



## Article

What kinds of executive education programs work?

The ones that “get to the heart of the matter.”

### Developing Emotionally Competent Leaders

Factors for Sustainable Executive Development

by Jim Morris and Betsey Upchurch

Linking Self-Awareness and Organizational Performance

## The Idea in Brief...

Executive-level leadership training has become big business. Is it working? This article examines why some executive leadership trainings may be effective and others may not.

Training that focuses on changing the leader's behavior isn't sustainable unless it helps them look at their deeper, underlying beliefs, values and assumptions. Training that lasts works at this level and requires what the authors call "The Five Factors" that lead to sustainable executive leadership development. The first and foremost factor is emotional intelligence and self-awareness.

### The Scenario

*Brigitte was at a loss for what to report to the executive team. As part of her division's leadership succession plan, she had sunk nearly \$80,000 into training for the 20 or so prospective leaders in her division. Now, six months after the training, she was no clearer on who was ready to assume more of a leadership role within the division than before she sent everyone to the training. Yet the very next week she was scheduled to give a presentation to the executive team on the results she had achieved as a result of the \$80,000 investment in leadership training.*

*In fact, Brigitte felt like the training had made a very positive impact on the prospective leaders she had enrolled – at least over the short term. Most of them had returned to work from the one-week experience with a renewed focus and an infectious energy that had provided the whole division with a shot in the arm. But as the months passed, the employees who had been to the training seemed to slowly slip back into their old patterns of behavior and ways of*

*thinking and working. Although most of them continued to report that the training was the experience of a lifetime, the proof of the training's impact faded in Brigitte's eyes.*

*Now she had to report on the results, and she didn't think she had any results to report.*

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Sound familiar? Of course it does. This scenario highlights a chief complaint of HR Directors and corporate educators in many organizations. The market is full of great leadership development training products and approaches, but most of them do not seem to lead to long-term changes in people or in the organization

Through our leadership development work - designing and delivering training in academic, private and public arenas - we believe sustainable leadership training involves the following factors:

1. Self-Awareness and the Competencies of Emotional Intelligence
2. Differentiating *Skills* from *Traits* in *What* is Taught and *How* it is Taught
3. Sponsorship by Senior Leaders
4. Long-Term Reinforcement Through Supplemental Training Events, Coaching, Action Learning, etc.

5. Training and Learning Topics that are Relevant to Work and Life

## Linking Self-Awareness and Organizational Performance

Before elaborating on each of these points, it is important to understand our point of view about why some types of training “sticks” while other types do not. Our thinking is as follows:

- Organizations hire people to help achieve desired results.
- Results are created by the behaviors and actions of people, particularly leaders.

therefore...

- The leader’s behaviors are the direct result of their conscious and unconscious beliefs, values, assumptions, perspectives, etc.

and finally...

- Leaders who are fully aware and emotionally intelligent produce better results.

The results anyone achieves are directly or indirectly related to the behaviors they exhibit at work, at home, with colleagues, on teams or with customers. Behaviors and actions are synonymous – how we act and behave are the visible, observable things that we do in order to achieve results.

The traditional view of executive and leadership development is that, to create better results, employees must be equipped with a tool kit of the best competencies and skills related to leadership, making them better able to perform as leaders. By “training” we are referring to ongoing or singular events that are designed to provide participants with additional skills, methods, experience and information that will in turn improve

their ability to perform. We categorize this kind of executive education and leadership development training as either:

1. Technical/Results-Directed Training
2. Behavioral Training



Results or technically-directed training involves learning the techniques of leading and managing business processes. These types of trainings exposes participants to the recent thinking, models and practices in business management and organizational leadership. Technical trainings make up a majority of the market for executive education and leadership development. Candidates for this sort of training include key executives who are less experienced than those they may one day replace or leaders with good employee management skills who lack some basic business acumen.

On the other hand, behaviorally focused training is typically connected to one or more of the personality type indicators like the Myers Briggs, FIRO-B, or DiSC profiles. These trainings focus on the actions and behaviors of leaders by teaching them more about their innate personality styles and how to modify their personality or approach when dealing with people. Candidates for this sort of training include Senior Managers who struggle to maintain positive employee relations; young, aspiring leaders who have good

technical skills but need to mature as leaders of people or; executives who have a difficult time adapting their style to the various groups they lead. Behaviorally focused trainings are predicated on the idea that, by becoming more aware of their personality types, leaders can begin to change or modify behaviors that are not optimal in a given situation.

Effective behavioral training creates the kind of results that are highlighted in Brigitte’s situation, above. Employees return from a training event with a renewed focus and determination to make the organization better. In Bridgitte’s case, the new skills of the leaders faded over time.



Behaviorally based training is increasingly popular in executive and leadership development primarily because it provides the participants with some tangible actions to change or experiment with as they interact with the world.

We disagree with this approach as a means of achieving better business results. Behavioral training is important, however, we think it is unsustainable in the context of growing leadership.

## Personality Versus Essence

Knowing one’s personality type, behavior profile, or default social style is helpful in becoming aware of one’s behaviors. However, behaviorally based training falls short in one critical area – it addresses our *personality*, not our *essence*.<sup>i</sup>

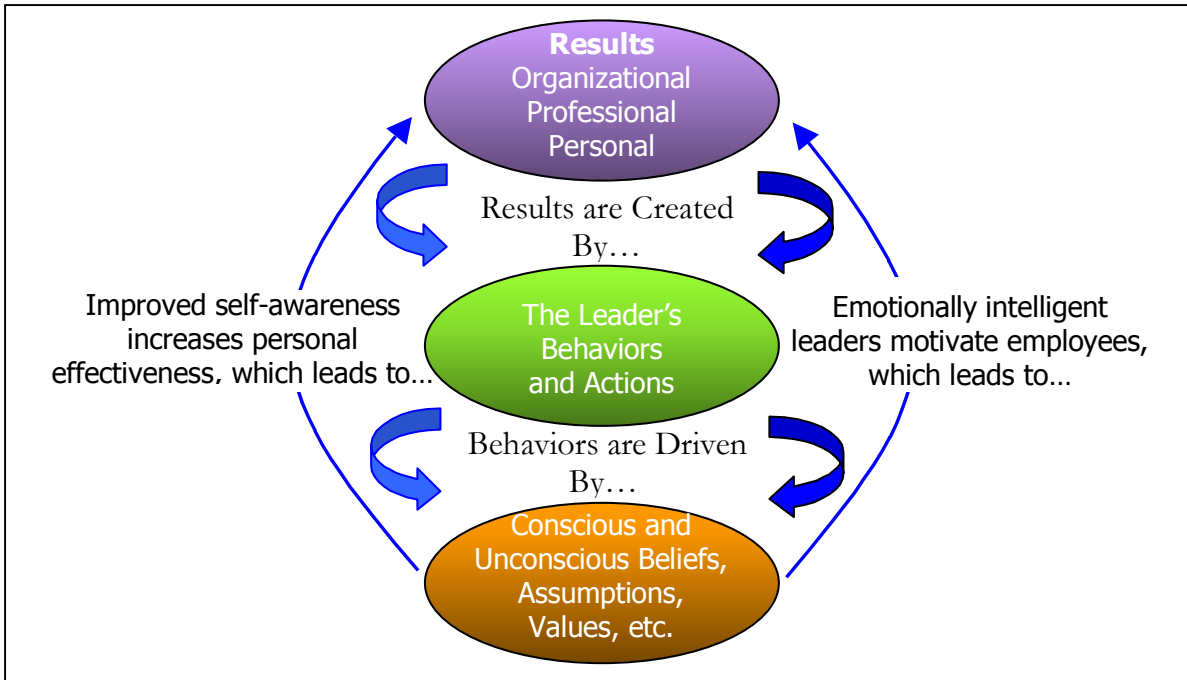
Instead of focusing on behavior, training that “sticks” focuses on the stuff under our behaviors; our conscious and unconscious beliefs, values, assumptions and conditioning. Our belief, supported by results our clients achieved, is that when leaders and executives-in-training become more self-aware, they become more “emotionally intelligent.”<sup>iii</sup> When they become more emotionally intelligent, they become better able to produce results and perform at a higher level personally, professionally, and organizationally.

## The First Factor: Self-Awareness and the Competencies of Emotional Intelligence

Research indicates that emotionally intelligent leaders are more effective, period. This supports our commitment to the importance of developing emotional intelligence in leaders.<sup>iii</sup>

Effective leadership development starts with the development of the leader from the inside out. We experimented with the use of a variety of instruments and models to help participants “get to the core” of their belief systems and unconscious selves as part of the customized leadership trainings we design for clients. We have been disappointed with all of them.

The most useful tool we have found to help leaders tap into the limits of their conscious behaviors has been the work of G.I. Gurdjieff, Don Riso, Russ Hudson, Michael Goldberg, Sandra Maitre and others using the Enneagram<sup>iv</sup>. The Enneagram is a System that includes nine basic personality types. Like the Myers



Briggs or DiSC profile, the Enneagram categorizes people based on a dominant series of characteristics in this case, characteristics that are described through the nine types. Unlike the other tests, Enneagram, participants decide which type best describes them in a self-guided assessment process.

According to the Enneagram, one of these types shows-up as more dominant in the “personalities” of every human being. Sandra Maitre described a key distinction between the Enneagram and other behavioral indicators that is critical: the Enneagram makes a distinction between personality and essence. Each of us is born perfect and whole. Our “essence” is the unlimited perfection each human being is born with while our “personality” is described as the layering-on of defenses and/or coping behaviors that are designed to protect our essence from harm. This line of thinking is congruent with ours; leadership development is as much about “letting go” (of control, fear of the unforeseeable, ego-based needs, etc.) as it is about “adding on”

(information, skills, tools, etc.). Effective leaders have found ways to let their essence shine through. Furthermore, this philosophy supports our notion that leadership development is more about “letting go” (of control, fear of the unforeseeable, ego-based needs, etc.) than it is about “adding on” (information, skills, tools, etc.).

As a learning model and system, the Enneagram is both apparently simple and deceptively sophisticated. As a tool to increase personal awareness and systems thinking, the Enneagram is the most effective too we have found with one provision: using it requires the person teaching the content to be completely familiar with it on personal level. Betsey Upchurch has used the Enneagram as a model for her own personal and professional growth work for the past 15 years. Her intimate knowledge of the system as a participant affords her with insights, knowledge and experiences that we found to be critical to using the Enneagram with clients. It helps clients dive deeper into the foundations of their behaviors.

## **The Second Factor: Differentiating Skills from Traits and What is Taught from How it is Taught**

A client helped us bring definition to another important – and frequently overlooked – factor in sustainable leadership training: distinguishing *Skills* from *Traits*.

Traits are desirable characteristics of behavior, attitudes, and personality features that assist leaders in being effective. Skills are methods and proficiencies that, if applied to work, should improve both individual and organizational performance through tangible actions. Skills can be learned and applied regardless of core personality features, beliefs or attitudes.

It takes a lot longer to learn and master traits than it does to learn skills. Why? Because traits are “intrinsic” meaning they are a natural quality of the leader’s personality. Since traits are a part of our habitual selves, changing them requires significant internal motivation and a high degree of self-awareness. Skills, on the other hand, can be learned and applied more quickly because they do not involve changes in the leader’s personality

The truth is that every day many aspiring leaders make covert decisions that are frequently high risk. These decisions allow them to test their leadership and executive skills and dig themselves out of traps when they fall into them.

or core beliefs. Understanding this distinction would have been helpful to Bridgette. If she wanted her leader group to grow significantly in areas of emotional intelligence and self-awareness, she should not have expected overnight results.

The body of literature and research on leadership shows that it can be taught and developed in people. However, leaders who have all of the skills and none of the traits of leaders will find leading difficult. Conversely, individuals who have all of

the intrinsic traits necessary to be effective but have not learned any of the skills necessary to apply their leadership may find themselves equally challenged. We use the Enneagram to begin the examination of trait-based characteristics.

## **The Third Factor: Sponsorship by Senior Leaders**

Without senior-level commitment to building leadership within the organization, sustainable business results are not possible. In truth, many organizations like the sound of “creating the next generation of leaders” more than they like actually doing it.

In either case, lack of sustained sponsorship by the CEO, Board, President or COO and their direct reports will greatly reduce the chances of success of an executive leadership development program. Why? We have identified the following impediments:

- Good executive education work is provocative. Gaining widespread approval for provocative learning practices is difficult without senior sponsors.
- Learning must involve practical

application to real-life business problems faced by the employees. In other words, not all education and practice happens as a simulation – some of the best learning happens under “live fire” in real business situations. Depending on the risk associated with the learning, it is critical to have the senior leaders monitor and support progress. If this sounds unusually reckless, it is not. The truth is that every day many

aspiring leaders make covert decisions that are frequently high risk. These decisions allow them to test their leadership and executive skills and dig themselves out of traps when they fall into them. The difference in our approach is that we acknowledge risk taking as part of growth and we build in safeguards to accommodate that risk.

- Ambitious, aspiring employees who want greater rank or autonomy can become highly disruptive in organizations if their energies and ambitions are not channeled. Having a “succession plan” that is monitored and implemented by the HR department is not usually a potent enough mechanism to focus the energies of truly gifted aspiring executives. The best focus comes when initiatives flow from the President or CEO’s office.
- Too often, leadership development initiatives are eliminated due to short-term budget constraints, conflicting political agendas of department or division heads or a host of other reasons. Sustainable leadership development should be subordinate only to meeting immediate cash flow needs, customer satisfaction demands or impending crises that threaten the day-to-day existence of the organization. Senior sponsorship insures that the discussion about programming for executive education doesn’t get delegated to the finance department.

There is no more powerful motivational or inspirational force for driving executive and leadership development than a committed senior leader.<sup>v</sup>

### **The Fourth Factor: Long-Term Reinforcement**

Since so much of leadership development involves the development of traits – not skills (refer to The Second Factor) -- opportunities to practice effective leadership is critical. Given that traits develop over a long time, effective programs offer multiple events ongoing processes and other means of reinforcement. The converse of this approach is to offer a leadership “training” that is spread out over a time period without including any interim work, coaching or Action Learning.

“There is no more powerful motivational or inspirational force for driving executive and leadership development than a committed senior leader.”

We have found Action Learning to be a particularly effective means of building sustainable results. There are several approaches to Action Learning, all of which we feel are equally valid:

***Tacit Learning*** (described by Tichy, Nonaka) emphasizes learning by doing and asking questions in real time.

***The Scientific School*** (associated with Kurt Lewin) asserts that learning takes place through data-driven problem-solving approaches. The focus is on “questioning insight,” not expert teaching.

***The Experiential Approach*** (as described by David Kolb) starts from one’s own lived experience and one’s personal reactions. Learning takes place through action and intentional, explicit reflection on that action.

***Critical Reflection*** (propounded by S. Brookfield) attempts to surface “undiscussable” assumptions of the organization or wider social system and to critique premises of the system. These

Competency	Examples of Goleman's Business Rationale	Examples of Our Personal Rationale
Self- Awareness	An accurate self assessment improves a leader's ability to adjust their approach to specific situations. Also, heightened self-awareness improves self-confidence.	Increased self-awareness allows us to become more aware of how we may read or misread the intentions of loved ones.
Self- Regulation	The ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods improves a leader's ability to build trust and credibility with others.	Understanding impulses based on emotional triggers improves the likelihood that couples, friends, and parents can communicate in a caring and constructive fashion
Motivation	The passion and commitment of a leader provides an example for employees.	Expressing a passion for improving the relationship builds trust in relationships.
Empathy	Understanding the perspectives and views of others allows leaders to more effectively manage their employees.	Understanding the differing views of friends and loved ones allows us to express our caring for them in meaningful ways.
Social Skill	Building rapport improves channels of communication and information sharing at work.	Building rapport increases a one's ability to work through conflict instead of getting stuck in conflict.

approaches should be combined as appropriate for the task at hand.

The most effective element of Action Learning is group learning -- either in the form of reflective discussions by those working on the same project in the same organization or cross-organizational learning groups that convene to compare notes and discuss their experiences of the same topic in different organizations.

### **The Fifth Factor: Learning Topics that are Equally Relevant in Work and Life**

Consistently, we have found that the leadership development subjects that have the highest retention rate among participants are those that apply both at work and in their personal lives.

Building these types of connections is not as difficult as it may appear. The key

to this approach is to see leadership as a *relational* experience. In other words, relating to people is among the most essential non-technical or behavioral skills leaders need. Similarly, relating to people is a critical skill for making friends, nurturing great relationships, parenting and functioning in a community setting. Daniel Goleman's competencies for emotionally intelligent leaders apply equally to personal and/or life situations. Leadership involves building emotional connections to others, and building the emotional connections between members of a group or a team.

For example, the skills and traits needed to overcome communication impasses in personal relationships are identical to those needed in professional situations. The difference is in the context and the depth of the relationship.

We have also discovered that participants who are exposed to new leadership skills and traits are more likely to apply them to their personal relationships first, probably because they perceive these situations as less risky. Exposing leaders to tools that are applicable in both professional and personal contexts increases the likelihood that those tools will be experimented with and eventually adopted.

### **Bringing out the Best in People**

Leadership training designed to develop skills, particularly training designed to develop the intangible skills of emotional intelligence in leaders, is only one small element in the constellation of conditions necessary to help grow leadership in organizations. The ongoing work of **Bristlecone Learning, LLC** is to help businesses bridge the gap between the powerful emotions that connect people to the results they create in their work and in their personal lives. Our mission is to “Help Businesses Bring Out the Best in Their Employees”. We believe

that “the best” in people arises not in the absence of emotion, but in the presence of it. We focus on the development of executive leaders; helping them find, harness and focus powerful emotions in healthy and productive ways.

The dishonesty and corruption of leaders in some of the most powerful and revered positions in the world, including several U.S. Presidents; the ethical debauchery of leaders at organizations like WorldCom and Enron; and a host of other events have drawn the public’s attention to the need for authentic, principled leadership in American business and government. Consultancies, universities, training companies and experts in a variety of fields have entered the marketplace to address this need.

Our efforts are to forward the case that leadership is not simply about technical skills, or public speaking and charisma, or controlling behaviors, or business acumen. Leadership is about bringing forth the best in the human spirit, beginning inside each of us.

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<sup>i</sup> It should be noted that we believe in the use of proprietary personality instruments like the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator. In fact, we teach and apply them. Our point here is not to dismiss the body of knowledge in this area. It is simply to point out the limitations of personality typing and instrumentation.

<sup>ii</sup> While the IQ of a person predicts what professions a person might enter and how well they are able to solve problems and come up with the ‘best’ solution, current research suggests that the *EQ* of a person will predict how successful a person is at executing these plans. A person’s EQ is the link to the competencies, values and attitudes that empowers them to get the results they want (Merlevede, 2000).

<sup>iii</sup> Daniel Goleman, et al., “Primal Leadership,” Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

<sup>iv</sup> There are numerous texts describing the Enneagram. One of our favorites is “The Wisdom of the Enneagram,” by Don Richard Riso and Russ Hudson, Bantam Books, 1999.

<sup>v</sup> We feel so strongly about this that we have turned down very lucrative contracts for leadership work because the initiative lacked senior sponsorship.