Well done on McKinsey* for highlighting the challenge of failing leadership development programs.

Having spent time as a Management Consultant at Kurt Salmon Associates, I have a great deal of respect for the McKinsey’s and Bain’s of this world.

As the founder of a company that specialises in learning transfer, ensuring that what participants learn during training translates to real world business outcomes, the answer seemed obvious to me.

What do McKinsey think?

Are we aligned on our approach?

Can the current trend of failing leadership programs be reversed?

*http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/leading_in_the_21st_century/why_leadership-development_programs_fail
I’d say yes to Mckinsey’s basics – and there’s more. Let me explain….

McKinsey states that almost $14 billion is invested annually by US companies on leadership development, and that it remains a key priority. Yet, they confirm “around 30% of US companies admit that they have failed to exploit their international business opportunities fully because they lack enough leaders with the right capabilities.”

The issue is clearly a sizeable one, with far reaching effects. It’s great that McKinsey have identified some of the most common mistakes made by businesses when it comes to successful leadership development - in my view though, they are light on the practical and light on the ‘how to’ of solving the problem.

They suggest the problem of failing Leadership programs can be addressed by sidestepping four common mistakes – I’d like to tackle each of these in turn.
In essence, I agree with many of the individual observations reported:

“Context is a critical component of successful leadership. A brilliant leader in one situation does not necessarily perform well in another.” Absolutely.

“Too many training initiatives we come across rest on the assumption that one size fits all…” Totally. This is a common mistake.

“In the earliest stages of planning a leadership initiative, companies should ask themselves a simple question: what, precisely, is this program for?” True. Companies do often need to better understand their business needs and importantly what specific changes they want to see back in the business as a result of the program.

“When a company cuts through the noise to identify a small number of leadership capabilities essential for success in its business – such as high-quality decision making or stronger skills – it achieves far better outcomes.” In essence this is true, but you can’t leave it there.

“Context is as important for groups and individuals as it is for organizations as a whole: the best programs explicitly tailor a ‘from–to’ path for each participant.” Again, I agree.

However, by the time I get to this final point, I am feeling that the importance of context in respect of the individual, has been overlooked. I am not arguing that the points raised by McKinsey are not important, but I am surprised that more weight hasn’t been given to companies failing to properly consider the context of the individual employee in relation to leadership development.
In the context of learning – and truly successful leadership development programs with effective learning transfer creating business results – more importance and emphasis needs to be paid to the individual. Having identified the business issues and needs, and who is going to participate in leadership development, companies then need to look at each individual in their individual role, and identify their individual learning transfer needs, in order to meet the requirements of that role and effectively develop new leadership skills. You might argue that this is done annually at a PDP (Personal Development Plan) session but for each program individuals need to identify what specifically they will take from the program and put into action from their individual context. This can be done either at the beginning or end of the face-to-face element of a program and isn’t as arduous as it might sound. Supporting the individual by holding them accountable to this change within the context of their role is what will then make the difference. So I feel McKinsey have overlooked an important question when it comes to overlooking context: what is the context of the individual attending in relation to the business objectives, right now?

SUPPORTING THE INDIVIDUAL BY HOLDING THEM ACCOUNTABLE TO THIS CHANGE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THEIR ROLE IS WHAT WILL THEN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE.

...WHAT IS THE CONTEXT OF THE INDIVIDUAL ATTENDING IN RELATION TO THE BUSINESS OBJECTIVES, RIGHT NOW?
Decoupling reflection from real work

The McKinsey approach here - and one which I see being used increasingly - is to set ‘projects’ that can be used to demonstrate and embed the learning.

McKinsey cite the need for this is because “burgeoning leaders, no matter how talented, often struggle to transfer even the most powerful off-site experiences into behaviour change on the front line.” Yes. This is very much the case, but to cut to the chase, why on earth create a ‘project’ that is outside of the person’s day-to-day role but is linked specifically to the learning with a business outcome? Why not use the participant’s current role to be reflected on and to form the core of the learning process?

The ‘project’ will inevitably come to a conclusion - and in most cases the learnings or behavioural changes end with the project. Yes, they might have enhanced outcomes on ‘the project’ - meanwhile the day-to-day performance of the leader within the business unit remains exactly the same!

The only reason I can see as to why the current role isn’t used is because people haven’t found a way to ‘decouple the reflection from the work.’ I strongly argue that you need to create space for effective reflection, and by effective I mean reflection that is specific, structured and accountable, not mere navel gazing. Reflection is essential, creating space to decouple is essential - but it is also essential to keep the reflection and learning on the day job for leadership development programs to be a success, in a long term sustainable way.

**EFFECTIVE REFLECTION IS SPECIFIC, STRUCTURED AND ACCOUNTABLE.**
I was relieved to see this section coming in to the top four problem areas as to why leadership development programs fail to deliver:

McKinsey have identified that “Becoming a more effective leader requires changing behaviour and ‘adjusting mind-sets’” but that “doing so can be uncomfortable for participants, program trainers, mentors and bosses.” Absolutely. 100% agree. These observations are at the heart of what I believe.

But whilst McKinsey has demonstrated that behavioural change is required to transfer training from the classroom to the workplace, they have not covered how. How do you, in a scalable way, create behavioural change post learning?

Behavioural change requires individuals to go below the surface to the thoughts, feelings, values and beliefs that drive their behaviour. In our experience, the level of vulnerability required for a senior leader to get below the surface and drive personal change, is not achievable in a group training course or in a follow up session with your trainer or manager. We have seen far greater results and outcomes for leadership programs when behavioural change is addressed via one on one sessions, occurring over the phone with an unknown specialist. The telephone not only makes it a scalable solution, but it allows you to be anonymous, creating a level of intimacy and vulnerability difficult to reach face to face – whilst these are not words often banded around in corporate training, they can’t be overlooked when getting to the mindset driving behaviour.
I often hear from clients “We need to evaluate the success of our Leadership Development programs?”

But more often than not it falls into the too hard basket. They strive for an ROI or set KPI’s that are so expensive to analyse in the context of Leadership that they end up measuring nothing.

In my experience, what clients really want is NOT the measurement but tangible outcomes which can be used to prove whether the leadership initiative has worked or not. I would rather they put the energy into ensuring that the learning transfer and behavioural change actually happens. When clients see the change physically in front of them, they are less worried about the measurement.

That said – obviously if you can create some measures, then it will help increase company buy in.

For more about measures on Leadership programs take a look at: Measuring Leadership Development: Quantify Your Program’s Impact and ROI on Organizational Performance by Jack Phillips and Patti Philips for an in depth way to get to the business impact.

AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING TRANSFER STRATEGY CAN BOOST RESULTS TO AS HIGH AS 88%
At Lever – Transfer of Learning, when we are considering measurement we typically use the following approach:

- Create a ‘progress check-in form’ to capture stories, wins and behavioural change 3 months after the program. Use this to drive a Learning Dashboard capturing:
  - What behaviours have changed within the workplace?
  - What benefits has the individual seen?
- Create case studies that tell the story of participants and what it has meant to them and their departments.
- Finally, consider what you want to measure and why. Are you looking to guarantee impact or measure impact?

Standing side by side with McKinsey is not something I ever thought I would have the opportunity to do, but I truly believe that if you are talking about why leadership development programs are failing, the solution must include effective transfer of learning strategies to create behavioural change post learning. Studies show that only around 15% of learning finds its way back into the workplace – but that an effective learning transfer strategy can boost results to as high as 88%.

So, I applaud you McKinsey for highlighting key issues around why leadership-development programs are failing – and think that you’ll agree that implementing strong Learning Transfer strategies are part of the solution.

Contact Emma Weber, CEO and Founder of Lever – Transfer of Learning and the TLA methodology, for an initial discussion at emma@leverlearning.com

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For more information on solutions to ensure the success of leadership programs, Emma Weber’s book *Turning Learning into Action: a proven methodology for effective transfer of learning* provides a how-to guide on post training impact.

Published by Kogan Page and available now from Amazon UK or Amazon USA online or Footprint (Australia). The book includes an example of an easy to create Learning Dashboard, action planning and learning agreement templates.