

# Getting Maximum Value from Leadership Programs



By Dan Tobin, Ph.D.

## One VP's Story

Last year, I met with the vice president of power generation at a public utility. He told me that nine of the top eleven people in his business unit, including himself, were eligible to retire in the next five years and, "I have no idea where we are going to find replacements for them."



I asked him if they had considered some type of leadership development program to prepare the next generation of leaders for the business. He said, "I sent one guy to a very expensive leadership program for a week – nothing changed. A total waste of money!"

I spoke with Joe, the person who had attended the program. He said, "It was a great program. I learned a lot, and I changed a lot. But I got back here and nothing else had changed, other than having a week's worth of work to catch up on. I suggested some new ideas to my boss, and he said that everything was working fine – no need for change. So, I'm really using nothing of what I learned."

Rather than make the argument here that the company should have built its own leadership development program, let's focus on how this utility company could have gotten more value from their investment in this individual. The program which this individual attended is well-known and highly-rated. The program itself was not at fault. What was missing from this attempt at developing a new leader was planning and preparation before the program, as well as follow-up and follow-through after Joe returned from the program.

## Planning and Preparation to Attend an Executive / Leadership Development Program

There are four steps that should have been taken in the planning and preparation for Joe's development:

1. Identification of Joe as having high potential for a future leadership role in the business unit
2. A 360-degree assessment to identify Joe's strengths and the areas in which he needed further development
3. Identification of a suitable executive education/leadership program for Joe
4. Preparation of Joe for that program, and setting expectations for what he would learn and how he would use his new learning when he returned from the program

The process should have started with a conversation about Joe among the vice president of power generation, his HR director, and Joe's direct manager. The vice president obviously thought that Joe had the potential to grow into a leadership position. What did the others think? Based on Joe's job performance and on the qualities and competencies needed to lead the business unit, should Joe be labeled as a high-potential (Hi-Po)?

Assuming that Joe was designated as a Hi-Po, the next step should have been to conduct a 360-degree assessment of Joe to better identify his strengths and the areas in which he needed development. The results of the assessment then should have been reviewed, first with Joe, and then in a meeting with the vice president, the HR director, and Joe's direct manager to reach agreement on the areas where Joe needed to develop new or improved competencies (Level 3). The result would be a learning agenda for Joe.

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Next, the HR director and Joe should have spent time researching the many programs available from business schools and other training providers. These institutions or companies typically have counselors who could be called to discuss what Joe needed to learn and skills he needed to hone. They would likely be happy to discuss their programs that can meet these needs. Beyond the counselor, they could also ask to talk with the program's faculty to learn more about the program, and how it would address Joe's needs. Once the research was done, Joe and the HR director could choose the optimal program for Joe.



The final step that should have been taken before sending Joe to the program is a meeting involving Joe, the HR director, the vice president, and Joe's direct manager to set expectations for what Joe would learn (Level 2) and how he would use that learning when he returned from the program (Level 3). "Here's what we expect you to learn from the program, and here's what we want you to do when you return." The post-program assignments could have included an expanded job description, a new job, a special project assignment, or another way of enabling Joe to apply his learning at work.

## Follow-Up and Follow-Through

When expectations are set before sending Joe to the program, it is then vital that the vice president follow up on those expectations, and follow through in enabling Joe to apply what he has learned to his work (required drivers). This would prepare Joe for a larger leadership role in the business unit and the company.

Once Joe returns from the program, the HR director, the vice president, and his direct manager

should meet with Joe again to follow up on their initial meeting. "Here are the expectations we had set before the program. How well did the program help you meet those expectations?" The meeting should also be used to reinforce the plan for Joe to use what he learned, either in his current job or in the new job or special assignment that had been agreed upon earlier.

This meeting is also an opportunity for Joe to tell the others, based on what he learned, what he plans to do in his current or new role, and what support he will need to accomplish this from the three of them or others. Based on this conversation, Joe should develop an action plan and a new set of goals against which they will measure his success.

It is then up to the vice president to follow through on the new assignment by meeting with Joe on a regular basis to check on his progress and to develop a sense of when he will be ready for a larger leadership role in the business unit and the company.

Had this vice president followed these steps, he, the company, and Joe would all have reaped many more benefits from this investment in Joe's development, and Joe would have been on track for a future leadership role in the business unit and in the company (Level 4).

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Dan Tobin is a consultant on corporate learning strategies and leadership development programs.

His newest book is [\*Feeding Your Leadership Pipeline: How to Develop the Next Generation of Leaders in Small to Mid-Sized Companies\*](#), co-published by ASTD and Berrett-Koehler.

He is also the author and facilitator of the program, [\*On-Target Learning\*](#) Dan can be reached at (914) 939-4737 or at [danieltobin@att.net](mailto:danieltobin@att.net).