



The way we learn about leadership

Leadership is essential to organizational life. We are all leaders in a sense, even if it is just our own lives. With any decision that we make, we weigh the implications of the choices that are in front of us, and in the end, we accept responsibility for the choices we make.

The transition to leading *others* (versus just ourselves) puts everything into a different context. Leading others means that our decisions, our processes, and the outcomes of our decisions are viewed and judged *publicly*. Leaders are agents of the organization and any action or decision they make are viewed through a cultural lens, a legalistic lens, a humanistic lens, and an historical lens.

In an organizational context, just about every organization grapples with *how best* to develop their leaders. The approaches range from doing nothing to standing up a large internal leadership development training function. Sometimes the organization does nothing in this area. They may be too small to afford a learning program or maybe no one believes that leadership development is integral to the health and success of the organization. These organizations might function successfully behind a charismatic leader *for a while* if the business is young and relatively small, but as they mature, and the leadership team expands, they will have to come to terms with the organization's role in fostering leadership.

Some organizations may ask or tell leaders to read the same book. 'Let's all read *Good to Great* at the same time, then talk about it for awhile, and consider it our leadership development effort.' Another common approach is to offer a cafeteria-style menu of topics. For example, the learner could be instructed to pick four topics from a menu of 12 that will be offered throughout the year. It assumes that the 1) learner can accurately self-assess their current gaps and what they need to learn about, 2) apply the learning and change behaviors on their own, 3) identify the topics that are most valuable for their leadership journey, and 4) identify the most strategic learning topics that will benefit the organization. That's a lot of assumptions.

While the organization has good intentions, these approaches see leadership as *topics*. Topics presented are topics conveyed. There is no shortage of leadership topics to cover, but it is not sufficient to bring them to the attention of the leader, assume *something magical happens*, and expect new knowledge to become incorporated into the way the leader thinks and behaves. One didactic workshop talking about conflict management is painfully inadequate. \ to really understanding and preparing for a conversation that you know is going to difficult.

Offering stand-alone topics may seem logical, but unless the learner integrates the learning into their real live experience, it is hard to get learning to transfer into some form of changed behaviors that are sustained over time.



Consider this very common scenario. We have a leader (*Jenny*) that struggles with conflict. We even sent her to training and yet she still doesn't get better. Either Jenny is broken, the training is ineffective, or both are true. Does this sound familiar?

This limited understanding of conflict and Jenny's relationship with conflict are not framed correctly. Consider this from a different perspective:

- How does Jenny view conflict and what is her approach?
- Does she have a situational approach to conflict (or default to one or two styles)?
- What does Jenny's *team* think about her conflict management skills? What about her superiors?
- How does she prepare for difficult conversations?
- How does she reflect upon and learn from her moments of conflict?
- What organizational culture constraints are in play? How does her organization's culture support avoidance of conflict? Does the culture reward competition versus collaboration? Is change viewed as necessary and integral to progress (or resisted)?

So even though we've provided a learning moment around the topic of conflict management, making the connection to the organizational culture and practical application within that environment requires a different approach.

The SLDP is different because in addition to the workshop, there are assessments, assignments, preparation for practical applications, a Mentoring conversation or two following the workshop, reflection and meaning-making. It is this wholistic approach to learning that helps the transfer of training to stick.

Research on the transfer of training is quite extensive. The Kirkpatrick model, Bloom's taxonomy, the AGES model are just some examples. Each model contributes to our understanding and transfer of knowledge. They seek to bridge the transfer of knowledge from the academic theory/research and practical application. This series incorporates these models in the design, focusing heavily on the AGES model developed in 2014. While some of these concepts are not completely new, bringing them together in a comprehensive manner *is*.

AGES is a learning model based upon four essential features of knowledge transfer: Attention, Generation, Emotion, and Spacing. (Davis, Balda, Rock, McGinniss, and Davachi)

Attention refers to the limits of our brains to give attention to learning. The optimal time frame (for most people) to focus on a topic is about 20-30 minutes. After that point, the mind can start to lose the ability to absorb information. It needs a break to recharge and regain the freshness to start again. Multi-tasking is a nice thought, and many of us think we're good at it, but it splits our



attention and reduces our ability to absorb information. Learning from the same modality is also counterproductive. The mind gets bored.

Knowing this, learning can be improved if breaks are more frequent, we remove distractions as much as possible, and incorporate a multitude of learning modalities during the learning process. Learning is also enhanced when we elongate the conversation; sustain the focus over time.

Generation refers to the learner's ability to connect the learning content to relevance in their lives. The degree to which that connection is made is the degree to which the learning becomes real for the learner (and sticks).

Sometimes, the mere mention of anything 'theoretical' turns people off. It's too esoteric; we need practical guidance they'll say. Ironically, everything we do is based upon a theory, we just might not consciously acknowledge or be capable of making the connection. The theory of *generation* teaches us that theory without an ability to bridge to one's personal context is hollow. The **disconnect** is what is frustrating to people.

Emotion refers to how making an emotional connection to new learning content will intensify the learning impact. Our emotional connections that involved curiosity, delight, flow, engagement, confusion, frustration, anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise are gateways to getting learning into our longer-term memory. Connecting to a time in our life when we were unfairly evaluated in a performance review, excluded from the team, or had our communication message misunderstood that caused someone pain creates an emotional connection to the learning.

Spacing refers to the way learning is packaged. It's common to see someone attend a 3-5 day learning event. The learner flies into a major city for the week and attends 8 hours of class each day. We've done this for so long that we don't even question the logic of this framework. To anyone who has done this, you know that by day two there is little to no absorption of content. Your brain is saturated and needs to pause, but the conference is pressing forward because *we have a lot to cover in a short amount of time*. Everyone has their breaking point, but at some point, you're just looking to get through the conference and get home.

Programs get packaged this way because we have convinced ourselves that if we sacrifice the physical hours in a 'classroom' setting, it's proof of our learning.

This series will incorporate the AGES principles into the curriculum design, the assignments, the scheduling protocol, and the Mentoring aspect of the program.



The Modalities – This learning program is structured to include a variety of learning modalities:

- Nine monthly synchronous online learning events
- Cohort model with about 10-13 learners
- Assessments (360s, Thomas-Kilman, Bar-On EQ-i)
- Facilitator coaching (1-2 hours)
- Mentoring relationship
- Assignments (essays, independent reading, group breakouts)
- Ongoing discussion board questions and cohort conversations
- Individual development planning

Mentoring – a final conversation about Mentoring. There is another section that more fully delves into the Mentoring component, but just a few thoughts here.

- Every learner will be a protégé to someone internal to the organization that they identify as their Mentor
- The Mentor will receive a 90-minute online session that will prepare them for the Mentoring role
- The Mentor plays a significant role in contextualizing learning and practical application
- The Mentor's role is one of facilitating reflection and meaning-making
- The Mentoring role, if done correctly, will have as much or even more impact than the workshops themselves
- The Mentor and protégé will meet approximately 8-12 times during the six-month relationship

The Learner's Supervisor – The learner's supervisor also plays an important role. Their support of the learner's journey through the program will have a great impact on the effectiveness of the experience. While the supervisor's engagement is not a heavy footprint, it is their connection to the learner's progress symbolized by occasional conversations with the learner and even the Mentor that will signal the importance of the program, the learner's active participation, and expectations to apply the learning.

SUMMARY

The SLDP is effective because it not only incorporates nine essential topics for supervisors, it is designed to approach the learning engagement using numerous modalities and touch points throughout the duration of the program. Learners are drawn into the learning and simply cannot hide, there is too much going on.



Crucial Leaders

New Leaders, New Challenges

The design uses learning modalities and concepts that teach the learner *how* to be a better version of themselves. The series is intended to accelerate the leader's maturity as a leader. It is oriented to action-planning, reflection, meaning-making, and growth. For organizations, it is a turnkey program for the most part. It provides a standardized footprint for their supervisors.