

The future of leadership development: how can L&D professionals design and develop our next generation of leaders?

Karen Meager and John McLachlan



Karen Meager is a Managing Director and John McLachlan are both based at Monkey Puzzle Training & Consultancy Ltd, Shepton Mallet, UK.

In writing our book, “Real Leaders for the Real World” (Meager and McLachlan, 2014a, 2014b), we conducted research with over 60 leaders from multinational organizations to small business owners and entrepreneurs. These leaders either classified themselves as “good” or were nominated as “good” by someone else. We wanted to discover whether there were any themes in leadership qualities, attitudes and traits in good leaders and whether there were any common problems that good leaders have in common. The results have significant implications for the future of leadership development and the design of leadership development programs.

Good leaders come in all shapes and sizes

In the study, we asked a set of multiple choice questions which were profiling questions and a number of open questions such as:

- What aspects of what you do in your leadership position are enjoyable?
- Which aspects of what you do in your leadership position do you dislike?
- What would you describe as your keys to success?
- What are the main challenges you face in life in general (i.e. not just in this context)?
- Which qualities do you admire in other people?
- Which qualities do you dislike in other people?

There were some strong themes in the answers to the open questions but the multiple choice questions were broadly in line with the US population average. Good leaders generally agreed on *what* made a good leader, but there were many ways in *how* to do it. By reviewing the answers to the open questions along with the answers to the multiple choice questions, we saw that respondents with different personality profiles had developed or were developing similar characteristics or traits. The traits were described as the same but the way they were doing the traits, as in their thinking styles and behaviors, varied. We concluded that it was possible for leaders with many different personality types to learn and develop successful leadership traits while being true to themselves. This is how we created the five traits of successful and authentic leaders. These are that good leaders:

- use feedback to succeed;
- take considered risks;
- are forward thinking and flexible;
- do what they say and say what they do; and
- develop real relationships with people.

These traits are possible for anyone to develop, while staying true to themselves. No personality transplant required! Good leadership development is not about changing people's personalities, as we need far less robots in business; it is to do with helping leaders to develop successful ways to develop their capabilities in these traits.

The common problems most leaders encounter

Our study also uncovered two major themes in terms of the problems that good leaders find challenging – time management and people problems. These would not be surprising for L&D professionals, but what was surprising was the extent to which they caused leadership issues and wasted company time and energy.

Time management

The majority of participants – 75 per cent – said that work and the rest of their life flowed well most of the time, while 25 per cent felt it was a constant juggling act. In the main, most of our participants were managing their balance in work and life well. However, over 80 per cent of respondents mentioned use of time as a problem within their role. The issues around time included achieving a balance between all the things they wanted to do, getting distracted and general prioritization and organization issues.

People problems

While over 75 per cent of participants cited working with people as a something they like about their role and was something they were good at, problems with some types of behavior were present in over 70 per cent of respondents' answers. "Other people", specifically people within their organization; colleagues, managers and employees rather than client or suppliers seemed to be both leaders' greatest joy and greatest problem. Issues with other people fell into three key unlikeable behaviors; arrogance, laziness and bullying.

Leadership development programs need to help leaders to address these challenges. The issue is, as L&D professionals know, that helping people to learn how to more effectively deal with these is easier said than done. Many development programs are too simplistic and do not work with the individual psychology of the leader. This results in, at best, participants only coming away with a few hints and tips and not fundamentally new strategies for working with these issues.

The importance of emotional regulation in leadership development

Underneath all the talents and skills of great leadership lies emotional regulation (Meager and McLachlan, 2014, 2014b). We say emotional regulation rather than emotional stability because the term "emotional stability" often implies a fixed state or style. That is not helpful. Having access to the appropriate emotion for any given moment is the stable base upon which all other leadership traits are built.

If leaders have too many flight, flight and freeze (survival) chemicals running around their brains and bodies, they will not be able to act appropriately and so will overreact or under react. These primal responses when activated are so quick that even the best skills training

will not work if someone's brain and body feels under threat. If someone is emotionally regulated they can express anger without attacking people, shed a tear with a member of staff if the situation calls for it, express joy and excitement at a new project and take responsibility for their part in something that goes wrong.

Experiencing emotions is supposed to help us make decisions and develop good instincts. The problem is that many people do not have good levels of emotional regulation. This is not bad or weird. However, if you want to lead well, you need more emotional regulation than most, so that you can keep your head and your sanity when others are losing theirs.

What does this mean for L&D professionals?

Leaders need to be developed as a whole person

Skills-based leadership development will, at best, only work for a few people. Leaders for the future need to develop a much deeper understanding of how they and other people tick – beyond personality profiling tools and standard pop psychology models. These things can be helpful but often are over simplified in their application and, therefore, leaders have some knowledge but little understanding or real wisdom as a result. We have seen this many times working in organizations and also had feedback from L&D professionals.

The development of emotional regulation should be at the core of a leadership development program; this does not need to be taught explicitly but should be integrated into the program. We are delighted to see that leadership development programs that “push people to the edge” are becoming a thing of the past. While good in their intention (helping people to work under pressure) they are counter-productive because of a misunderstanding about the psychology of human beings.

Building in space for reflective thinking, running a no threat confidential environment for people to express themselves freely, teaching people how to manage their emotions through breathing, movement and mindfulness and bringing in quality one-to-one coaching as part of your program will help leaders develop their emotional regulation.

Your choice of provider is critical to the development of your leaders

The people that deliver your leadership program are critical. People respond to people, and people develop their own emotional regulation when they are with other emotionally regulated people. It is a brain chemical thing. Your provider should feel like a safe pair of hands.

Some tips on choosing an appropriate provider for your leadership development program:

- It should be enjoyable but not cozy (people learn best when relaxed) and challenging (but not stressful).
- Beware of trainers or coaches who are over critical or over nice, or those who seek too much validation from you or the delegates (they will not be emotionally regulated themselves).
- Your provider should demonstrate the qualities you expect them to assist others to develop. So if respect is important to you, make sure your provider demonstrates that.
- Think carefully about internal delivery programs. You may say it is confidential but do participants believe you? Internal programs can be problematic not because of their quality or delivery but because delegates are concerned about confidentiality

Keywords:

Development,
Leadership development,
Organization development,
Coaching,
Learning,
Management development

and therefore are not mentally open to development and admitting errors and problems as they would be with someone they would not have to work with in any other capacity.

This does not necessarily mean throwing out your existing program and doing something completely different. Sometimes you do and some programs just need adjusting with these elements in mind.

The world needs more good leaders and your work and commitment to quality “whole person” leadership development is instrumental in making this happen.

References

Meager, K. and McLachlan, J. (2014a), *Real Leaders for the Real World*, Panoma Press.

Meager, K. and McLachlan, J. (2014b), 'Emotional Regulation', *Real Leaders for the Real World*, Panoma Press, pp. 35-57.

Corresponding author

Karen Meager can be contacted at: karen@monkeypuzzletraining.co.uk

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.