

# A Collaborative Approach to Corporate Leadership Training

**Elizabeth Fountain and Kurt Kirstein**

## **Abstract**

Leadership training is increasingly important as impending retirements suggest an oncoming leadership void. Organizations need to train future leaders rapidly for maximal impact on operational performance. Yet, traditional leadership training models are constrained by curricular, participatory, or geographical limitations and frequently fail to deliver the results organizations seek. Through collaborative design and delivery methods, City University of Seattle has developed an alternative model of leadership instruction that involves trainees, their managers, and the organization's senior leadership. This chapter describes this leadership training model, explaining how it is able to rapidly impact organizational performance for all participants and avoid the limitations that can undermine the effectiveness of traditional approaches to leadership development.

## A Collaborative Approach to Corporate Leadership Training

"I'll tell you what scares me," shared a doctoral student, who also serves as a human resource director in her large multinational corporation, in a consultation about her dissertation. "Hundreds of years of experience and organizational wisdom will walk out the door, as our baby boomer generation retires. And we don't have any idea how to effectively transfer their knowledge to the next generation of leaders." This student is not alone; many fear that leadership skills, refined by direct and tacit training and experience, will leave with the retirees, creating a crisis in the critical abilities organizations need to advance their missions (Aarons, Ehrhart, Farahnak, & Hurlburt, 2015; Boittin & Theys, 2014; Corporate Learning Priorities, 2014; Goodman, 2014; Gordon, 2014; Peet, 2012; Shandler, 2014; Sims, 2014).

Organizations that seek to invest in training in response to this crisis encounter a number of problems. Traditional corporate soft-skill training is usually offered in a classroom format, using face-to-face delivery (Czeropski, 2012; Godat & Atkin, 2011). Key employees, who are often selected for leadership training because of their high potential, are thus taken away from their regular duties for extended periods of time, impacting productivity (Czeropski, 2012; Godat & Atkin, 2011; Kaur, 2013). Conversely, there isn't always the return in capability that the leadership training was intended to deliver. The traditional approach to employee leadership training only serves local employees who have access to the location where the training is delivered. The exclusion of remote employees in this day of multi-location and multinational companies greatly reduces the benefits of the training. A significant issue with traditional leadership training is its lack of a collaborative element in the design and delivery of curriculum (Masie, 2012). Training providers typically design training based on the ideas and concepts they want to deliver rather than the needs of the organization, and training is often delivered in isolation from the real problems the organization faces (Aarons et al., 2015; Godat & Atkin, 2011; Goodman, 2014; Masie, 2012). Since it is removed from the daily organizational operations, training frequently fails to deliver to expectations. As a result of these factors the initial run of leadership training may not be repeated, leaving the initial problem unsolved.

As organizations seek solutions to the pending loss of leaders, they turn to training providers who can deliver highly relevant learning

experiences for their high-potential employees. A best-practices leadership training model focuses on developing key skills in high-potential employees in a way that: (a) does not pull the employees away from their jobs for long periods of time; (b) is accessible by employees in all locations; and (c) is tied directly to the operations of the organization, thereby making it highly relevant. This paper describes the development and delivery of such a model. It emphasizes the collaborative nature of the model as an exemplary practice that can be applied to any training situation or context.

## Collaboration: An Exemplary Practice

The exemplary element of City University of Seattle's approach is building in a mechanism for collaboration with the organization seeking the training. The method incorporates a standard curriculum, based on contemporary leadership theory and practice, and customizes it to an organization's specific needs via a collaborative design and delivery process. At the start, organizational leaders participate in the design of the curriculum for their participants, through a series of workshops involving course developers. Furthermore, in at least one successful model, the organization also requires managers (the direct supervisors of participants in the training) to engage in weekly conversations with participants regarding the topics being studied. Additionally, participants collaborate during instruction delivered via live virtual seminars, hosted by the instructor, that link participants through web conferencing tools. By building multiple levels of collaboration into the training from design through delivery to instruction, the training is well-positioned to create stronger leaders and a stronger organization.

Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2007) developed a four-level evaluation model for corporate training that emphasizes results not only for individual learners, but also for the organization as a whole. The final level of evaluation focuses on establishing clear goals for the organization, addressing increases in engagement, productivity, and/or capacity that will result from the training. The collaborative nature that is built into the design and delivery of the leadership training, that is the subject of this chapter, provides a strong foundation for achieving these goals. By its very design the training becomes far more strongly integrated into organizational life than a traditional, site-based, stand-alone training.

## Collaboration in Action

Collaboration is built into the leadership training approach in three ways: first, in the design phase, which is conducted with a team designated by the organization to “steer” the training program; second, in the delivery, as managers become involved in bringing the learning to life; and third, through instruction, as participants co-create discussions in virtual seminars and online discussion boards focused on the topics under study.

In the design phase, collaboration began with a series of meetings focused on specifying the learning outcomes and topics to be covered. Once these were determined, the collaboration continued with conversations on choice of instructional materials and activities. Next, a demonstration “class” was created, so the steering committee could experience the instructional environment. The final step in collaborative design was an agreement to involve managers through weekly journal entries written by participants, documenting conversations with their direct supervisors on the relevant topics.

The expectation that managers would be involved throughout the leadership training course led to developing orientations that included them in the process of preparing for course participation. At these orientations, managers also provided input into the design of the course, helping to make content, flow, and expectations even more relevant for their teams’ needs. As the course proceeded, both participants and managers indicated the weekly conversations created high value. Managers understood what their employees were learning in the course and helped them apply the concepts to the real challenges facing them. Participants gained a real-time window into the life of managers and leaders in their organization, expanding their perspectives and helping with the transfer of both explicit and tacit knowledge from seasoned to new leaders.

During course delivery, the instructor and the participants gathered weekly for virtual seminars, using web conferencing tools that allowed for real-time discussion and interaction regarding the course topics. The emphasis during these instructional sessions remained on immediate application of the concepts under discussion. Participants could ask questions and learn from one another’s experience, a hallmark of collaborative and constructivist learning philosophies.

## Ensuring Success

This collaborative approach to leadership training works best when the partner organization is motivated to collaborate; designates a steering committee or other body with decision-making authority; and supports its managers and employees in participation (Godat & Atkin, 2011; Masie, 2012; Technology and talent, 2013). The model could be used for any content – not just leadership, but any skill- or content-based training approach. However, if the partner organization desires a more hands-off approach, delegating all design and delivery to the academic institution, the collaborative model would prove incompatible.

Success is also dependent on selection of appropriate participants as learners in the training courses. Because the high level of manager involvement requires time and effort, managers need to be involved in selecting the members of their teams to participate. Participants should be strongly motivated, with the potential to move into leadership roles in their organizations.

Finally, collaboration does not end at course delivery (Masie, 2012). For this model to succeed, communication mechanisms need to be in place to support the ongoing assessment and improvement of the training offerings. In the cases described here, weekly teleconferences between the project manager at the organization and the course instructor and course manager at the academic institution ensure quick issue resolutions and course corrections as needed.

## Conclusion

Leadership training is becoming increasingly important as a large group of experienced leaders gets ready to retire. Traditional leadership training, delivered in classroom format for a small group of localized employees, can take a good deal of time to impact the organization in a positive way, and often, discernable benefits are not seen from these programs. There is a need for a leadership training model that can have a more immediate impact on an organization’s performance for a wider group of geographically distributed participants.

The collaborative nature of City University of Seattle's training model addresses this need. The program's requirements are determined by the organization's senior leaders. The curriculum is developed through a collaborative effort merging accepted leadership theory and practice with the specific needs of the organization. The program is delivered using web-based technologies for live and asynchronous activities, which eliminates geographical restrictions. And, perhaps most importantly, the program integrates experienced leaders at the organization into the learning process of the participants.

The collaborative design of this program accelerates the impact that it is able to have on the operational efficiencies of the organization. Such training models, for leadership and other disciplines, represent exemplary practices that can be valuable in helping to transform operational effectiveness in today's rapidly changing organizations.

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