leaders may go on to military careers or become high flyers in the world of big business, but they are not likely to end up running a small social services unit in an out of the way provincial town. Finally, leaders need to be part of a team, and for the team to function efficiently, the led need to know the ground rules so that they can serve effectively.

So having concluded that leadership training is both necessary and desirable, how can it be organized?

The jumping off point for any training course is, and has to be, formal instruction in the theory and principles of leadership. There are three ways of doing this:

1. **Books.** There are literally hundred of texts on leadership. Most of the business schools also provide free podcasts and webinars. The eager student can soak up any number of treatises on various leadership systems and processes but be cautious. Some of the best writing is outdated and doesn't meet with modern management ideas. Many of the academic pieces are useful but based on case studies at the very peak of leadership experience and thus divorced from practical reality. While books are an essential resource, they are only satisfactory as a reference and as part of more focussed study.



2. **Courses.** There may not be as many courses as there are books but it feels that way. Regardless of your discipline, geography academic background or vocational sector, there will be a leadership course bespoke to your needs and packaged to meet your requirements. Although many of these courses will be tailored to your industry by an experienced practitioner; in the end, the leadership system, process or methodology taught will be as much a matter of personal preference of the trainer as it will be reflective of any best practice. In reality there are hundreds of leadership models. All will be based on observation and research and will have some applicability, but there is no “right” or “wrong” system. All a course does is highlight one particular approach and provide the basis for consistency amongst those that attend.
3. **Practical Experience.** The sure fire way of developing leadership skills is to practice. If under the leader’s leadership, the outcome is ‘success’ then he or she needs to capture the behaviours that led to that success. And if it was failure, then behaviours need to be modified and tried again. Which is why coaching and mentoring are so effective.

But of course, while practical experience may be very desirable, it can also be expensive and risky. So how can organizations who want to imbue leadership qualities provide the opportunity to practice in a safe environment which allows emerging leaders to make their mistakes and learn from them?

Although I tire of hearing clients say that their business is ‘different’, the truth is that no enterprise is identical to any other. Just as every person is an individual, so every organization reflects the individuals in it in terms of history, culture, systems, processes and resources. There may be common characteristics that may mark out a leader in a company but there is no absolute answer. Organizations have to develop training regimes that suit their own purpose.

Regardless of how this is achieved, the starting point will nearly always be a process, model or philosophy that expresses the culture of “how ‘leadership’ gets done around here.” Whilst there is no doubt that formal courses have an important role to play in defining a common understanding of, and approach to leadership, in the final analysis, the practical element of developing leadership skills must be an internal process.

Although not necessarily universally recognized or accepted, many leadership approaches are based on a six stage model shown in Figure 1.

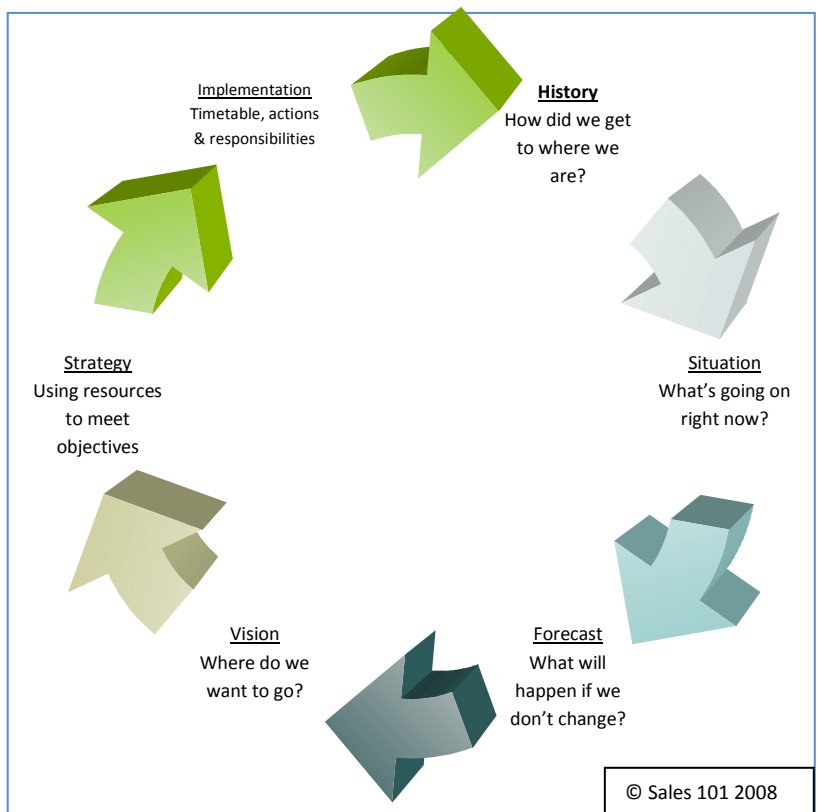


Figure 1 Leadership Model

This model suggests that in order to be successful, the leader has to ask six basic questions:

1. Where do we want to be?
2. Where are we coming from?
3. Where are we heading if we keep going as now?
4. Where are we now?
5. By when do we want to be there?
6. How will we get there and what do we need?

By following this approach the leader can structure his team, deploy his resources and provide support, guidance and information that will get the team there.

Although the model itself is fairly simple, fitting it into a course is slightly more problematic. The content is simple, straightforward and easily understood. With a senior group, a competent trainer can usually get through the theory comfortably in a morning. The issue is with the practical sessions. Most courses have ten to fifteen delegates although six or seven is not uncommon.

To practice leadership skills effectively, the team needs to consist of at least four members. Thus with every delegate getting a chance to lead and assuming that several teams can practice in parallel, this is a full day especially when allowing for quality feedback and consolidation. To provide the practical experience, I use tools such as Super Tanker, Westrek, Viking Attack! and Terra Nova. These are self contained packs which contain everything needed to run a session. For additional “spice” the activities can be run competitively between groups with a prize for the winning team. This puts additional pressure on the leader and can be a useful device for creating tension within the teams.

The following structure is very tight, but by limiting the practice sessions to 45 minutes with 15 minutes for feedback, you could get 16 delegates through the programme in a (very full) day. Ideally of course you would spread the course over two days and allow much more time for the exercises and feedback. This would also allow more time for consolidation and action planning after the delegates return to the workplace.

Activity	Time (minutes)	Start	Subject	Tools
1	10	9.00	Introduction and domestics	
2	35	9.10	Objectives of the course, delegates experiences	
3	15	9.45	Overview of Leadership	Group / Breakout Discussion on characteristics and qualities of outstanding national, political religious leaders etc
4	15	10.00	Leadership Plenum	
5	15	10.15	Introduction to the Leadership Model	
6	15	10.30	Coffee	
7	105	10.45	Leadership Model Continued	Breakout sessions & handouts on Asking questions, Vision, Strategy,

Activity	Time (minutes)	Start	Subject	Tools
				Objective setting, Providing feedback
8	60	12.30	Lunch	Leaders issued with the brief for the exercise they are to run in the afternoon
9	30	13.30	Summary – What does leadership mean	Breakouts & Group session
10	45	14.00	Super Tanker Exercise	3 or 4 groups in parallel
11	15	14.45	Super Tanker feedback to leaders	Followers give feedback
12	45	15.00	West Trek exercise	3 or 4 groups in parallel
13	15	15.45	West Trek feedback to leaders	Followers give feedback
14	45	16.00	Murphy exercise	3 or 4 groups in parallel
15	15	16.45	Murphy feedback to leaders	Followers give feedback
16	45	17.00	Terra Nova exercise	3 or 4 groups in parallel
17	15	17.45	Terra Nova feedback to leaders	Followers give feedback
18	45	18.00	Summary, What we learned and what we will do differently	Action plans and evaluation

An alternative structure would be to break the sessions into logical components and then run them in a series of 2 - 3 hour development classes over a three or four week period.

For a really successful session it is important that the leadership lessons learned are aligned with the needs of the organization and that the delegates leave the course with a clear action plan for improving their own performance.

The importance of the feedback sessions cannot be overstressed. A “non disclosure” covenant should be obtained, and the followers must feedback to the leader how they felt during the exercise. This can be a brutal lesson but it is vital if the delegates are to get full value from the session.

In summary, every enterprise needs leaders at all levels throughout the organization. With some careful planning, a clear learning outcome and the right tools, almost anyone can structure a highly successful programme that will have dramatic and long lasting results.

About the Author

Perry Burns is Managing Director of Sales 101 Ltd in London which specializes in using tools and exercises to improve performance. A former director at Ernst & Young he now works with a wide range of companies to provide training resources and strategic advice.

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