

Leadership Development that Changes Behaviour



Simply Wright

Why good workshops are not enough

Leadership development is not about giving managers more information.

It is about helping them behave differently when the work is complex, relationships are difficult and pressure is high.

A good workshop can start the process, but behaviour change happens through practice, feedback, reflection and support back in the workplace.

The issue

Many organisations invest in leadership development because they want managers and leaders to communicate better, lead change, support their teams, manage performance and create healthier cultures.

A well-designed workshop can be valuable. It can create space to reflect, introduce useful models and help leaders think differently about their role.

But leadership development only makes a real difference when it changes what leaders do back in the workplace.

Kolb's experiential learning cycle reminds us that people learn through experience, reflection, new thinking and trying things out.

Bandura's social learning theory also highlights the role of observation, practice and confidence in behaviour change.

Together, these ideas show why leadership development needs to go beyond content delivery.

Key Question

Before asking **“What leadership programme do we need?”**, ask:
“What do we need leaders to do differently when pressure is high and old habits are easier?”

Why Leadership Development Often Fails to Stick



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Good content is not enough if the workplace does not support behaviour change.

Leadership development often starts with good intentions. The programme may be well designed, the facilitator may be skilled, and participants may find the session useful.

But if the learning is not connected to real work, reinforced by senior leaders or supported after the session, leaders may quickly return to familiar habits.

What often happens	Why it matters	What helps
Leaders attend a workshop but return to the same pressures	New behaviour gets crowded out by old habits and urgent demands	Build in follow-up, reflection and workplace application
The learning is too generic	Leaders struggle to apply it to their own teams, relationships and challenges	Use real leadership situations and live examples
There is little opportunity to practice	Confidence does not build through theory alone	Include rehearsal, feedback, coaching and peer discussion
Senior leaders are not visibly involved	The programme can feel optional or disconnected from organisational priorities	Link development to strategy, culture and senior leader expectations
Managers are not supported after the session	Learning fades when there is no accountability or encouragement	Use line manager follow-up, action learning or peer groups
Success is measured by attendance or satisfaction	A good session does not always mean that behaviour has changed	Measure application, confidence, behaviour and impact
The wider culture rewards old behaviours	Leaders know what to do but feel pressure to behave differently	Align systems, expectations, recognition and accountability

Leadership development sticks when learning is practiced, reinforced and supported in the real environment that leaders work in.

What Makes Leadership Development Work



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Behaviour change needs more than content.
It needs practice, feedback and support.

Leadership development is more likely to make a difference when it is designed around the real behaviours leaders need to use in practice.

The aim is not just to understand leadership. The aim is to lead differently.

The 5 Ps of Leadership Development

Purpose: What needs to change, and why?

Be clear about the behaviour, outcome or culture shift that the development is intended to support. Avoid vague aims such as 'better leadership' without defining what that means in practice.

Ask: What do we need leaders to do differently?

Practice: Where will leaders rehearse new behaviours?

Leadership skills develop through trying things out, making sense of what happened and trying again. People need opportunities to practice conversations, decisions and responses before applying them in live situations.

Ask: Where can leaders safely practice before it really matters?

Perspective: How will leaders receive feedback and challenge?

Leaders often need help to see the gap between intention and impact. Feedback, coaching, reflection and challenge help leaders to understand how their behaviour is experienced by others.

Ask: How will leaders understand the impact they are having?

Peer Learning: How will leaders learn with and from others?

Leadership can feel isolating. Peer learning, action learning sets and reflective groups create space to share real challenges, test thinking and build confidence.

Ask: Where can leaders learn from real situations together?

Practical application: How will the learning be used back at work?

Development sticks when it is connected to real work. Leaders should leave with specific actions, opportunities to apply learning and follow-up that keeps the learning alive.

Ask: What will leaders do differently in the next week, month and quarter?

Leadership development works best when leaders are not just taught new ideas, but supported to practice, reflect, apply and keep going.

Making Leadership Development More Likely to Stick



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When leadership development is the right answer, connect it to the workplace before, during and after the session.

Before development: Be clear about the purpose.

- What behaviour or outcome needs to change?
- Why does it matter now?
- Who needs to be involved?
- What real leadership challenges should shape the design?

During development: Make it practical and reflective.

- Use real examples from people's work.
- Give leaders time to practice and rehearse.
- Build in reflection, feedback and challenge.
- Help leaders identify what they will do differently.

After development: Support transfer into practice.

- Create opportunities to apply the learning.
- Use peer groups, coaching or action learning.
- Ask managers or sponsors to follow up.
- Review what has changed, not just who attended.

Before designing leadership development, ask:

“What do we need leaders to do differently when pressure is high, relationships are complex and old habits are easier?”

If the answer is unclear, the programme may create insight — but not behaviour change.

Evidence base

Kolb — Experiential Learning

People learn through a cycle of experience, reflection, new thinking and active experimentation.

<https://experientiallearninginstitute.org/what-is-experiential-learning/>

Bandura — Social Learning and Self-Efficacy

Behaviour change is influenced by observation, practice, confidence and belief in one's ability to act.

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/bandura.html>

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/self-efficacy.html>

Knowles — Adult Learning / Andragogy

Adults are more likely to engage with learning when it is relevant, experience-based, self-directed and connected to real problems.

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11008574/>

CIPD — Leadership in the Workplace

Leadership development should be connected to workplace needs and practical leadership capability.

<https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/factsheets/leadership-factsheet/>