



Leaders Teaching Leadership

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

I have seen many corporate training applications where top leaders believe stronger leadership is needed throughout the organization's ranks. They ask the Training Department to develop a leadership development program. Training managers are not allowed to "staff up" to do the actual training, so they look outside for the faculty to teach various leadership courses. This could be a mistake, because it overlooks the cadre of potential teachers already on the payroll.

For the senior leaders in an organization, the level of involvement in actually helping to train more junior leaders runs the gamut from zero, as described above, to actually doing all of the teaching themselves. Classroom time spent by a senior leader is a sliding scale; what works well in one instance would be a problem in another case. A good benchmark is if the senior leaders do 20% to 40% of the teaching. It is up to the individual leader, along with the development staff or outside consultant, to determine the optimum level of involvement.

I believe higher involvement by senior leaders often leads to better outcomes assuming the top leaders have the credibility and skill to do a good job of teaching lower level leaders. If there are problems at the senior level, then training dollars would be better spent there to make top leaders capable of being credible teachers as opposed to trying to "fix" the lower levels of management with outside canned leadership training.

If you are a leader, you need to make a conscious decision about how much time and effort you will put into the job of training underlings yourself. If you are a training director or consultant, you will need to decide how much you should encourage the senior leader to be involved. There are numerous personal, organizational, and practical factors that go into these decisions.

For example, if the senior leader is cloistered in financial meetings all the time, and the human side of the work is delegated to operations people, having this person do instruction would likely be a poor choice. If the organization is in the middle of a survival crisis or a merger, the top leader may be unable to spare any time for development of underlings. Perhaps the senior leader is just a lousy leader, and it would be foolhardy to have this person teach others how to screw up. Conversely, the senior leader may be outstanding and consider training the next generation of leaders to be his or her highest calling.

Let's assume the top leadership has built high trust and has the capability to teach leadership in an engaging manner. Under those conditions, there are several advantages to having leadership classes taught by senior leaders:

1. **Shows right priority.** If the top brass preach that nothing is more important than having great leaders at every level, then they ought to show that with action and their time rather than give lip service to executive development.
2. **People pay more attention.** If your boss is in front of the classroom, not only does it send a very strong signal about the importance of the training, people listen better because the boss is putting sweat equity into the equation. It is called leading by example.
3. **The best way to learn something well is to teach it.** If leaders take the time to organize their thoughts about key leadership concepts, they will be more likely to practice the habits themselves.
4. **The content is more applicable.** The case examples and materials used to teach the lessons are directly applicable to the particular situation managers are facing every day on the job. They are not hypothetical examples brought in by an outside trainer who does not even understand the local jargon.
5. **Training your own leaders is uplifting.** Taking a personal interest in the development of up-and-coming leaders helps the top brass assess capabilities better and forms a kind of mentoring spirit that is healthy. The caveat here is to avoid being overbearing or intrusive. Young leaders need to experiment with different ideas in safety, so the mentor needs to establish ground rules that ensure a safe learning environment.
6. **Control your own destiny.** When leaders develop the course content, it will be laser-focused on the local need. If an outside trainer is teaching leadership, it will be less potent and potentially less effective.
7. **Those actually in the trench are better at teaching trench warfare.** Great leaders have the instincts and knowledge of how to apply concepts in a pragmatic way on the job. Trainers who have not sat in the leader's chair do not have the in-depth understanding of the realities. They describe the textbook answers that often fall flat in the real world.

These seven reasons are why it is helpful to have leaders be the teachers of leadership. I acquired this tendency myself as I learned that teaching leadership and trust was one of the most important parts of my job as a Division Manager of a large corporation. I gave the activity roughly 30% of my calendar time, and I am convinced it was the best use of my time.

I grant that many leaders would not have the patience or skills required to be good at teaching leadership. Frankly, many leaders do not have the ability to practice what they preach, so their teachings might ring hollow to stronger underlings. This is where the Development staff needs to focus energy. The top leaders need coaching on how to participate in the hands-on work of teaching leadership in their organization. There is plenty of work for consultants to drive this conversion, but once leaders get the idea and have the skills, it is best for them to take their place in front of the classroom.

Several organizations have taken up the banner of having leaders teach leadership. Becton Dickinson is one group that practices this well. There is a good book on this concept by Ed Betof, if you are interested. The title is *Leaders as Teachers*. It describes the journey at Becton Dickinson and the incredibly positive impact the practice has had on the organization. However, you do not need to read a book on how to practice having leaders as teachers, just advocate it and start doing it. If that seems unlikely in your situation, it may mean that the top leaders in your organization need some remedial leadership training themselves. Spend your training dollars there first.

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