

From the Bottom Up: A Novel Approach to Leadership Development



By Dr. Chance T. Eaton

According to Gallup research in 2015, over 70% of the variance in employee engagement is due to *who leads a team*. A common-sense professional in the field of learning and development, during most of my career, I have placed the bulk of my attention on developing leaders to address low employee engagement. Without a doubt, I have seen many cases of engagement improvement due to leaders investing in their leadership development. However, I have also seen far too many underutilize that investment.

As a case in point, I recently delivered a lecture on leading high-performance teams. The very next day, one of the leaders from the class felt inspired to walk around the building to interact with other employees as an act of building trust – to fulfill the lesson that people won't trust you if you are not present and available. This walkabout lasted for 10 minutes but didn't happen again. This leader was inspired for a moment but couldn't make the commitment to follow through and really lead. It is always frustrating when an investment in a leader doesn't take; but when we look at the state of leadership development, we can see just why those efforts aren't paying off in the form of return on investment.

Leadership training alone is estimated to cost around \$20 billion per year (ATD, 2012). Despite the large amount of dollars being spent on leadership training, however, the return on investment doesn't appear to be

paying off. The Conference Board has been surveying job satisfaction for the past 25 years, and it has found that job satisfaction has declined at a steady rate, from 61% in 1987 to 47% in 2012 (Adams, 2012). HR consulting firm Mercer has found that across the globe, between 28% and 56% of employees want to leave their jobs and 32% want to leave their jobs in the United States alone. The Gallup organization has found that employee-disengagement numbers remain steady, at around 70%. As stated earlier, the data point toward management because 70% of the variance in engagement factors is due to a work group's immediate supervisor (Gallup, 2015). Finally, *Forbes* magazine author Casserly (2012) said that 65% of Americans would be happier firing their boss than receiving a salary increase.

If attaining high engagement in the workplace has become one of the most important motivations for leadership, why are our leadership practices doing more harm than good? More importantly, how do we really make meaningful impacts in the workplace if leadership development doesn't always yield a good return on investment? The answer is to shift our paradigm of leadership development.

Traditionally, we see the "leader" from a hierarchical perspective: the individual driving performance. As we move further away from the industrial paradigm, we need to see the "leader" from a collaborative perspective – one where each team member has

the potential to influence shared movement toward common goals.

What this translates to is shifting the focus from teaching leadership only to leaders toward teaching leadership to the masses. For the past two years, I have strategically shifted much of my leadership training from formal leaders to front-line employees. Though this may sound contradictory, I have seen outstanding results.

Performance Management Training for Front-Line Employees

The topic of performance management haunts U.S. companies. According to HCI (2016), only 8% of managers believe that the traditional performance-value process actually drives business value and only 10% believe that it is a good use of time. Further, the Corporate Executive Board has found that 90% of HR heads believe that ratings actually yield accurate information.

In the past, I have typically taught this subject solely to leaders, as they are the ones ultimately responsible for making judgments on employees' performance. But noticing the ineffectiveness of this approach, in 2016 I designed a 10-hour curriculum that could be taught to entire teams, with the leader participating at the same time. The curriculum consisted of (1) knowing your team (using personality grids using Caliper and Clifton StrengthsFinder), (2) knowing your role (getting comfortable having dialogues concerning job duties and competencies), (3) employee engagement and (4) measuring performance using rating scales and SMART goals.

As a result, I have seen an upward pressure placed on the leaders to perform. Since the entire team was taught the same content, they began to use the same vocabulary, became personally accountable to team engagement, shifted from a weakness focus to a strength-based focus and co-created rating scales to fit their team's performance. Outside the training sessions, in a private setting, I have a short meeting with the formal leaders, explaining that they, the formal leaders, have the most potential influence over a team's performance and that the engagement data can be a nice baseline for measuring growth in a team's engagement. This creates a leader feedback mechanism for the formal leaders and extra accountability for their own leadership performance.

By training the masses, you not only build a culture of accountability for everyone but you also put an upward pressure, not downward, on the leader by

their own team members. In fact, I had an employee recently go back to their supervisor and provide feedback on the supervisor's lack of providing team recognition. The employee had learned, in the training, that recognition is a valid component of performance management, and they needed their leader to perform just as they were. This requires a culture of accountability and trust, and team performance training delivers just that. I have also seen teams collectively rebuild rating systems that fit their business and provide strength-based project assignment goals, employee self-rating in one-on-one supervisor meetings, a culture of employee-driven recognition and higher frequency and quality one-on-ones. Quite simply, educating entire teams – not just the leader – has resulted in organic and meaningful results.

Since leadership education for the masses is a paradigm shift, I have definitely received push-back. I recently taught a course entitled "The Leadership Challenge," based on Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner's work (2012). This open-enrollment offering to a company resulted in 20 participants, two of whom were formal leaders while the rest were front-line workers. The CEO couldn't understand why his administrative assistant had enrolled in the class, because she was definitely not a leader. I had to explain to him that, for one, leaders often don't feel they have the need to improve their leadership skills – hence low enrolment. I know this because that is exactly what leaders have told me: "I'm already a leader, and I don't need training on it." Second, front-line employees are screaming for higher quality leadership and aren't finding it in their current leaders, so they want to become part of the solution and enhance their own leadership skills in the process. I also know this because that is exactly what they told me.

The data is clear: The current leadership development training models aren't working, and focusing sole attention on leaders is often an ineffective strategy. When you begin to develop leadership from the bottom up, teams organically begin applying an upward pressure on their leaders to perform. Leadership development will never die, but how we teach it and who we teach it to must change. If we want to create the next generation of effective leadership, we need to shift from solely traditional top-down leadership development models to organic, collaborative, team-based leadership models.

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Dr. Chance Eaton has over a decade's worth of experience working in the field of learning and organizational development. Due to his unique educational and work experiences in finance, psychology, leadership and management, education, noetic sciences and agriculture, Dr. Eaton provides his clients with relevant business solutions grounded in theory and research. To learn more about Dr. Eaton's services, please visit:

HRSolutionsInternational.com.