



Accelerated Evolution Consulting

# How Leadership Development Fails

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## Initial thoughts

Each year hundreds of millions of dollars are spent on the development of leaders - by companies wanting a competitive edge, government departments concerned to improve their professional competence, institutions looking for greater public impact or a more congenial work environment and individuals seeking self-improvement.

Most of these investments are channelled into workshops, training courses and programs of differing kinds. And most of it goes to waste. Although there are often short-term gains reported by a few individuals these are exceptions. Leadership development programs are rarely effective in the long-term. Much goes on as before. Transformational change remains in hiding.

Generally speaking we do not discover more sophisticated leaders or higher levels of consciousness emerging from conventional leadership programs. Unfortunately the facade of success appears to be easily sustained in today's marketplace, in spite of the fact that programs intended to develop and nurture leaders most often serve only to underline the dearth of leadership that currently exists.

There are good reasons for this which I only began to explore during the writing of *The Five Literacies of Global Leadership*.

Current approaches to leadership development remind me of the health and well-being industry, its veracity as well as its marketing hype. I am sure you know the way this industry works.

If you are wealthy the first step is to choose the most superbly equipped, state of the art health resort, if possible in some exotic

location. Many of these facilities offer comprehensive packages comprising nutritional therapy and customised diets, spa and sauna rooms, colonic irrigation, therapeutic massages and detoxification treatments, physical exercise regimes, yoga and meditation classes. Often exuding an air of exclusiveness, these facilities offer tranquillity and a rare chance to reflect on one's life journey in harmony with nature. Think squawking parakeets, sunny skies, the sigh of a gentle breeze through palm trees, the distant sound of surf...

For many others who long to participate in these health resort experiences but are less affluent it is simply the equivalent of a holiday. A few frequent flyer points away from life's hectic treadmill. A pause. Do they provoke long term change? No, not usually. But they still have benefit. The problem is the misconception of what is on offer. The marketing message seduces, exactly like the messages surrounding corporate change, into taking the easy path - the pill for weight loss or, for that matter, the pill for anything, versus doing the inner and outer work that is actually required for real change to embed.

Health resorts are luxurious and also very expensive but then so are most corporate change and leadership development programs. Of course you can expect highly personalised attention from expert staff as well as your own private villa for seclusion should you so choose. Sports stars and movie celebrities check-in to these places. You are bound to emerge a fitter, healthier, happier, more effective human being. Or so you reason...



As it turns out this is an illusion. Statistics show that over 86 per cent of people who routinely attend a health resort, wellness centre or spa, fail to maintain their new fitness and dietary regimen even when the immediate impact such life changes produce have been noticeably beneficial. This is why people constantly return. In fact the health and well-being market actually depends on their return customers.

Although I cannot quote precise statistics the same happens to be the case with almost all leadership development schemes – even the best and most internationally lauded of brands. Just think about it. These intensive courses and high-level retreats are typically designed “for” a clientele, rather than “with” them, by human resource specialists (and occasionally instructional designers) who then turn over custody of the participants development to a cadre of facilitators, academics and consultants, particularly those who have acquired something of a guru status in their special field.

There can be no doubt that training and development professionals are too often engaged to drip-feed superfluous or questionable information, minimising any potential discomfort and creating an impression for participants they are in some kind of positive and sustainable transition. Focused primarily on upgrading technical knowledge and often urging behavioural or attitudinal readjustments, these external service providers are not in the least bit concerned with volition or conflicting “states of being” within the group. Nor do they concern themselves with trying to secure any kind of enduring collegiality. Why? Because they are not paid to do that. If they were rewarded on such results, the programs they designed would most likely take on an entirely different

form and ethos, more appropriate to a transformational paradigm than the prevailing instructional mode, which merely gives them licence to perform in front of an admiring audience.

The cynic in me is also suspicious that one of the most important selection criterion for any successful external trainer or facilitator is the ability to inject novelty without causing unnecessary offence or too much distress – unless, of course, that has been overtly orchestrated. Some of the most highly paid facilitators, including a number of associates with whom I regularly work, state emphatically that, for the most part, they are paid to smooth conversational processes and make participants feel good about the outcome, even if this bubble bursts the morning after. In other words facilitators are often the insurance policy that guarantees a good time is had by all. Tick the box. Job well done.

Is it any real surprise then that participants come away frustrated by the suite of new-fangled theories and incoherent models they are expected to deploy but that remain functionally and symbolically disconnected from their day-to-day problems?

The expression of freshness, of discovery and exhilaration, of modified behaviours and new personal commitments that seemed so novel and engaging at the time, eventually fade into vague memories. Unless further invitations transpire offering additional, more “advanced” courses. Which then serve to recycle the whole experience once again. Ah well, plus ca change, plus c'est la meme!

It is true to say that most programs of this nature are simply unsustainable away from the conditions of their genesis. In other words they are designed to fail. The promise of



sustainable change is one that simply cannot be kept. Yet pills continued to be swallowed by the bucket load and unwise investments, amounting to millions of dollars in training, materials, travel and accommodation, not to mention opportunity costs, roll on mainly because those responsible for resource allocation have been brainwashed into believing that leadership development is critical to the business.

It is critical. We know that. But not in any shape or form. And certainly not in the form of a pill or vaccination promising immediate and sustainable change. The results are in and the implications are absolutely clear. If effective transformational leadership is the goal (and far more consideration must be given as to whether this really is the superordinate aim) a number of critical design factors must be taken into account.

After all is said and done, the need for development (whether individually or collectively motivated) arises for a reason. There has to be an underlying imperative, a logic, implying something is currently missing and/or something can be gained, from undertaking a program focused on development. We have to believe in the potential for surfacing something better, brighter, grander or more effective that will evolve from investing in the development of leaders and the nurturing of new forms of leadership.

Well there is.

Actually there are three overarching logics (or longings) that commonly drive the urge to grow successive generations of leaders and to articulate a new knowledge base for leadership:

1. The judgement to perceive reality from a higher altitude or the perspectives offered by a new stages of consciousness. Higher states of enlightenment unveil hidden dimensions and possibilities for becoming a force for good in our world
2. The wisdom to appreciate the complexity inherent in human systems, relationships and beliefs. This capability can be used to comprehend complex dynamics and to provide a more sophisticated resolution of the dilemmas facing us
3. The willingness to step into different epistemologies, and cultural mindsets, and to do so with grace. Such volition opens up compassion and empathy for diversity and inclusion, without which any leadership flounders or descends into baseness.



To enable these three logics to manifest within the context of leadership development, five additional factors must be taken into account:

## 1. Learning Mode

Leadership development needs to be prised out of the instructional mode (of telling) into the sphere of personal and collective transformation (of enquiry and questioning).

That simple shift requires development initiatives to be co-designed by the community of participants or stakeholders, including those for whom development or behavioural change is intended, so that relevance is assured at all times and everyone has a say in how their “evolving selves” can best be used in every moment.

A word of caution is in order. The term “co-design” is very much in vogue today. It has become common currency even within the instructional mode of development. Only in that context it refers to specific knowledge to be imparted (as in theories, models, exemplars and tools) as well as the manner of such instruction (that is presentations, round tables, facilitated dialogues or working groups). This usually implies that a “design” is agreed by the commissioning agency (most commonly members of an organisation’s human resource community) in conjunction with designated service suppliers. This is not what I mean by the term co-design.

Within the transformational paradigm authentic co-design is an engaging and continuing process, it requires a

contribution from, and the presence of, all stakeholders in the initiative - especially those being targeted for development. As a consequence design input focuses on the symbolism, composition and staging of experiences that have the direct effect of excavating ancient wisdom or of eliciting yet-to-be-embodied knowledge, as opposed to conveying explicit data which is, after all, the objective of design input within the instructional paradigm.

## 2. Attention density

Typically the potential value arising from development workshops and programs remains unrealised, mostly because of routine pressures or a cultural DNA that protects the status quo, but also because of conflicting philosophies. By means of development programs leaders connect with new possibilities (for themselves and for the organisation) but may find it difficult integrating these into beneficial enterprise-wide changes because of existing conditions that actively discourage the migration of new knowledge into new praxis.

This can also be deeply troubling at a personal level. When this happens people either stay, suppressing what they have learnt in compliance with tradition, are marginalised as they struggle to resolve the tensions, or give up trying and leave.

True leadership development aims to change these outcomes by finding ways for new knowledge to integrate and transcend into new work. This is a cyclical, iterative and recursive dance between transformative thinking and communicative



action. I often refer to this transitional or migratory state as an “awakening” process rather than a “developmental” process per se. Leaders are given opportunities (or are jolted into epiphanies) that awaken within them an electric, palpable authenticity and potency, both individually and collectively.

This can usually only be achieved by

- (i) continually recreating, sharing, integrating and transcending the conditions, conversations and experiences evident when a sense of anticipation, renewed purpose, or excitement for change originally surfaced and
- (ii) having leaders nurture and value intimate working relationships with mentors who can constantly remind them of the transformational experience and intended higher purpose.

### 3. Framing

There are enormous social and psychological impediments to deployment of the kinds of consciousness expansion we seek from leaders today. Most leadership programs ambushed by the instructional mode of development are seriously impacted and distorted by the nature of the inquiry itself. In short, the question or impulse (or sometimes just the nominated expert at the front of the room offering their pet view) shapes the response, rather than allowing the data to frame relevance. It is for this reason that on-the-job learning in a transformational

mode is preferable to almost any other form of developmental experience.

True learning coupled with the evolution of new forms of consciousness invariably arises from an inner sense of knowing and translating that into action. It occurs when experts, gurus, facilitators and trainers are taken out of the equation and people are left to wallow in a messy and confronting space defined only by intentionality and imagination and guided by questions and provocations from those who are “tuned in” to group dynamics and are not constrained by adherence to a single model, truth or impulse.

### 4. Setting

Pertinent theory and the analysis of case studies can be immensely useful - if there is an opportunity for immediate translation, application and practice. Nowadays however it is quite easy for anyone to surf the net and download as many case studies and theories as one could stuff in a wine cellar. Generally speaking classroom teaching in the conventional sense adds almost no value to leadership development in ways that are unequivocal.

Furthermore, where such theories and lectures take people off-the-job into an artificial learning environment for an experience that might be memorable but is not replicable when it matters, they invariably fail. Naturally this will be fiercely contested by the business schools who trade in such models.

If programs and courses are delivered in this manner one needs to ask, what is



retained when participants return to work? How much of the learning endures? To what extent will that knowledge continue to add value when the daily routine exerts its gravitational pull? How much of it will still be relevant in five years time? Or ten years time?

Above all how can the unique experiences conveyed within instructional development programs be amplified in ways that add value for the thousands of other people who were not privileged to attend the program? Generally speaking they cannot. In order to generate sufficient returns on investments in leadership, higher-order benefits need to spread across the enterprise – in terms of a more innovative culture, cross-business cooperation and the collective comprehension of environmental patterns and trends. This can only manifest in “on-the-job” praxis which is the pragmatic element within the transformational mode of change.

which, so often, is to keep leaders firmly anchored in current disciplines and beliefs.

## 5. Language

The vocabulary of leadership is critical. Within the transformational paradigm development must include terms such as **being, empathy, diversity, beliefs, choice, wisdom, responsibility, an expanded sense of self, freedom, intent, purpose, integral, limits** and **volition**. For this is the language of intentional transformation.

As a lexicon in its own right, this language evokes altogether different responses and emotions than the technical terminology so beloved of management consultants and behavioural psychologists, the result of



## Final thoughts

The development of leaders and leadership is especially pertinent in today's global environment as huge shifts in our most life-critical systems edge us towards an age of ethical capitalism, an era of far-reaching change and fundamental political, economic and social upheaval leading, one might hope, to societal renewal. In order to benefit commercially and continue creating value through such volatile times, it will be necessary for companies and governments to pursue innovative business and operating models as well as adopting mindsets open to entirely new ways of being, thinking and doing.

I have been blessed with the extraordinary good fortune to be involved with some of the most progressive leadership programs of their kind available anywhere: inspiring, challenging and knowledge expanding. Until very recently leadership development was premised on a model that depended on acquiring knowledge from external experts or consultants, usually in an artificial environment far removed from the day-to-day bustle of organisational routines, and where case studies and lines of reasoning assume a continuation of the prevailing business paradigm. This is an instructional mode of conditioning. It is repressive and manufactures consent but is increasingly useless in a leadership context.

If we are to challenge that hypothesis, opening our thinking to more exploratory ways of understanding, the development paradigm needs to shift. We will need to take the very best of what has been achieved, integrate and transcend new knowledge and ways of knowing, and embed this within a continually evolving expansion of leadership praxis. That will entail leaving theory behind and treating leadership as a process of continual learning rather than as a punctuation of events residing outside of our control.

[Richard Hames:] *I am grateful to my colleague in The Constellation, Dr Christine McDougall, for her valuable assistance in developing some of the ideas contained within this piece.*

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