



Leadership training – to educate or to change behaviour?

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Robert Terry says it is time to focus leaders on behaviour change rather than learning outcomes. Here he talks to Mike Levy.

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Are trainers teachers in business suits? Do those who pay for leadership training want more educated leaders or people who do the job more effectively? These are questions that are really galling Robert Terry.

He has some pretty harsh words to say about an industry that spends little time on assessing its own value to the business world. He is a passionate advocate for changing behaviour rather than relaying knowledge – which is what, he says, many trainers do.

'If you tell a drunk that his drinking is killing him, he may acknowledge that wisdom but he will be no further forward in becoming sober,' says Terry.


Behaviour change

This simple analogy is important for leadership training. 'You create a programme that helps leadership delegates to move from where they started to where the organisation wants them to be. Fine, but most programmes are designed by trainers along the educational model and the outcomes are learning objectives, which infers that the purpose of the programme is learning.'

Terry believes that organisations do not need more learned leaders but ones who do things better. 'There is a massive distinction between learning, however noble, and behaviour change which takes a long time and involves many people other than the learner's line manager.'

'This is often beyond the reach of the trainer – the desired objective is often too great and requires much more in terms of organisational commitment. If trainers can't get this from the organisation, they get accepted as teachers rather than behaviour changers.'

Terry is keen not to be seen as a harsh critic of training. 'It is hard to criticise trainers given the lack of backing that some organisations give. They are not often given the resources – money included – to change behaviour. For every pound spent on learning, there should be at least another pound devoted to behaviour change. This does not often happen and we can expect to see many more managers attending programmes where the principle outcome is knowledge rather than behaviour change. I did an MBA, a long time ago and have no regrets, but just about everything I learned was knowledge and I can't think of many things where the effort was invested in changing behaviour.'



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Terry is currently the editor of the **National Learning Transfer Survey** – he was writing the latest synopsis as we spoke. 'I wanted to find out what practitioners were actually doing in the name of learning transfer and conducted a survey among HR directors and learning and development managers – we had 550 responses.'

'We found an honest acknowledgment that the activities that would convert honest endeavour of L&D into improved workplace performance just don't happen. This is very frustrating and makes them cross, but the key is to get support from the line manager - which often isn't there. Line manager buy-in is a necessary precursor to change management.'

According to Terry, when organisations reach for the training solution, they do so more in hope than in expectation. They are aware of the need for the business to change and that leadership will carry the can for that transition and therefore they had better do something.

'But I am not sure that enough is done in organisations to identify the hard-nosed ways that are needed for the outcomes they need. A large global electronics giant we did work for some time ago, wanted two very clear outcomes: shorter meetings – 45 minutes to be exact - and eleven weeks removed from their new product time-to-market. They had very clear metrics by which we were to be measured.'

'This demand is very unusual – it is rare for clients to articulate a specific measurable change they require. If all you can define are the learning outcomes in a training intervention, then what you get is a learning outcome. That customer with a clear view also told us they wanted to move from 10th in global market share to top five within three years. They focussed on the right business measures, and we could then identify the key behaviours that would get them to that point.'

Training industry waste

Terry says the amount of waste in the global training industry is eye-wateringly huge. 'The last estimate I read is that management and leadership development spend is around \$40bn globally. Of this no more than four to 10 per cent of that learning content will find its way to the actual workplace. If you put those figures to the average finance director, he or she would laugh.'

The shortcomings of the training industry are the real frustration for Terry. 'I am frustrated bordering on irritation. I would love to finish my career knowing that I had left my industry in better shape than when I found it. It has a serious responsibility that it does not do enough to shoulder.'

He is now working with people in the US on new support tools to help bring about changed behaviour. He recommends the book 'Influencer' by Al Switzler et al. He also cites the work of James Prochaska, a clinician whose pioneering work in change behaviour has helped those with drug and alcohol dependencies. Prochaska shows that you can't just tell drunks to stop drinking. Terry believes that a trainer in a business suit also can't teach a leader how to be a better one.

Robert Terry is executive chairman at **ASK Europe**, a workplace performance consultancy, where he focused initially on major change programmes in banking and other financial services and the IT industry. Since then he has developed a particular interest in the design and implementation of performance management processes. Robert is a former director of the Adam Smith Institute and editor of the National Learning Transfer Survey.

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