**National College for
School Leadership**

Innovation in Headteacher Induction

Case Study 5: LeaderLab, Center for Creative Leadership

by Dick Weindling

Spring 2004

Case study research carried out for the

National College for School Leadership

by

Dick Weindling, CREATE Consultants, London

1

Contents

Background information

LeaderLab, an open enrolment commercial program, started in 1991 at The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) in Greensboro, North Carolina. Based on a customer needs analysis, the action-oriented program lasted for six months and used both traditional and non-traditional features. By 1995 the program had been run over 30 times and more than 550 people had taken part. LeaderLab was offered over a ten year period, but is no longer currently available.

Strategic aims

The goal was to help executives take more effective action in their organizations. The majority of participants were middle and senior managers from business, although about 25% were from education and other public services. A key aim of the program was to connect classroom learning to the 'back home' leadership situation, using a process of action learning.

Program structure and design

The six-month program contained two separate sessions of classroom activity, each followed by about three months back on the job where participants implemented their action plan with support from an assigned process adviser (PA). The process advisors usually had a background in counselling, organization development, or management and leadership. Each PA received training and worked with two or three participants. The main components of the program are shown below:

Pre-work	PA phones six weeks ahead. Participants undertake various self-assessments and obtain 360 degree feedback from work colleagues.
Week 1 (6 days)	Feedback from PA on assessments. Classroom activities. Development of the action plan which is discussed by the triad of change partners.
Three months back on job	Implementation of the plans. Writing the learning journal which is sent to the PA. Working with the PA and the back-home change partners.
Week 2 (4 days)	Classroom activities. Discussions with PA and change partners. Revision of the action plan.
Two and a half months back on the job	Implement revised plans. Writing the learning journal and meetings with PA.
Program Completion	Participants write in-depth summary of their experience. Final meeting with PA.
Annual network meeting	For all alumni to provide continuing support and learning.

Program processes

Prior to the first classroom session, the participants complete several self-assessment instruments, have their co-workers evaluate their performance, and do an audit of their current work situation. At the first session at CCL, the participants receive feedback on all the data they have collected and work with their PA. The PAs generally report that after the first session the individual moves to real life situations and an analysis of the actions that they need to undertake. The data from the instruments may be used again later to challenge or confirm a participant's self-understanding.

There are lectures and discussions, and the participants engage in a number of experiential and non-traditional learning activities. During the sessions they work in groups of three as 'Change Partners', who provide each other with mutual support. They are encouraged to establish a similar set of change partners back home.

Throughout the six month period they work with their PA, through meetings and regular phone calls. Face-to-face meetings are crucial as research by CCL suggests that three months is about the longest that a relationship can be enthusiastically kept alive over the phone. The learning journal is used for both reflection by the participant and for communication with the PA. Participants are encouraged to use whatever method they find best to complete the journal, such as a tape recorder, computer, or pen and paper.

Developing an action plan was a fundamental part of the program. The vision building consists of guided visualisations to help the participant obtain a picture of their ideal leadership situation. The action planning process involved multiple attempts to articulate the vision and then determine the steps needed to work towards the vision. Participants were asked to take action at three levels: personal, group and system. Concrete short- and long-term goals were decided, and the initial steps had to be achievable in the three month period. During the second session at CCL the action plans were revised in the light of experience and then implemented in the next phase.

Program content

LeaderLab uses 360 degree feedback, assessment instruments, visioning techniques, acting and artistic activities, journal writing, action learning and classroom lectures and exercises.

There were three areas of content in the program which are introduced through lectures and discussions:

1. challenges faced by leaders in the future – e.g. rapid change, managing a diversity of people and views, building the future through a shared sense of purpose, dealing with each leader's individual situation.

2. five leadership competencies to deal with these challenges – dealing with interpersonal relationships, organizational systems, decision making trade-offs, flexible thinking and acting, and maintaining an emotional balance.

3. skills and knowledge for self-development – e.g. how to learn from experience by 'going against the grain' (GAG, using situations that are personally difficult or uncomfortable), and using structured reflection through completion of the daily learning journal.

In LeaderLab the notion of the participant's 'sense of purpose' is rooted in the idea that people need strong motivation to take action. This motivation can develop out of an increased awareness of an ideal or vision for the future, and a clear picture of the needs of the current leadership situation. During the first week the program works with the individual leader's sense of purpose; during the second week it focuses more on developing a shared sense of purpose with the workgroup or organisation, which is referred to as 'building the future'.

A number of non-traditional classroom activities such as; acting, artistic work and 3-D problem solving, were used in the program. For the artistic activities a professional artist asked the participants to depict their current leadership situation in terms of family, work, friends, and interests. They also constructed an object from natural

materials as a personal metaphor or vision of change in a non-verbal way. These activities were intended to help participants understand leadership 'as a performing art' (Vaill, 1989). The activities were controversial and uncomfortable, and therefore a GAG (going against the grain) experience for some of the participants.

Learning culture and program principles

The program was an extension of the traditional CCL model which focuses on self-awareness. The main difference was that LeaderLab provided mechanisms for support to enable the participants to take action. Where 'action' was defined as the translation of self-knowledge into specific activities to enhance their leadership capabilities. This was based on the process of 'action learning' developed by Revans (1983) and Argyris et al. (1985), which sees real-world action as a valuable source of knowledge about the self, and conversely, views organisational change as a manifestation of individual growth and development. In LeaderLab the problems participants address are real; they deal with them over time and with the support and confrontation of their change partners and PA; and in the process they change both themselves and the system in which they work.

The structure of the program was designed to support learning through developmental relationships in two ways. First, the PA helps to tailor the program to the individual needs of the participant. Second, participants are grouped into triads of change partners in the CCL sessions who work together using each other as a resource. They are asked to set up a similar system back home, with people who can give them support and encouragement, advice and honest feedback. Because many of the changes require personal change, the back-home change partner may be a spouse or living partner.

The daily learning journals are used to document events and record important issues. The reported benefits include enhancing reflective thinking skills; distilling the lessons of experience; tracking learning, trends and patterns over time. As they are routinely sent to the PA, they provide much of the content for discussion. They are personal and confidential, no one but the PA sees them, unless the participant chooses to share the journal with others.

CCL believes that a learning environment which facilitates effective leadership development involves a combination of three elements: assessment, challenge and support. The process adviser plays the following roles within each of the elements (see McCauley, Moxley and Van Velsor, 1988).

Element	Role of PA	Function
Assessment	Feedback provider	Raise awareness of skill deficiencies and of strengths the person is not fully utilising.
	Reflective thinking partner	Probes assumptions; provides different perspectives for clarifying issues.
	Expert	Offers advice, suggests strategies based on assessments and knowledge of change and development processes.
Challenge	Dialogue partner	Insists that ownership of and deciding upon course of action rests with the individual.
	Accountant	Motivates by asking for an account of progress.
Support	Role model	Demonstrates competency in modelling change and development process
	Counsellor	Aids in understanding of emotional side of learning – frustrations of failure, fears of change, etc.
	Positive reinforcer	Encourages; expresses confidence; acknowledges manager for making progress.
	Historian	Tracks progress; reminds of accomplishments.

Effective PAs had three key attributes: knowledge, a supportive style, and availability.

- Knowledge - Effective PAs had a thorough understanding of human development and adult learning processes. They have the expertise to use counselling skills to encourage dialogue and allow the individual to work through challenging issues. They must be credible to the participant and have experience of working in or with organisations.

- Supportive Style – The successful PA works within the guidelines of the program, yet deals with the evolution of the process as new information is introduced. Although their personal style varies, they share some abilities, including the motivation to teach others, keen observational skills, knowledge of how to encourage action and when to pause, the ability to sense the personal issues underlying the developmental situation, and a strong desire to help others grow and change.

- Availability – All coaching takes time. The PAs needed to commit 25 to 30 hours to each of the participants over the six months. They had to allocate time to review the pre-work data prior to the first meeting, spend time on the various face-to-face meetings, make regular phone calls and read the learning journals, and advise throughout the development and implementation of the action plan.

Training for the process advisors

A three-day training program is held for the PAs to inform them about the goals, competencies, expectations and the instruments of LeaderLab. In addition, PAs go through a practice session which is observed for the purpose of selection and further coaching. They are given a clear and structured set of notes, affectionately known as the *PA Waltz*. CCL staff have frequent communication with the PAs during the program to offer advice and sort out any problems. There are also quarterly meetings and an annual retreat. Each of these meetings has a specific focus and is meant to help PAs and program managers learn from each other and contribute to a general knowledge about the leadership development process. Staff are updated on the latest program

innovations. Sharing stories, experiences, problems, and concerns increases the PAs understanding of the program and their role, and enhances his or her effectiveness.

Peer reviews by the PAs are used as a learning and coaching tool. They discuss their work in review teams, thus expanding the knowledge base of each member of the team as well as providing assessment, challenge and support for each other. These peer reviews have become especially valuable over time. As a PA works with a number of people from the same organisation, they become more knowledgeable about a particular industry and its unique needs. This PA then becomes a valuable resource and coach for other PAs when they work with LeaderLab participants from that industry.

Learning outcomes and impact

In 1995/6 an evaluation was conducted by CCL through questionnaires with 29 LeaderLab participants and a control group of 38 people who had not yet attended the program. Telephone interviews were used to obtain the perceptions of 27 participants, their co-workers and process advisers three months after LeaderLab. A second set of telephone interviews were used with 32 participants to obtain their views about the features of the program.

The program was perceived very positively by the participants and their co-workers in terms of the significant changes made, and the development of competencies. Statistically significant higher scores were obtained from the participants than from the control group. But the evaluation showed the importance of turbulence in affecting how well the action plans were carried out. The turbulence could be work related; such as the arrival of a new CEO; or personal; such as separation from a partner, and psychological; such as depression.

Participants differed in their approach to action planning, and three general models were found:

- Goal focus - where the participant set a goal for action and stuck to it

- Vision focus – where the action plan was viewed merely as a step in the process of working towards a larger vision

- Process focus – where the action planning was seen as an ongoing process used to conduct work and communicate with colleagues.

The second set of telephone interviews asked participants to rate how specific features of the program had helped them take more effective action. The rank order on a 10 point scale is shown below:

Feature	Mean Rating
Process Advisor	8.9
Program Structure	8.2
Action Planning	7.8
Diversity of Group	7.4
Artistic Activities	7.1
Acting	6.3
Journaling	6.3
Visioning	6.2
Change Partners	6.1
3-D Problem Solving	5.7

Previous work by CCL found that program ratings gradually decrease over time, so it is interesting that these ratings which were collected three to four months after LeaderLab, are particularly high for the process advisor and the program structure (stretching the intervention over six months through multiple sessions and an action-learning approach).

All the participants who were interviewed said how helpful the PA had been as the following quotes illustrate:

> "Without question, the most important ingredient was the PA. She worked very hard to get ready for me: going through the notes in preparation. She gave me a breathing image of the data from a static interpretation of the numbers. The discipline of sending her materials and talking to her kept me on track."

> "My PA acted as a mirror for myself so I could see patterns, and maintain consistency. He challenged me to explore my feelings and develop different strategies."

> "The PA helped me visualise the changes needed and showed me where to focus and how to accomplish my goal."

It was noticeable that the PA's expert role was almost always related to process not content. Their advice was not based on an intimate knowledge of an industry or

organisation; rather it was based on their understanding of the change and development process. The participants saw the PA's objectivity and positive regard for them as the critical ingredient of successful relationships.

Participants liked the structure of the program with the two training sessions and the phases of implementation in between. Returning for the second week was especially important in keeping participants motivated to work on their action plans.

> "I was dubious at first. Then everything clicked for me during week two at CCL. It was a revolutionary time for me. I realised the foundation must be laid in week two."

> "The first session was a discovery process. The second week allowed me to view what worked, what didn't, and why."

The majority of people found the journal was helpful primarily as a reflective learning tool. The modest ratings were mainly due to difficulties finding the time to complete it. A few participants expressed frustration with not understanding the purpose of the journal earlier in the program.

The program assumes a process orientation towards action planning, meaning that participants are encouraged to draft a plan; work on implementation; reflect and distil learning along the way; and revise, update, expand, or change the plan as needed. Thus, learning from actions over time and feeding back into the action-planning process are critical.

Although LeaderLab was not designed specifically for new heads or principals, the main features could easily be used in such a program. The role of the PA is similar to that of a mentor, and the emphasis on action learning fits well with some of the other programs of leadership development.

Additional information and references

The information on LeaderLab was taken from the following two CCL books:

Young, D P and Dixon, N M, 1996, *Helping Leaders Take Effective Action: A program evaluation*, Greensboro, NC, Center for Creative Leadership

Guthrie, V A, 1999, *Coaching for Action*. Greensboro, NC, Center for Creative Leadership

Other references

Argyris, C, Putnam, R, and Smith, D, 1985, *Action Science*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

McCauley, C D, Moxley, R S and Van Velsor, E, 1988, *The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass

Peterson, K D and Deal, T E, 2002, *The Shaping School Culture Fieldbook*, San Francisco, Jossey Bass

Revans, R, 1983, *ABC of Action Learning*. Kent, Chartwell-Bratt Ltd
(Note that the current edition is 1998, London: Lemos and Crane Publishers)

Vail, P B, 1989, *Managing as a Performing Art*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass

Commentary

by Bruce Barnett

The LeaderLab program, created by the Center for Creative Leadership, operated over a 10-year period during the 1990s with business executives. The program incorporates a variety of effective instructional design features, and if it was still operating, the developers might have made some changes based on the reported program evaluation data. These key features and improvements are described below.

Key features

LeaderLab is unique in many respects, especially when contrasted with most professional development programs for school leaders. The design features that facilitate the growth and development of participants are the: (1) application of learning in the participants' organizations, (2) program content and activities that encourage new ideas and practices, and (3) evaluation data from a variety of sources.

Workplace application

A hallmark of LeaderLab is its focus on assisting participants to apply their knowledge back in their organizational settings. Participants are encouraged to select several "change partners" in their personal or professional setting for support and encouragement; however, the key factor in the application and transfer process is the ongoing involvement of the Process Advisor (PA). Program organizers recognize the features that make effective coaches, particularly their knowledge of human development and adult learning, their observational and human relations skills, and their willingness to devote considerable time to the process. A common oversight in many professional development programs is the presumption that peer coaches already possess the knowledge and skills necessary to facilitate the growth of another person; however, no such assumption is made in LeaderLab. PAs attend a three-day training program where they are exposed to the elements of the program and practice various skills. They also meet quarterly and attend an annual retreat. LeaderLab participants rate PAs higher than any other component of the program, particularly their ability to remain objective, process information, and build a strong collegial relationship.

Another factor that encourages workplace transfer is the expectation that an action plan be developed and implemented with the PA's support and guidance. The action planning occurs through a series of interrelated phases. Participants begin by collecting self-assessment data and information from co-workers prior to the first training session. During the initial training session, these data are used to develop the action plan, which is then implemented over the next three months with the PAs ongoing involvement. Based on their progress, plans are altered at the next training session and implemented over the remaining time in the program. At the conclusion of the program, participants summarize their experiences and meet with their PAs to discuss how to continue the plan in the future. Finally, participants can attend yearly network meetings for further discussion of their plans.

Content and activities

During the two separate weeks of training, participants are exposed to content and processes that are intended to stretch their thinking and commitment to action. The content of these sessions focuses on future challenges facing corporate leaders, leadership competencies, and self-development. A distinct feature of the training is the use of non-traditional "going against the grain" (GAG) activities, such as acting, artistic work, and 3-D problem solving. In addition, the PAs work with their assigned leaders during the training sessions, assisting them in translating these learning activities into the development and implementation of the action plan.

Program evaluation design

The evaluation of most professional development programs tends to address participants' impressions of the training session activities, ignoring how their actions have changed or how their organizations have benefited. The LeaderLab evaluation process, however, incorporates multiple sources of data from participants, their co-workers, PAs, and business executives who have not attended the program. Therefore, program organizers have been able to determine what features are working well from the participants' standpoint, examine co-workers' views of how participants are implementing changes, and compare the change strategies and competencies of participants and non-participants. What is most impressive about the results is that participants are

incorporating significant changes in their organizations and are developing leadership competencies in ways not seen in corporate leaders who have not attended LeaderLab.

Suggested improvements

One wonders why such a successful professional development program is no longer available to corporate executives. Perhaps the enormous time commitments and training costs became too prohibitive to manage and finance. Several aspects of the LeaderLab program might have been improved had the program continued, which have implications for other professional development programs, especially those where school leaders are the primary audience. These areas are: (1) expanding the program duration, (2) training back-home change partners, and (3) assigning PAs to participants.

Program duration

One difficulty that many new and experienced principals express is being out of their school buildings. The duration and time commitment required away from school during their first six months on the job is impractical for beginning principals. One option would be to spread the time commitment over a longer period of time, reducing the amount of time required at the beginning of their new jobs. Given the steep learning curve for many new principals, this type of intense professional development experience might be better suited to school administrators who have several years experience.

The evaluation data suggest that participants need ongoing assistance to contend with the "turbulence" affecting their change efforts. One solution would be to develop a third training session where PAs and participants could assess factors affecting their change efforts and devise methods for monitoring the change process. Another option would be to use the annual network meeting for this purpose.

Back-home change partners

Because PAs are intimately involved in the program and receive training, they are clear about the goals and their role in assisting participants. The same cannot be said for the back-home change partners. This component has been rated as one the lowest in comparison with other program features. If change partners are intended to encourage application and transfer, they need a formal introduction to the program and their role

expectations, which can be provided by the PA. Change partners also could attend one of the week-long training sessions, perhaps the second one.

PA assignments

A good deal of attention is given to training PAs and providing them with ongoing support once the program is underway. The program developers also use some of the activities during the PA training to determine their suitability for the program. What is not clear is how the PAs are assigned to participants, which tends to be an ongoing dilemma for most coaching and mentoring programs. Although the geographical proximity of the participant and the coach dictates many matches, sometimes these relationships do not flourish. Based on the evaluation data, however, most matches are working quite well. For those that are not, it would be important for program developers to monitor and assist partnerships, and in extreme cases, a new PA may need to be assigned.

Commentary

by Kent Peterson

The LeaderLab is a well-designed, intensive program to increase the self-knowledge and leadership ability of corporate and educational managers. The program employs a combination of structures such as pre-assessments, extensive interaction with a "process advisor" (PA), work-focused action plans, multiple-day sessions at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), as well as a training-implementation structure. While this program design requires a significant amount of available time for participants and considerable travel funds, the mix of on-site and off-site work should provide relevant opportunities to learn and practice skills while engaging in meaningful personal reflection and receiving significant coaching from the PA.

The use of multiple assessments prior to initial training is unique and a useful approach for both engaging the participant and establishing baseline information on leadership style and needs. The program "pre-work" is a useful combination of personal assessments, 360-degree feedback from co-workers, and a careful audit of the context of the participant's work situation. These varied assessments offer the participant a broad-based understanding of self and work situation through multiple lenses and conceptual models. These data should increase the precision and focus of the learning as well as providing data to enliven discussions. Additionally, the data and assessments place skill development within concrete depictions of both personal and organization contexts.

The classroom portions of the program employ a mix of approaches from lectures and discussion to acting and artistic activities. Following knowledge of effective adult learning, LeaderLab varies the approaches used at CCL. While the mix of assessments instruments, 360-degree feedback, lecture, journal writing, action learning, exercises, and lectures is common in many of the programs, the addition of non-traditional acting and artistic activities is less common and an interesting addition to the program.

Under some circumstances these approaches can be uncomfortable, but they can have several major outcomes. First, they can be particularly effective with adults who learn better in visual or kinesthetic modes. Second, they can increase the ability of leaders to see their ideas and themselves from more symbolic and metaphorical perspectives. Third, these exercises can help them learn how to use innovative approaches for the leadership development of their teachers (Peterson and Deal, 2002).

The LeaderLab also includes a clear rationale or "theory of action" as part of its design. A "theory of action" represents the underlying sets of beliefs about how or why the components of the program will work to achieve its specified ends. In leadership development programs, a "theory of action" specifies why the mix of activities will produce leaders who are more likely to achieve their goals. While most programs have an implicit theory of action, LeaderLab states directly that it believes that "...people need a strong motivation to take action. This motivation can develop out of an increased awareness of an ideal or vision for the future, and a clear picture of the needs of the current leadership situation." (LeaderLab Case) Their training is based around this set of assumptions

The program approaches the design and training of the process advisors with considerable care. To begin with, there is a thoughtful rationale and specific description of roles in the program. For example: each different PA role is specified, attributes of effective PAs are described, and specific skills are thoroughly detailed. Next, they receive extensive training themselves including: a three day training on the assessment instruments, advising practice sessions and feedback, advising process notes, interaction with CCL staff during the year, as well as quarterly meetings, and an annual retreat. This is one of the most extensive and thoroughly developed training programs for advisors and mentors anywhere.

Recommendations

These recommendations are provided to suggest ways to refine, fine-tune and enhance existing qualities of the program. All programs are designed within fiscal, social, and contextual parameters. The ideas are provided as thoughts to consider as these programs move forward.

The structure, content, and ideas in the program may not only develop the leadership of the principals, but may importantly model how they could develop and nurture teacher leadership. The program may wish to make this implicit learning outcome explicit and a defined goal.

If it was not already part of the program, LeaderLab could provide a detailed curricula and conceptual rationale for the specific assessments and approaches used to develop leadership. By making the underlying model explicit, participants are more likely to incorporate the ideas and concepts into their own mental models.

The program could consider using principals from the local district as PAs. This would enhance the skills of principals in the local district and may begin the development of a local professional community among PAs and participants.

While getting away from one's local context is important, and meeting at CCL is a unique experience, the program might consider have regional centers where principals from the region could attend and build social and professional ties. These could be collaborative efforts with universities, districts, or principal centers such as the one in Georgia described in another case.

CCL provides high quality training for leaders from a wide variety of organizations: corporations, the military, schools and districts, not-for-profits. It is relatively rare for new principals to have the chance to interact with other leaders from such a wide array of organizations. It might be quite useful for new principals to engage in carefully facilitated discussions with leaders in other institutions about leadership, the nature of motivation and work, and organizational context and culture. In addition, there could be fruitful learning occurring through cross-organizational visits and shadowing.

Continued growth of one's leadership requires continued opportunities to develop skills and knowledge. The program could provide counseling and perhaps design a professional development plan with participants that specified areas for ongoing improvement, programs that would provide needed training, and a set of specific five-year goals.

The program might add a LeaderLab embedded section to the existing CCL website. It would provide links to information related to the core content of the program. Many of the professional materials, suggested additional readings, and even short audio clips could be made available for going back over ideas, topics, or skills initially addressed in the workshops.