

# Are you underestimating the impact of your leadership development programs?

## Three innovative ways to measure your real return on investment

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### Overview

The field and discipline of leadership development within organizations dates to the mid-twentieth century (Day et al., 2014), and its importance to organizational success has become so widely accepted and professionalized that nearly all mid- to large-sized organizations now have a formal leadership development team or function. Global organizations spent an estimated \$67 billion in 2022 on leadership development programs (FMI, 2022). A number of annual polls indicate that leadership development remains a top three concern among CEOs and a factor they believe to be essential to the long-term success of their businesses. There is also widespread agreement that we are in the midst of unprecedented transformations that will require new and elevated skillsets for tomorrow's leaders.

No wonder that investments in leadership development are projected to grow substantially in coming years, with estimated spending of around \$180 billion by 2032 (FMI, 2022). Yet the returns these investments yield for leaders, their teams, and their organizations are not always clear. In fact, there is significant concern and criticism about the failure of the leadership development profession to effectively measure the benefits and results of this massive investment. Several studies conclude that only a small minority of organizations believe their leadership training programs are highly effective (Abelli, 2019; Feser et al., 2017). Improvement in this area has become a perennial concern.

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Most organizations and organizational researchers continue to assess the effectiveness of leadership development programs based on participant learning and outcomes. Results tend to focus on individual leaders' retention of knowledge and skills and their ability to apply that acquired knowledge and skills in action. However, quality programmatic designs can deliver significantly larger positive impacts in three major areas that are overlooked by traditional measurement methods.

The first overlooked area is the leadership development program's impact on the collective leadership capability of the cohort. In short, traditional measurement continues to focus solely on leader development or human capital development, while ignoring leadership development or social capital development. The second overlooked area is the measurable business results achieved through implementing solutions generated by program participants in response to business problems assigned to them during the program.

Such recommendations may emerge, for example, out of action learning projects, which are a design feature of many leadership programs. The third overlooked area is the leadership development program's impact on a variety of individuals and groups beyond the program's targeted learners. Considering the variety of critical stakeholders often involved in and directly affected by well-designed leadership development programs, a narrow focus on participant outcomes is seriously limiting.

We contend that the failure to measure and account for these three additional impact areas leads to a potentially major undervaluing of a program's true business impact. Yet more comprehensive leadership development measurement is possible and can enable organizations to make more informed investments in developing individual leaders, enhancing overall organizational leadership capability, and improving business results to demonstrate greater return on investment.

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## A Brief Background on Traditional Programmatic Measurement

While organizations have long used leadership development programs as a core element of their talent management practice, there is limited research on how to evaluate their impact and ROI effectively. One survey found that 70% of learning and development teams report feeling pressure from leadership to measure impact (Luxon, 2019). Yet only 24% of organizations attempt some form of impact measurement (State of Leadership Development Report, 2018) The most popular measurement tool? Satisfaction surveys.

When organizations fail to measure leadership development programs, they lose the opportunity to determine if learning objectives were achieved, if learners are applying the new skills in their organizational roles, or if the program

should end or continue (Leading Effectively Staff, 2020). Don Kirkpatrick created a foundational approach to learning and development evaluation in 1954 that remains widely in use. The Kirkpatrick Model consists of four levels (reaction, learning, behavior, and results) to determine the overall training evaluation. Level 1, *reaction*, measures the extent to which the learner found the training relevant, engaging, and easy to understand. Level 2, *learning*, looks at how much the participant learned throughout the training. Evaluators usually gather data at these levels through surveys and pre- and post-tests administered at the beginning and end of the training. Level 3, *behavior*, evaluates whether participants apply learning in the workplace such as data collected through demonstrations or polls at 30, 60, and 90 days. Level 4, *results*, looks at determining the business value and impact on job performance by focusing on changes in relevant business metrics (Pandey, 2020).

As was, and still is, common today, the Kirkpatrick Model focuses on individual leaders and their reactions, learning, behavior, and outcomes. E-learning expert Christopher Pappas (2021) highlighted that most organizations continue to measure training effectiveness primarily through basic

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learning and development measures, such as training satisfaction, completion rates, and testing scores. He notes, “The vital missing link is none other than the business metrics, that is, finding how the business will achieve a specific gain that influences the business goals... However, not much data is available on the impact that these training programs have on business.” This need not be the case. Organizations can leverage three methods that represent real advances in quality leadership development measurement.



## Advance #1: The Importance of Tracking Human *and* Social Capital

In his seminal review on the context of leadership development, David Day (2000) distinguished between developing leaders and developing leadership. From this perspective, the more traditional approach, *leader development*, focuses on developing human capital—that is, developing the individual leader’s attributes (knowledge, skills, and abilities). In contrast, Day conceptualizes *leadership development* as “an integration strategy by helping people understand how to relate to others, coordinate their efforts, build commitments, and develop extended social networks by applying self-understanding

to social and organizational imperatives.” In contrast to leader development, or the development of human capital, leadership development focuses on social capital development—the strengthening of connections and interactions among individuals within a social context that enables organizational performance. The table below expands on the insights of Day and researchers Eva Bilhuber Galli and Günter Müller-Stewens (2012), offering a summary of the different areas of focus, developmental methods, tools, and practices that distinguish leader development from leadership development.

A Comparison of Leader Development vs. Leadership Development

	Leader Development	Leadership Development
Focus	Individuals in formal leadership roles (intrapersonal)	Teams and levels of leaders/ organizational cultures (interpersonal)
Developmental Insights and Methods	Predominantly psychology	Behavioral sciences, including psychology and sociology
Outcomes	High-performing individual leaders	High-performing teams and aligned organizational cultures
Type of Capital Development	Human	Social
Tools, Methods, Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cognitive, personality and 360 assessments</li><li>• Development planning</li><li>• Targeted learning experiences</li><li>• Leader development coaching</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Individual and group assessment</li><li>• Cohort-based development experiences and journeys</li><li>• Action learning/project work</li><li>• Individual and team coaching</li></ul>

**Figure 1:** Expanding on the seminal insights of Day (2000) and the work of Galli and Müller-Stewens (2012), the table offers a summary of the different areas of focus, and the developmental methods, tools, and practices that distinguish leader development from leadership development.



This is a critical distinction with major implications for how we design and measure leadership development programs. Blurring the distinction between *leader* and *leadership*, organizations may call their efforts “leadership development initiatives,” yet think, act, and measure as though the only or primary goal is to improve individual leader development. We would do well to remind ourselves that these are cohort-based development investments. Such group experiences can have important and measurable benefits in social capital development. For example, well-designed programs can improve peer networks and cross-organizational collaboration, unlocking new value and innovation that can deliver substantial business impacts. Programs also act as collective culture builders, change accelerators, generators of new business opportunities, and solvers of problems. In addition, they can create alignment that improves strategy execution, provide senior leaders with exposure to talent in ways that enhance succession planning, and more.

Working with mid- to large-sized organizations that are investing in major leadership development programs, we have seen that C-suite executives intuitively understand that a program’s benefits go beyond leader development. In fact, they frequently state that improved cross-organizational

relationships and strengthened bonds between and among leaders are essential outcomes they desire and expect. As the CEO of a global engineering firm said to one of us as he looked upon a room filled with problem-solving teams during a leadership development program we facilitated, “This is the next generation of leaders right here in this room, the ones who will shape our business and our culture in a few short years.” Another CEO, Mike Hoover of Sundt Construction, whose organization has invested in major leadership development programs for high-potential leaders for over 20 years, told us that the program forges a “culture of leaders who grow up together in this program” and recalled his own experience as a participant in the very same program along with several people still on his executive team. Executives not only expect effective leadership development efforts to develop social capital as well as human capital, they also directly see its benefits.

Angie Freeman, CHRO and ESG Officer at C.H. Robinson, captured this felt impact as she reflected recently on a 10-year partnership with our organization on leadership development efforts:

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*I think about the impact that it has had on our leadership bench, on our ability to be really strategic and intentional about where we’re going as a company, and what we want to make sure our leaders are well-equipped to help lead us through. Oftentimes when I’m sitting in a key strategic meeting, I look around the people at the table and very many of those folks who’ve risen up through C.H. Robinson have participated in MDA’s programs, so the impact has been amazing. Not only are they really good at their jobs and key to Robinson’s success, the relationships they built going through [the development program] together have made them even more effective. They have been an important part of knitting together our culture and our leaders as a team.*

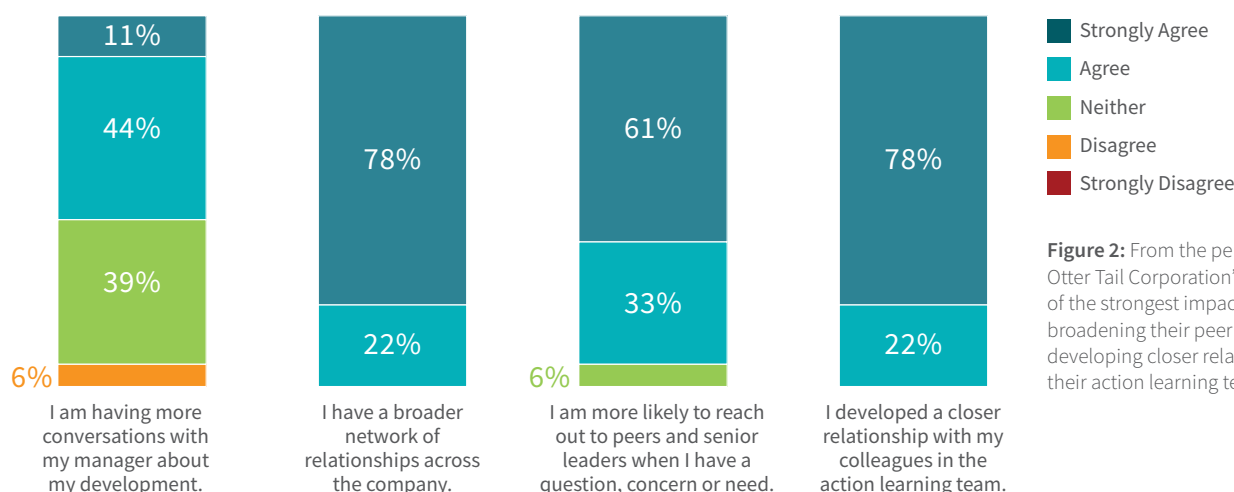
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Admittedly, measuring not only leader development but also leadership development is difficult. Yet it should be pursued, and it can be done. A recent program that our firm designed, delivered, and measured provides one example of getting at these broader indicators of success. The program was a year-long cohort-based development experience for senior-level leaders at Otter Tail Corporation, a diversified holding company consisting of five businesses across the power and manufacturing industries. The program was seen as an



Well-designed programs can improve peer networks and cross-organizational collaboration, unlocking new value and innovation that can deliver substantial business impacts.

## Program Impact: Network & Relationship Building



**Figure 2:** From the perspective of Otter Tail Corporation's leaders, some of the strongest impact results involved broadening their peer network and developing closer relationships with their action learning teams.

investment in developing talent for future executive-level roles and as a critical enabler for succession planning.

For this program we captured a robust set of both leader and leadership measures as well as social capital development. For example, Figure 2 demonstrates an important programmatic outcome: deepening the social network of these leaders and the executives who supported the program. One especially cogent measurement is that 94% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that, as a result of the program, they are now “more likely to reach out to peers and senior leaders in other [operating companies] when I have a question, concern or need.” In addition, 55% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they are having more conversations with their managers about their development.

Admittedly, deepened cross-organizational relationships and a willingness to reach out to others do not demonstrate that elusive “holy grail” of measurement—level 4 business impact. However, combining quantitative measurement with qualitative data capture, including anecdotal evidence, can be a winning combination. Take, for example, the powerful story of two leaders in a cohort-based program that we designed and led called *Timberline*. The program brought together 20 leaders from one of the top specialty contractors in the United States, including vice presidents and general managers of regional offices across the country that operated essentially as independent businesses. One of the program's explicit goals was to foster for the first time a “one company” mindset that, it was hoped, would improve strategic opportunities and operational efficiencies.

Here is a level 4 business impact story, told directly by one of the two leaders involved:

“Ryan and I had met each other in passing over the years, but never really connected on opportunities since we were in different locations and performing different scopes of work. Timberline gave us an opportunity to connect and get to know each other on a more personal level and to better understand what services we could provide on projects from each of our operations. During one of the session breaks, Ryan approached me to let me know that his team was working on a project at [a large hospital] and that the customer was looking for someone to provide scaffolding which is a service my [area branch] could provide. We were able to add \$2 million in revenue through this joint venture and provide the customer with a more complete solution to their needs. As the project developed, the type of scaffolding needed became more complex and required a higher level of expertise than what my branch alone could provide, so Shawn (another Timberline participant) and I engaged [an additional regional office] to ensure proper execution of the job (another JV). This project served as a starting point to provide several services (insulation, firestop, scaffolding, and expansion joints) at another site which will add approximately \$6 million in revenue that we would not have been able to secure otherwise. By working together, we are now performing joint venture projects for a total of ~\$80 million in revenue and with resources from branch offices in five major cities. The Timberline experience created connections with other leaders in different parts of the country that has allowed us to better serve new markets and new customers, and ultimately, grow our business.”

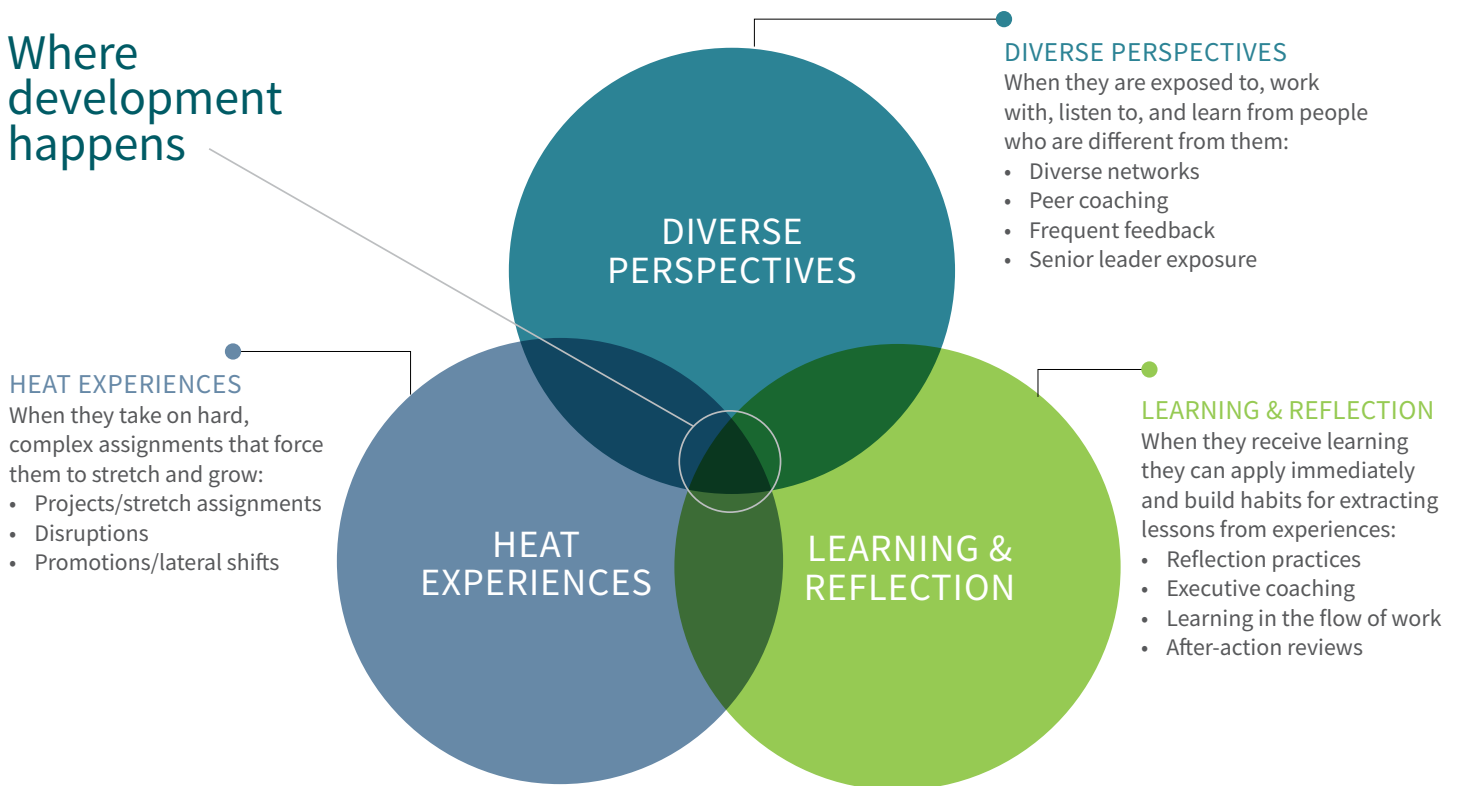
## Advance #2: The Importance of Measuring Action Learning Efforts

At MDA, we value leadership development programs that include an action learning component. As the name implies, action learning is a method of accelerated leadership development that involves creating learning teams of 4-8 colleagues who work together to propose recommended solutions to real-world (and often gnarly) business challenges and then reflecting on the results and team dynamics. It has been around for decades and evolved in a variety of ways based on different practitioners. As the World Institute for Action Learning (WIAL) outlines: “Action learning solves problems and develops leaders simultaneously because its simple rules force participants to think critically and work collaboratively. Action learning is particularly effective for solving complex problems that may appear unsolvable. It elevates the norms, the collaboration, the creativity, and the courage of groups” (WIAL website, 2023).

The teams struggle through problem definition and reframing the challenge given them, embark on deep discovery work as they collect data to understand issues and connect with various stakeholders across the business, seek outside-in perspectives, uncover actionable insights, and are encouraged to formulate experiments or pilots to test their potential solutions. Executive sponsors provide light-handed guidance, boundary-setting, and budgetary approvals. The work culminates with teams delivering high-pressure presentations to senior leaders that include both actionable recommendations and bold solutions plus reflections on individual and team learning.

In our programs, we see approximately two-thirds of teams’ major recommendations implemented by their organizations. These implementations can be tracked and measured for their business impact. In programs we have delivered, action

### Where development happens



**Figure 3:** Action learning is a core component of many leadership and executive development programs worldwide. Wisely designed, it accelerates leader and leadership development by leveraging the research on fast-growing leaders. This model draws on research from the Center for Creative Leadership, which finds that growth happens best at the intersection of three circles.



learning team recommendations have resulted in major improvements in all aspects of the business, including significant cost savings, reengineered processes, adoption of new technologies, establishment of new corporate practices and policies, increases in employee retention and engagement, and more. In a recent program involving a construction firm, one team was able to identify minor improvements to the company's existing contracting process calculated to achieve an immediate revenue capture of over \$2 million in the first year. This breakthrough idea so struck the company's CEO, who was present for the team's final presentation, that he could not contain himself and interrupted them before they concluded to exclaim, "This is brilliant! Let's do it!"

In another example, action learning benefited and differentiated a national engineering, construction, and services

firm. Top leadership knew that for the company to grow, it needed leaders ready and able to assume expanded roles and take advantage of new geographic and market opportunities. The challenge was to ensure those leaders were fully immersed in the complexities of its specific context and business needs. Thus, action learning became the basis of their leadership development program for high-potential leaders. In a decade, the company more than doubled in size to a \$4 billion organization. Its growth can be attributed to many factors, but one key was building the leadership capability necessary to launch multiple new businesses, create a strong competitive differentiation, and deliver the highest levels of customer satisfaction and team member engagement that the firm has ever had. The senior team views these collective metrics as compelling evidence of program success.

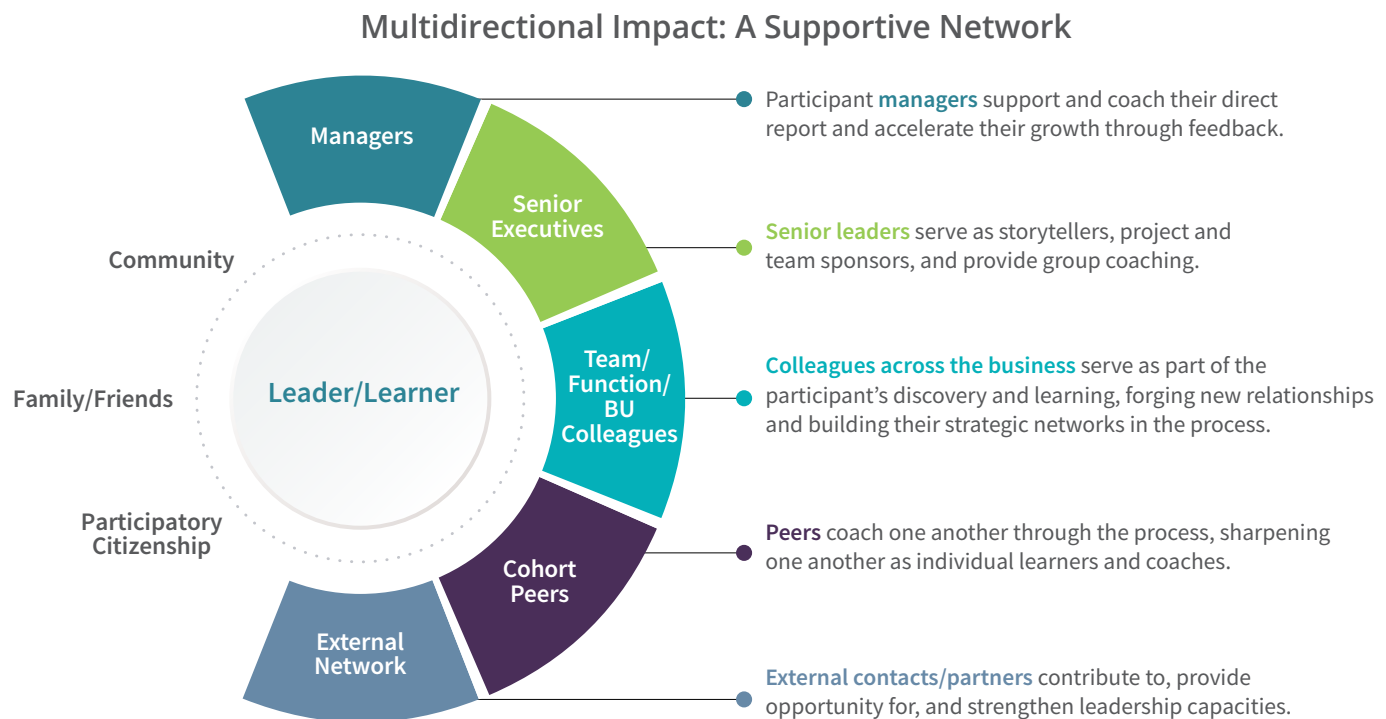
In programs we have delivered, action learning team recommendations have resulted in major improvements in all aspects of the business, including significant cost savings, reengineered processes, adoption of new technologies, establishment of new corporate practices and policies, increases in employee retention and engagement, and more.



## Advance #3: The Importance of Capturing Multidirectional Impact

Business leaders and leadership development professionals undervalue their leadership development programs by failing to consider and measure the value of social capital development among the learning cohort. They also do so by failing to consider and measure the program's impact on others beyond that cohort.

As conceptualized in Figure 4, MDA believes that the impacts of leadership development programs reach well beyond the individual leaders who are the program's target. Those positively impacted can include managers of the participants, direct reports, executive sponsors, and the broader social network of the organization. All told, these engaged others multiply a program's impact many-fold.



**Figure 4:** The multidirectional impact model demonstrates that, while leaders/learners are the central targets of learning, a successful program can have a positive impact on many others who improve their own leadership capabilities through their involvement with the program and relationships with program recipients.

One multidirectional aspect of leadership development that can have a crucial impact on the success of leadership development programs is executive involvement and sponsorship. A recent survey of HR leaders and professionals by *Fortune* magazine found that the CEO's hands-on involvement in the organization's talent programs (including future-focused leadership and bench strength-building programs) was linked to their ratings of organizational effectiveness. Specifically, 33% of respondents who viewed their CEO as actively engaged in talent programs perceived their company as being an industry leader, compared to just 6% of respondents who viewed their CEO as being disengaged in talent programs (Lovich et al., 2022). Similarly, a 2021 survey of over 750 learning and development professionals and decision-

makers found that executive engagement in leadership and development programs was consistently linked to high-performing organizations, and the greater the involvement of the executives, the better the outcomes. These researchers concluded that "while increases in executive involvement are promising, still less than 60% of executives tend to engage in these activities. Significant improvement opportunities still exist in many organizations" (Leimbach, 2021).

Program designers can enhance the multidirectional impact of their leadership development programs in many ways. For example, in some programs, senior executive involvement is nominal—they drop in to provide opening or closing words for the program or socialize with participants at evening events. However, we believe only including senior leaders at a surface



level is a critical missed opportunity. As Michael Leimbach (2021) asserted, “Executive involvement in leadership development has a profound impact on results.” In particular, we contend that executive engagement impacts not only participants, but also the executives themselves, especially if they are integrated more substantively into the program. Some approaches that organizations have used to leverage executive sponsors to help create a high-impact leadership development experience include:

- leading a module on a critical business area such as strategy or innovation
- sharing their lifelong leadership story (and risk vulnerability in sharing it) with the development cohort
- facilitating a spirited and challenging hour-long honest conversation with participants (as one CEO we work with now consistently does when we launch a new annual program)
- assigning them to sponsor an action learning team over six or nine months
- encouraging them to actively coach and mentor key leaders who will factor into their succession plans

Certainly, such in-depth involvement has real benefits for participants. They gain exposure to senior leaders, learn from them, and deepen personal relationships. Yet there are additional, measurable benefits for senior leaders as well. Many of them have shared how unexpectedly valuable this deeper involvement has been to their own awareness, growth, and relationship-building with the next generation of leaders.

A recent program evaluation that MDA co-designed with a client provides clear evidence of this multidirectional impact on executives. In the study, we measured the program’s impact not only on the participants, but on senior leaders who acted as expert teachers in the program and as sponsors to teams of participants solving business problems. These senior leaders achieved significant measurable outcomes as a result of their program participation, including the following:

- **50% agreed** that they had a greater understanding of the leadership talent in their company—a critical measure given their strong focus on succession planning
- **50% agreed** that they had learned new tools and concepts about effective leadership
- **85% agreed** that it was worth the investment of their time to be actively involved in the program

This can be true for participants’ managers as well, since program design can include numerous substantive ways to engage and involve them before, during, and after the development experience. Our design process creates regular

opportunities for the leader’s manager (and, if available, their human resources business partner) to learn about, understand, and contribute to that leader’s growth. By engaging the leader’s manager and other supporting colleagues, savvy designers can help foster leadership development within a genuine learning culture and community—all of which can be measured.

Another major impact, yet one that is seldom measured, is the “cascade effect”—that is, the degree to which participants apply the development they have received to the development of their own teams and direct reports. Typically, program evaluation relies upon participant self-reports to measure this learning application. One program we recently completed included this measurement, and the findings were outstanding: 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I am spending more time developing the talent of my team and those around me.”

Yet we went beyond self-reports, obtaining feedback from participants’ direct reports and other stakeholders who had line of sight to evaluate participants’ on-the-job application. The results: 66% of respondents reported that they also saw “evidence that participants are spending more time developing the talent of their teams and those around them” because of the program. Since the 18 participants in the program had an average of 6 direct reports, our findings demonstrated that another 71 people were directly, positively affected by the program through this measurement of the “cascade effect.”

Leadership development measurement should extend beyond program participants. Factoring multidirectional program impact into the equation helps us avoid the reductive math that simply divides a program’s cost by the number of participants to obtain an investment per participant. This is a widespread practice in too many organizations. For example, if the total program cost is \$200,000 and there are 20 participants, the program is seen as an investment of \$10,000 per participant. In fact, this undervalues the total positive impact of the program. Program designers and advocates, those fighting for leadership development budgets, can greatly benefit by more accurately representing the multidirectional impact of their programs.

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## Measuring the Impact of Leadership Development Programs

While a surprisingly large number of organizations fail to measure the impact of their leadership development programs with any true rigor, others work hard to do just that. Many practitioners and organizations construct evaluations and administer employee surveys and 360 degree instruments that provide the qualitative and quantitative means to more clearly measure an individual leader's ability to retain and apply learning. Some go further, measuring perceived changes in a leader's effectiveness among those with whom they directly work. This is essential, yet it is insufficient, since it fails to capture important additional benefits gained from leadership development efforts. In short, the way leadership development professionals and business leaders continue to conceptualize impact is flawed.

MDA's findings show that organizations sell leadership development programs short when they think solely in terms of the impact on the small cohort attending a given program.

In fact, a well-designed program can have significant, measurable impact on a far larger number of organizational players and result in major business benefits beyond the sum of learning and performance gains achieved by individual participants.

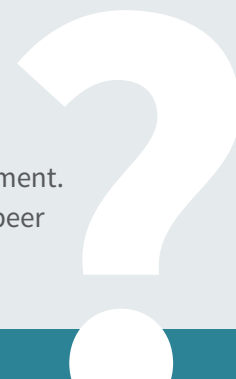
We have described three methods that represent real advances in quality leadership development measurement. While capturing true social capital, action learning, and multidirectional impact are at the leading edge of program measurement, there are smart, cost-effective ways to do so. The result is a more accurate understanding of the positive individual, team, and organizational benefits of leadership development. Effective measurement is an essential component of any well-designed program and a chief aid in ensuring the organization is making wise development investments that pay off in both personal and organizational growth and sustainability.

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## Novel Ways to Measure Your Leadership Development Program Impact

- How does your organization think about successful outcomes of leadership development programs? Beyond the development of individual leaders in the program, what other important outcomes are you hoping to gain from your investment, such as advances in succession management initiatives?
- Can you incorporate action learning projects—ones that tackle real business challenges—into your efforts to support improved measurable outcomes?
- What programmatic design elements lead to multidirectional impact? That is, what are some of the ways that you involve, integrate, or impact a variety of stakeholders beyond the targeted cohort? Consider senior executives, managers, peer groups, and direct report teams.
- How might you and your organization explore and measure the multidirectional impact of leadership development programs?
- Measurable business impact has been seen as the elusive and ultimate program measurement. How might you capture or demonstrate business impact in your programs? Leverage the peer networking and action learning case studies presented here in your thinking.



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MDA Leadership has a proven track record of designing, developing, delivering, and measuring high-impact, cohort-based leadership development programs for leading organizations. Our work has been recognized with two competitive global awards for leadership development excellence in recent years. Contact us to learn more about how we can partner to achieve the individual, team, and organizational results your business needs.

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