



Unlocking the Benefits of On-the-Job Learning in Leadership Development

In today's fast-paced and ever-changing business environment, strong leadership is more critical than ever. Yet, the very pressures that demand agile, capable leaders often leave little time for them to invest in their own growth. Despite the importance of leadership development, many organisations still struggle to make it a strategic priority

Research¹ shows that organisations that do invest in leadership development see significant returns. They are up to three times more likely to exceed financial targets, twelve times more likely to engage and retain top talent, and five times more likely to drive effective innovation.

Leaders who do focus on development often turn to formal training, seminars, research and increasing use of AI. The challenge is that these methods typically focus on delivering information not meaningful growth. Real performance improvement comes when leaders connect new concepts to real world challenges – a process that demands time, focus and a deliberate step back from daily pressures.

Effective programmes are providing leaders with opportunities and skills to address real-world challenges. We see this with leadership development training extending beyond traditional courses and integrating:

- assessment and development planning
- on-the-job development activities
- coaching and mentoring
- peer learning, and
- real-world projects.

| *Leadership development is a continuous journey.*

¹ Bersin, J. & Merrill, A. (2024), The state of leader development (webinar), Franklin Covey; quoted in C Lombardozzi (2024), Current Practices in Leader Development. The Learning Guild

Leadership development isn't a one-off event – it's a continuous journey of learning and adapting. Adults learn best when they can apply new insights to real-world challenges, making on-the-job experiences a powerful driver of growth.

The Key to Development – Reflection

Reflection is the key to unlocking learning from real-world leadership experiences.

Reflective practice – common in fields such as medicine, education, counselling, and IT, enables professionals to turn action into insight. In project management, for example, 'lessons learned' exercises are a form of reflection.

A leading thinker in the field, Donald Schön describes the practice as:

Reflective practice is the ability to reflect on one's actions so as to engage in a process of continuous learning

Schön builds on earlier work by John Dewey (1910) who argued that adults don't learn from experience alone but from reflecting on experience, this approach emphasises the importance of critical analysis. Reflection allows leaders to make sense of past decisions, identify key learnings, and apply them to future challenges – driving both personal and professional growth.

David Kolb's (1984) later integrated these ideas into his experiential learning cycle, where reflection is the essential bridge between experience and lasting change. Research² shows that experiential learning is the most effective way to develop leadership capability. Yet, in practice, the reflective stage is often overlooked – resulting in training that fails to deliver real performance improvements.

Even when learning programmes encourage and support reflection, the practices often fall short because leaders who are developing don't have sufficient:

- **Bandwidth** – reflection requires dedicated time and energy.
- **Skills** – reflection itself is a skill that needs development.
- **Management Support** – leaders as learners need encouragement, feedback, and recognition.
- **Access to Guidance** – managers, mentors, coaches, and peers provide essential perspectives.

While we can't fully predict the leadership challenges of tomorrow, we do know qualities that matter will include curiosity, adaptability, responsiveness, and the ability to build strong relationships. These are capabilities that are best learned in the real world.

We also know that the more leaders develop self-awareness and the capacity to reflect collaboratively on decisions, behaviours, and setbacks, the more effectively they can navigate change.

² Paine & Delves (2019), Innovation in Leadership: An EFHB report into innovation in 12 large companies. EFMD; quoted in C Lombardozi (2024), Current Practices in Leader Development. The Learning Guild

But reflection doesn't happen in a vacuum. Leaders need support – not just in time and tools, but through an organisational culture that values learning. That means creating psychologically safe environments where it's okay to admit mistakes, and where reflection is seen as a strength, not a weakness. Most importantly, senior leaders must model this mindset and actively foster a culture of continuous learning and growth.

Building Better Leaders Through Reflection

It is possible to add reflection practices into leadership development programmes but building a learning culture across the organisation will lead to better performance overall.

As building a learning culture is a long-term goal in the short time reflection can be added to leadership development programmes with the use of:

- **Reflection activities in all structured learning programmes**
 - pre- training events and linked to everyday work
 - during workshops or training courses
 - post- training events to review application of learning
- **Feedback, coaching and mentoring**
 - support to guide leaders in self-reflection.
- **Training that integrates reflective practices**
 - develop reflective practice skills
 - peer learning and/or action learning
- **Formal recognition of on-the-job development**
 - allocating time for reflection and learning
 - recognising development efforts

Building a support learning culture take times and requires commitment, recognition and support from senior leadership. Ideally the organisation needs to:

- **Build a safe culture** to admit mistakes.
- **Embed reflective practices** into everyday work.
- **Encourage shared learning**
- **Model reflective practices** throughout the organisation.
- **Recognise importance of learning** by allowing time and recognising effort
- **Build capability** in feedback, mentoring and coaching.
- **Provide access** to mentoring and coaching.

At the heart of it all is the understanding that information alone doesn't drive performance change. Shifting how a leader thinks and behaves is like any meaningful change – it starts with a commitment to try. The first attempt often feels uncomfortable, and without feedback and support, it's easy to slip back into old habits.

Sustainable growth requires reinforcement, encouragement, and a culture that supports learning through action.

Conclusion

The demand for adaptable, resilient leaders has never been greater. Meeting this need requires more than one-off training sessions – it calls for a sustained, supported commitment to development. Organisations must invest in leadership growth and foster a culture where continuous learning is the norm, not the exception.

By embedding on-the-job learning and reflection into the fabric of leadership development, we can build leaders who don't just respond to change – they lead it, driving success for their teams and the wider organisation.

Cadence not only supports organisations to develop fully integrated leadership development programmes we can also help you on your journey to build a learning culture.

We support all levels of individuals to grow leader skills with development coaching supported by the performance focussed Growth Leader Assessment <https://www.cadence.co.nz/produgie.html>.

For small business we have developed a fully customisable leader development programme Grow Leaders <https://www.cadence.co.nz/grow.html>

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