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Companies, organizations, and government agencies make significant investments in leadership development, yet leadership performance continues to set new lows. Studies find that two-thirds of the population lacks confidence in their public leaders. Three-fourths of the population thinks corporate corruption continues to increase. Over half of employees consider their bosses to be below average leaders with many surveys reporting approval ratings as low as 10 percent. Two out of three employees are seriously considering leaving their organizations. Only one in four employees are fully engaged in their work and giving their best effort.

By many measures, employee morale is down and job stress is up. It wasn't long ago that adrenal fatigue and fibromyalgia weren't in the business lexicon. In the home, statistics aren't much better. Parenting studies find that parents aren't parenting. Many children grow up with only one parent who is often unable to provide the leadership children need. It's not a coincidence that over half of the inmates in state correctional institutions are from single parent households.

Is it just me, or are these statistics truly alarming? Have people become so conditioned to mediocre leadership that it has become acceptable? Don't people realize that poor work conditions, company layoffs, high unemployment, economic recessions, and other societal issues have their roots in mediocre leadership?

Perhaps we need to rethink leadership development and how leadership traits are cultivated. Common methods to learning leadership include five approaches: on-the-job learning, training, reading, mentoring, and coaching, but are they effective?

Before answering this question, let's answer a more fundamental question—how do people learn? As an executive coach and lifelong student, I find that learning any skill, including great leadership, is accomplished through four attributes – interest, acquisition, application, and reinforcement.

- First, learning to lead starts with having an interest in learning to lead. Without an eagerness to develop and rise above mediocre leadership standards, people don't invest the time and effort that great leadership requires.
- Second, with an eager mindset in place, becoming a great leader requires acquiring knowledge. It involves learning how to think, decide, and act. It requires understanding not just what to do, but how to do it.
- Third, learning to lead requires application. It requires putting acquired knowledge into productive use. It involves repeated doing, practice, measurement, and refinement.
- Lastly, great leadership requires reinforcement. It requires continual improvement and sustenance. It requires encouragement, exhortation, and accountability to the standards of great leadership.

So how do the five typical approaches to leadership development satisfy these four enablers of learning?

1. On-the-job learning provides an excellent opportunity for application and reinforcement, but often falls short in providing deeper insight. Also, the reinforcement it provides can be at odds with actual best practices.
2. Training, when based on expert content and delivered by skilled trainers, provides the insight, but falls short on application and ongoing reinforcement. It also does little to stimulate interest in becoming a great leader.
3. Reading non-fiction books can provide a source of motivation to learn as well as expert content and ongoing sustenance, but does little to guarantee application and accountability.
4. Mentoring, when provided by a seasoned leader, can stimulate interest, transfer knowledge, and provide reinforcement. However, mentoring doesn't guarantee application as it generally lacks accountability.
5. That leaves coaching. Coaching, when performed by a competent coach, whether an employee's manager, in-house coach, or external executive coach, instills interest, imparts knowledge, facilitates application, and provides reinforcement. Individualized coaching enables all four attributes of learning.

If you aspire to become a great leader or develop a deeper skill in any domain, talk to your boss about receiving his or her coaching. Ask your boss to facilitate your learning, help track your learning progress, and provide ongoing reinforcement. If available, inquire about augmenting your boss's coaching with an in-house or external coach.



Learning to Lead and the Role of Coaching

If you are in a position to help others become great leaders, adopt a coaching approach to leadership. Give significant attention to developing the attitudes and behaviors associated with great leadership. Jack Welch, who turned General Electric into one of the world's most admired companies, said he spent over half of his time developing his leaders.

For detailed information on developing coaching skills, read the *SCOPE of Leadership* book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches. All six books are now available at your favorite book retailer or www.scopeofleadership.com.

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