

Leadership Development that Sticks

20+ Lessons Learned over 30+ Years

Arguably one of the greatest issues with a leadership development program (or any professional development program) is whether it will STICK; will the skills be applied on the job, and will the application of those skills result in the desired business results?

We at Entelechy have been designing leadership development programs for 30+ years now and have found several elements that significantly increase the chances that the program will have the intended impact on people and on the organization.

According to [Future Market Insights](#), global organizations spent US\$81.19 billion on leadership development in 2024. Over the next 10 years, the global leadership development market is anticipated to have a compound annual growth rate of 10.3% to ultimately reach US\$216.9 billion in 2034. For that investment, it would be natural to assume that organizations that continuously develop their leaders would see significant returns in terms of employee retention, engagement, performance, and achievement of organizational goals. And, yet, the [Society for Human Resource Management](#) reported that the top HR challenges in 2024 were upskilling or reskilling an evolving workforce (harnessing the power of AI and equipping employees to remain innovative and agile were top concerns), cultivating and supporting a diverse (and mentally healthy) talent pool, and strengthening employee engagement and retention (all while balancing exterior forces like ongoing inflation and labor challenges).

Clearly the billions spent on leadership training don't seem to have the positive, significant, sustained results they should. And, in our experience, it's typically not the program per se; smart people don't spend billions on ineffective programs. It's about making the program stick, ensuring that the skills learned in the leadership development program transfer from the classroom to the job and become part of the culture, "the way we do things around here."

So, how do you make your leadership development program stick? Here is a snapshot of the 20+ lessons we've learned over 30+ years that can be applied to any leadership development program:

Tips to Increase Leadership Development Effectiveness

Executive Support and Organizational Buy-in

- 1. Get a senior-level champion.**
- 2. Align the program with organizational goals.**
- 3. Gain widespread support.**
- 4. Ensure that senior leaders have the capability to model and reinforce the skills.**

Program Design

5. **Make it simple.**
6. **Make it relevant...VERY relevant.**
7. **When in doubt, leave it out.**
8. **Reach leaders where they are, in the format that's right for them.**
9. **Embed engaging activities.**
10. **Use a 360° survey.**
11. **Use video to illustrate skills in action.**
12. **Select your trainers carefully.**
13. **Train your trainers rigorously (and support them rigorously).**
14. **Ensure a positive and seamless experience for participants.**

Skills Application and Ongoing Support

15. **Develop leaders, don't just train them.**
16. **Practice the skills in the training.**
17. **Build in transfer at each module.**
18. **Continue the learning back on the job.**
19. **Leverage the models.**
20. **Measure (and celebrate) success.**

Rinse and Repeat

21. **Make leadership development a journey, not a destination.**

Each of these strategies increases the likelihood that your leadership development program will stick and have the results you're looking for and that your investment demands. Address them all and your program is guaranteed to stick.

In the rest of this white paper, we'll expand on each of the 21 strategies, providing specific details, examples, and best practices that you can immediately apply to make your leadership development programs even more effective.

Executive Support and Organizational Buy-in

One of the elements most critical to the "stickiness" of a leadership development program really doesn't have anything to do with the program. We've found that the success of any leadership development initiative is directly related to the enthusiasm and passion the organization has for leadership development. Organizations who view leadership as essential, even critical, to the achievement of organizational goals are more likely to have a leadership development program that sticks.

1. Get a senior-level champion. Having a senior-level champion is perhaps the most important element in making leadership development stick. This sponsor is an evangelist for leadership development and is present in initial meetings, program communications, and occasionally even in the classroom.

2. Align the program with organizational goals. Organizational goals are the “why” in leadership development. We need improved leadership to achieve specific organizational goals, whether those goals are business-based (i.e., improve productivity, increase innovation, increase market share) or organizational in nature (i.e., increase employee engagement, reduce employee turnover). Organizational goals help shape the leadership development program’s content; they clarify the training needs.

Additionally, aligning the leadership development program with organizational goals keeps the program “honest” and subject to ongoing scrutiny and improvement, which is common for any large expenditure that doesn’t necessarily generate immediate, tangible results.

Finally, a leadership development program is a PERFECT time to ensure every leader knows what the organizational goals ARE! According to many studies, a vast majority of employees do not understand their company’s objectives and most employees do not understand how their jobs relate to the overall strategy. We in leadership development have a unique opportunity to ensure that leaders not only KNOW the organization’s goals but can effectively communicate them to employees.

3. Gain widespread support. While a senior-level champion is the spark, the fuel for a sustained leadership fire comes from throughout the organization. Each business unit should have a sponsor whose job is two-fold: 1) provide input into the leadership development team, and 2) communicate progress and successes to their unit or department. Carefully select your best and brightest for this work; they need to have credibility within their organization and the ability to communicate with enthusiasm.



“Winning companies win because they have good leaders who nurture the development of other leaders at all levels of the organization.”

— Noel Tichy, American management consultant, author and educator

One of the best ways to get broad-based buy-in is to invite leaders from all parts of the organization to pilot test the program. Genuinely involve them in making program modifications and adjustments. Leverage their expertise, while simultaneously garnering their support, in making the program perfect.

4. Ensure that senior leaders have the capability to model and reinforce the skills. One of the most common questions asked in leadership training is, “Will OUR leaders go through this? They really need this!” And, when asked in the end-of-course feedback form, “Do you feel confident that your manager will be able to help you implement what you learned?” the common response, sadly, is “No.”

Make your leadership development program STICK by ensuring that senior leaders have the capability to model and reinforce the skills. Nothing is as powerful as modeling the expected behavior; conversely, there is nothing more damaging to a leadership program than to see a senior leader who violates the very skills and philosophy touted in the leadership training. Make

sure those who supervise attendees of the leadership program are equipped (and committed) to model and reinforce the skills.

In many of our leadership program deployments, we create an Executive Reinforcement workshop for senior leaders to learn the models and techniques their staff will learn in the core track. While the content and activities are largely the same, the Executive Reinforcement workshop takeaways are significantly different. For example, instead of “who will I coach,” the senior executive is asked to identify “how can I support my team with their coaching.” Additionally, having a separate track for senior leaders allows more open discussion in each track.

Program Design

There are an abundance of decent leadership development programs out there. Be sure that the program you choose (or build) is designed from the outset to truly make the training “stick.” To ensure that the resulting program changes behavior and changes the organization’s culture, consider the following design tips:

5. Make it simple. Complicated, confusing, or vague models and content tend not to get used outside of the classroom. In our experience, the most effective models are stunningly simple, intuitive, and adaptable. For example, the models we use in our programs have been carefully honed based on 30+ years of field application and client and participant feedback. We know the end result is a suite of simple, practical, and, most importantly, effective techniques that can be easily used on the job for immediate results.



“Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”

— John F. Kennedy, American president

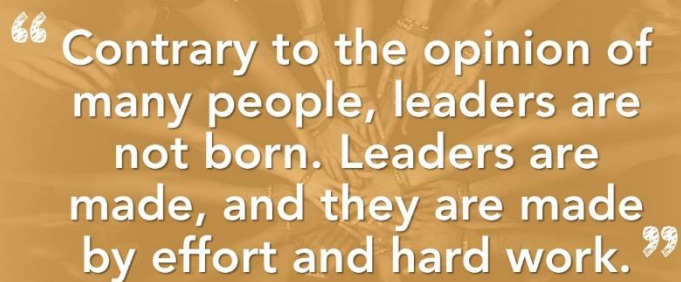
Additionally, models should be scalable across the organization. Our coaching model, for example, works equally effectively on the factory floor as in the finance department; it works for supervisors and team leads just as effectively as it does for senior directors; it works in Chicago, Shanghai, Amsterdam, and Buenos Aires.

6. Make it relevant...VERY relevant. An effective leadership development program must be relevant to participants. Sounds obvious, but most off-the-shelf programs are just that: off the shelf. And, off-the-shelf programs (and many home-grown programs) run into the same complaints from participants, “That may work for others, but it’ll never work for me!” Make the examples true to life; create instructional videos illustrating skills being used in real situations.

There’s a catch here. Leadership development programs that are seen as less than relevant tend to create negative perceptions about training in general, which creates a death spiral for training and a learning culture within the organization. Conversely, a highly relevant and practical leadership development program creates buzz and is its own best marketing, which increases the overall credibility of training.

Many clients who have deployed Entelechy's customized leadership development programs have indicated that the demand for the training usually exceeds the organization's ability to schedule and conduct classes. That demand is driven by relevance. And, relevance is created through customization. All of Entelechy's core programs ([Aspiring Leaders](#) for high-potential individual contributors, [Unleash Your Leadership Potential](#) for frontline and mid-level managers, and [Leading Leaders](#) for leaders of leaders) were created with customization in mind. We identify specific places for customization, including specific examples, role-play scenarios, leadership competencies, language/terminology, and instructional videos. That's relevance! And, it makes the training stick.

7. When in doubt, leave it out. Especially with leadership training, there's a tendency to include anything and everything that deals with communication, performance, building relationships,



“Contrary to the opinion of many people, leaders are not born. Leaders are made, and they are made by effort and hard work.”

— Vince Lombardi, American football coach

listening, time management, delegation, handling conflict, and so on. And, if this is new leader training, let's throw in policies and procedures, with some diversity training and some legal compliance training, “since we have them here already...” It's too much. If there's anything we've learned in our 30+ years, it's what to leave out. Effective leadership programs focus on key skills and consciously

leave out other skills that, while important, are perhaps less critical or can be acquired through other training.

The thing is, we designers tend to muddy the waters with our training design. We feel compelled to explain the theory on which a model is based, or to provide a historical treatise on the field of leadership study. Effective leadership development design is a lesson in restraint.

8. Reach leaders where they are, in the format that's right for them. The delivery methodology must balance effectiveness with cost and scalability. Most people would agree that there are huge benefits for leaders to meet face-to-face in a classroom setting, namely comradery, networking opportunities, and personal connections. Yet, for many clients the single highest cost of leadership training is related to travel (including time out of the office).

During the pandemic, the more effective designers realized that you couldn't simply use the classroom-based slides and activities in a virtual setting. At Entelechy, we also built out our programs to be blended social learning experiences using social learning platforms like NovoEd.

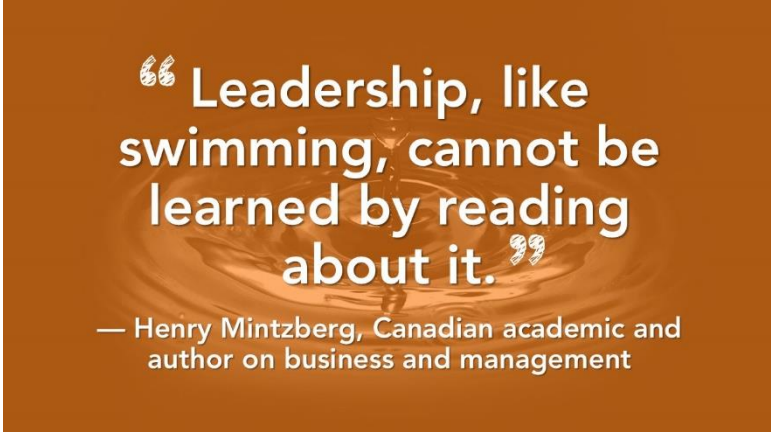
At the end of the day, we find that a truly blended learning experience that meets the unique needs and culture of an organization is most effective in maximizing engagement and learning and minimizing boredom and cost. For example, we often use a virtual kickoff session followed by some self-paced learning to set the stage for a classroom/social learning experience. The leadership journey then typically follows a mix of self-study, virtual, collaboration/teamwork, and

perhaps a live capstone meeting. The point is that each journey reflects deliberate design; we know what we want participants to be able to do and we design the best, most effective learning with the lowest cost possible.

9. Embed engaging activities. Engaged participants learn most and retain that learning longer. Engagement happens in different ways: skill building activities (see Lesson #16); attention activities (like videos, breakout discussions, and action planning), and identity-creating activities where participants learn more about themselves as leaders. While all are important, many leadership development programs aren't as successful as they could be because they don't help participants change their identity about who they are as leaders. STICKY leadership development programs help participants imagine a new possibility, even a new identity of who they can be as a leader. And, this shift typically requires an activity that provides a sudden realization to help participants see a new perspective.

10. Use a 360° survey. Becoming a successful leader requires a true transformation. Effective leaders must operate with a strong sense of their own identity, because along with it comes purpose and integrity, willingness to take risks, the ability to understand the importance of change and to be ready for it. An online 360° survey provides attendees with insights they normally don't receive. For some, it's affirmation of their self-assessment of strengths and areas for development; for others it's a much-needed dose of reality.

A 360° survey can also provide a benchmark that would be useful for ongoing development. This is especially useful when the 360° survey is based on the organization's leadership competencies; leaders get great insights into their leadership behaviors as measured by others and those insights are relevant to "the way we want you to lead here at XYZ Corp."



“ Leadership, like swimming, cannot be learned by reading about it. ”

— Henry Mintzberg, Canadian academic and author on business and management

11. Use video to illustrate skills in action. There's nothing like seeing a skill in action. Even the earliest instructional design theories point to the superiority of demonstration over explanation. With today's technology, it's easy to shoot and edit your own instructional videos using your own people as "talent." While the video examples need to accurately illustrate the models, they don't have to be perfect since less-than-perfect illustrations invite discussion. We have technology today that can help create engaging and effective demonstration videos. Videos make it real!

12. Select your trainers carefully. The best-designed leadership development program with the most effective models and activities can fail if not effectively facilitated. In the hands of the right facilitators, however, a good program becomes great. Participants learn and leave confident of their ability to apply new skills.

“ We cannot change what we are not aware of, and once we are aware, we cannot help but change. ”

— Sheryl Sandberg, American technology executive, philanthropist, and writer

Leadership trainers need a unique blend of skills and experience. They need, of course, outstanding presentation and facilitation skills to convey new material and facilitate the discussions and activities that bring that material to life. Additionally, they need leadership experience; they have led and managed people and can speak with authority and credibility while also facilitating lively discussions.

Many organizations are challenged to find facilitators who meet all the criteria and for face-to-face classroom delivery will choose to have two people, usually a senior trainer and a senior leader, facilitate the leadership training. While this increases the effectiveness of the delivery, other organizations tap into outside resources to add yet another level of credibility to the training.

Of course, it should go without saying that equal care needs to be taken when selecting a virtual trainer. So much more rides on the ability of the virtual trainer to engage, prod, and encourage interaction. Similarly, the use of a producer to manage the show and monitor chat is important; on some platforms the producer can even tell the facilitator who isn't participating as much so the facilitator can deliberately engage those participants.

Facilitators on a social learning platform must provide continual monitoring and occasional prompting and encouragement to move discussions and collaboration in the intended direction. These facilitators must be involved!

13. Train your trainers rigorously (and support them rigorously). A well-designed leadership development program, one that is scalable throughout the organization, is well documented. You want each class to have the same valuable experience as all other classes. You want each instructor to convey the same messages and conduct activities the same way to ensure a consistently powerful result.

Ensure that every trainer is delivering the program as it was designed. Provide robust guides to ensure that the nuance of the instruction is clear and repeatable. Robust guides also ensure that the first delivery is as powerful as the 30th delivery. While each instructor should be encouraged to share his or her own experiences, it is critical that each instructor adhere to the explanations and activities as designed. Additionally, encourage instructors to share tips and techniques with one another. Sit in and monitor instructors; provide coaching to ensure a consistently powerful learner experience.

We always use as a benchmark the question, “If the CEO (or senior-level sponsor) walked in on this delivery, would he or she be pleased?” If the answer is “no,” we coach the instructor or find a replacement. It is THAT important!

14. Ensure a positive and seamless experience for participants. Provide resources to ensure that attendees are notified, classes are scheduled, rooms are set up properly, technology has been tested and is working properly, and professionally produced materials are available. While much care and thought has gone into the design and development of the leadership program itself, its reputation is built at the point attendees first encounter the program. Make it a profoundly positive first experience.

In our experience, the more successful clients take great care to customize the precourse letter/invitation as well as the precourse microlearning module. This provides an overview of the program and some of the content and can also contain a video of a senior executive welcoming participants and explaining the importance of this leadership program to the organization's success. Likewise, successful clients often take great care in promoting the program and building excitement throughout the organization.

Skills Application and Ongoing Support

Don't just trust your leaders to figure out how this stuff works "in the real world." Or assume they don't need to practice in a classroom. Life gets busy. Build in the right practice and support to help your leaders leave the training ready to make an immediate impact back on the job.

15. Develop leaders, don't just train them. A wise person once said, "You don't train leaders, you develop them," which is a subtle yet important distinction lost on many. Training focuses on best practices, while development focuses on next practices."

Training is important to impart and practice skills, but leadership is a developmental process and should be treated as such. Provide initial skills training, but ensure that participants have the opportunity to apply, practice, and get feedback over time.

We are often asked by participants if the models we introduce in training must be followed precisely. The answer, initially, is an emphatic YES! There's a reason the model is structured a certain way or uses certain words; it's that structure or impact that we are trying to impart. For example, our coaching model requires asking questions (three questions to be precise). Participants often ask, "Well, can't I just tell them instead of asking?" There's a very powerful adult-learning reason we ask questions instead of telling and we want/need participants to understand the reasoning. Often when they understand the power of questions and see the impact it has on communication, the way they communicate with others changes dramatically. We train participants to ask the questions; we develop them to improve their communication.



Development comes with experience and time. However, programs that are designed as events tend to miss the opportunity to develop leaders and to help them grow over time. Design your programs to help leaders develop as leaders.

16. Practice the skills in the training. Love them or hate them, skills practice exercises work. Skills practice turns knowledge into action. Sure, they're uncomfortable. Sure, they're not exactly like the real world. That's why they're called "practice!" We ask participants to focus less on the scenario and more on the skill or model.

Effective training approximates the real, and often challenging, situations that leaders find themselves in, where emotional courage is required. And, well-designed skills practice exercises can be extremely effective in building that emotional courage and confidence in participants. Entelechy's leadership development programs use triads in skills practice, with one person acting as observer-coach. We purposefully provide ample opportunities for participants to use skills and models multiple times. This ensures the training sticks!

To focus on the model, we provide a simple, relevant-to-all context-setting scenario when practicing the model. In fact, because each person in the triad needs to use the model, we ask them to use the same scenario repeatedly. By focusing on the model and not the scenario, the power of the model, and the participant's confidence in using the model, becomes clear.



“ Leadership should be more participative than directive, more enabling than performing. ”

— Mary D. Poole, author

Where context IS important, such as when participants learn how to have productive performance conversations (we call them Difficult Conversations), we have the participants use their own scenario so they can apply the Difficult Conversation Model to their own scenario; this relevance and practice helps make the training stick.

17. Build in transfer at each module. The goal of any leadership development program is to change behavior. After a successful program, participants should show up differently, saying and doing things in new ways that produce better results. Many programs leave action planning for the end of the day or program; that's a huge mistake since participants 1) are usually out of time and energy and want simply to leave, and 2) often forgot what they learned earlier.

“Leadership is a journey.
Each one of us has to take
our own path and get
there our own way.”

— David Gergen, American political commentator
and former presidential adviser

The most effective leadership development programs include frequent check-ins where leaders pause for five to ten minutes to record how they will apply what they learned; we then ask them to share what they wrote with their neighbors/peers; we call on a few to declare what they will be doing. Each of these activities cements how each individual leader will apply what they learned. While

each participant will record something unique based on their team, situation, timing, etc., they all share one commonality...each participant knows HOW they'll show up differently.

18. Continue the learning back on the job. The most effective leadership development programs feature comprehensive reinforcement plans. This can take many forms, but often it's a series of emails that remind participants of the skills and techniques they learned in the program and offer ways they can employ those skills back on the job. At Entelechy, we offer participants Entelechy's Leadership Minute, a bi-weekly email series that reinforces core concepts covered in our programs in easy to implement bite-sized nuggets.

Sometimes, clients schedule monthly conference calls to maintain their focus on key leadership skills. The best meetings provide an opportunity to learn more as well as to share successes. In these meetings, you can:

- Provide Skill Spotlights, structured mini skill building activities to be used on the job in support of the leadership skills learned.
- Select a challenge from one of the attendees and discuss options for addressing the challenge; link the options back to the models learned in your leadership development program.

Another way to keep the skills alive is through Action Learning, where graduates tackle real issues and reflect on what they did. Have a team tackle “the turnover problem” or create an effective onboarding process or recruiting strategy.

19. Leverage the models. The more widespread the models are used, the more entrenched they become in the organization. This creates efficiencies when discussing performance and when sharing ideas and solutions.

We've had clients embed the coaching questions into their customer service quality control process. Other clients have used the Performance Management Checklist questions as the de facto standard for HR consultants when working with corrective action cases.

Note: Many leadership development training providers prevent organizations from using their proprietary models and content as described above. Check with your provider. At Entelechy, we

encourage clients to use our content throughout the organization because we know how critical reinforcement is to a program's success.

20. Measure (and celebrate) success. Nothing breeds success like success. Create a buzz using the success stories from program graduates (and there WILL be stories). In addition to highlighting the utility of the skills and models, anecdotal stories also inform others on how the skills and models could be used and the learning continues!

Use the organizational metrics identified up front to show progress and to identify areas for development. Use the 360° survey to help individual leaders measure personal growth.

And, recognize the team, including yourself, for the tremendous work you accomplished in making your leadership development program STICK!

Rinse and Repeat

21. Make leadership development a journey, not a destination. Lastly, leadership development must be viewed as an ongoing endeavor, not simply a one-time training event. One doesn't work out once or eat healthy once and expect miracles. The most effective leadership development programs are those that are regularly updated to include not only fresh content, but also to realign foundational content with new organizational direction and strategy. The most effective leadership development programs are embraced by senior executives as the means to achieve the end. They're the "how" to the organization's "what." To reach new goals, leaders need new and realigned tools, tools presented in a refreshed leadership development program.

Final Thoughts

Throughout our 30+ years in business, we've learned some powerful lessons that allow us to work with clients to create impactful leadership development programs that truly change behavior and generate lasting results across the organization. As a result, we design every program with the end goal of making the content and lessons stick.

About Entelechy

Entelechy partners with leading global organizations to design and deliver leadership development programs that drive permanent change and bottom-line benefits. Entelechy's flagship leadership development programs, [**Aspiring Leaders**](#), [**Unleash Your Leadership Potential**](#), and [**Leading Leaders**](#), transform leaders as they progress through their careers. Entelechy is an authorized provider of proven, research-validated assessments, including Everything DiSC® and The Five Behaviors®. To learn more about Entelechy, please visit entelechyinc.com and follow us on [LinkedIn](#).