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## **ARTICLE** **DEVELOPING EMPLOYEES**

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*by Deborah Rowland*

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Too many business leaders today are out of touch with the employees they lead. Edelman estimates that [one in three employees doesn't trust their employer](#) — despite the fact that billions are [spent every year on leadership development](#). Part of the problem: Our primary method of developing leaders is antithetical to the type of leadership we need.

The vast majority of leadership programs are set curricula delivered through classroom-taught, rationally based, individual-focused methods. Participants are taken out of their day-to-day workplaces to be inspired by expert faculty, work on case studies, receive personal feedback, and take away the latest leadership thinking (and badges for their résumés). Yet study after study, [including my own](#), tells us the qualities that leaders in today's world need are intuitive, dynamic, collaborative, and grounded in [here-and-now emotional intelligence](#).

The mismatch between leadership development as it exists and what leaders actually need is enormous and widening. What would work better?

Over the last 16 years I have carried out [research](#) into [how leaders create change](#), and I've worked in the change leadership field for 25 years in multinational corporations. Over that time, I've come to appreciate four factors that lie at the heart of good, practical leadership development: making it experiential; influencing participants' "being," not just their "doing"; placing it into its wider, systemic context; and enrolling faculty who act less as experts and more as Sherpas.

**Make it experiential.** Neuroscience [shows us](#) that we learn most (and retain that learning as changed behavior) when the emotional circuits within our brain are activated. Visceral, lived experiences best activate these circuits; they prompt us to notice both things in the environment and what's going on inside ourselves. If leadership development begins in the head, leaders will stay in their heads. We can't simply think our way out of a habit. But in experience, and novel experience in particular, our intentional mind can be more engaged as we make conscious decisions about our behavior.

In practice, this mean setting up what I call "living laboratory" leadership development. Throw out pre-planned teaching schedules, content, lectures, and exercises that ask you to think *about* your world and how you need to lead it. In its place, switch to constructing self-directed experiences for participants that replicate the precise contexts they need to lead in. In such experiences the group dynamics at play in the room become the (at-times-uncomfortable) practice arena. Business simulations or unstructured large group dialogues are examples of this. I have also used experiences that challenge participants to self-organize visits outside of their companies to stakeholder groups that matter for their future, such as a carbon-dependent energy provider visiting environmental NGOs. All can act as powerful experiential catalysts for learning and change.

**Influence participants' "being," not just their "doing."** In soon-to-be-published research, Malcolm Higgs, Roger Bellis, and I have found that leaders need to work on the quality of their inner game, or their capacity to tune into and regulate their emotional and mental states, before they can hope to develop their outer game, or what it is they need to actually do. So leadership development must start by working on the inner game. It's very hard for leaders to have courageous conversations about unhelpful reality until they can regulate their anxiety about appearing unpopular and until they've built their systemic capacity to view disturbance as transformational, not dysfunctional.

In order for leadership development to influence being-level capacities, the learning experience needs to offer stillness and space for intentional, nonobstructed contemplation. It's difficult to teach how to be! Training people with tools and models is very different from simply holding a space for leaders to *be*. In practice, I have found that offering participants experiences such as mindfully walking outdoors in nature, sitting silently in peer groups to hear colleagues share their life stories, and providing out-of-the-ordinary tasks such as stone carving, enables leaders to tap into their inner world as a powerful instrument for cultivating the vital skills of purpose, self-awareness, empathy, and acute attentional discipline.

Such approaches might sound a million miles from the chalk-and-talk model on which leadership development was built over the last century. But do we really believe that inner capacities can be developed in this way?

**Place development into its wider, systemic context.** In their HBR article, "[Why Leadership Training Fails - and What to Do About It](#)," Michael Beer, Magnus Finnström, and Derek Schrader talk cogently about the need to attend to the organizational system as a vehicle for change before companies simply send their leaders on training programs to think and behave differently. Too often I have seen the "parallel universe" syndrome, in which leaders attend courses that promulgate certain mindsets and ways of working only to go back to the workplace and find that the office (and especially top leadership) is still stuck in old routines.

I have an additional spin on this need. And that is to use the lived leadership development experience as an opportunity to tune into and shift that very system, because they are intimately connected. Recently I directed a three-year change intervention in which the top 360 leaders of one company (including the board) attended a leadership development program in 10 waves of participants, with 36 leaders in each. Given the uncertainty in their industry, it was impossible for senior management to know what their long-term business strategy or organizational model would look like. However, the CEO did know that all he could do in such a dynamic context was build new capacities for agility and change in his organization. Each wave of participants joined the leadership development at a different stage of the company's change journey, and at each stage we used the development experience not just for personal training but also as a vehicle to import and work with the shifting systemic dynamics of the company through time — helping them move through the "change curve."

This meant, of course, that the program for each of the 10 waves felt very different, all set course designs had to be thrown out, and we as faculty had to continually adapt the program to the shifting context.

**Enroll faculty who act less as experts and more as Sherpas.** Finally, you have to attend to the required skills and characteristics of the people who lead these programs.

In the above example, we found that no single provider could provide a facility that was holistic enough. We needed a faculty group with egos not wedded to any particular leadership methodology or school of thinking and who could work skillfully with live group dynamics, creating psychological safety in the room for participants to take personal risks and push cultural boundaries. We required the educational equivalent of Sherpas, people able to carry part of the load in order to guide participants toward their personal and organizational summits.

This required not just hiring a bunch of individuals with such guiding skills but also developing ourselves continuously as a robust faculty team. We needed to be able to work with a continually changing curriculum design, and with the group projecting their discomfort with the wider change — and how it was being experienced in the program — onto the faculty.

Make no mistake, attending to all four of these factors is a sizable challenge. Whether you are a corporate or business school leader, a head of leadership and organizational development, or a senior business leader sponsoring and attending leadership development programs, take a long, hard look at how you are currently delivering leadership development. The price of failed leadership is already too high for us not to attend to the process through which we develop it.

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**Deborah Rowland** has led change in major global organizations including Shell, Gucci Group, BBC Worldwide and PepsiCo where she has had Vice President of Organization & Management Development and Global Vice President of Human Resources roles. She is the co-author of *Sustaining Change: Leadership That Works* (Wiley, 2008) and the author of the forthcoming *Still Moving*.

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