



Boss Support Can Make or Break the Effectiveness of Leadership Training

From Center for Creative Leadership

A lot of effort, time, money, and attention go into developing leadership training programs, retreats, classes, webinars, and other formal learning opportunities.

Program designers usually focus on meeting the learning needs of participants and aligning content with corporate strategy and goals. And they should.

But what happens before and after those formal programs has a major impact on the return on training investment — and could be the key to ensuring success: boss support.

Our research on what makes leadership development programs successful has found that people who have support from their bosses get significantly more out of these types of training. In fact, it's the primary predictor of a leadership development program's success.

When bosses are more engaged and actively show clear support of their direct reports' development, participants report they get more value from the training.

To better understand a supervisor's impact on their participants' success, we conducted 2 studies. Our findings revealed that when bosses are involved and supportive of training, participants experience the following outcomes:

Leaders' self-awareness, leadership capability, and leadership effectiveness significantly improve.

Leaders have a greater impact on the teams they lead.

Leaders receive more favorable ratings on organizational effectiveness, management capabilities, and employee empowerment.

Boss Support of Employees Drives Better Organizational Outcomes

We also found that greater boss support drives better organizational outcomes. The data show that bosses rated most leaders participating in our Leadership Development Program (LDP)[®] with high marks for organizational impact:

79% showed increased or significantly increased organizational effectiveness.

64% showed increased or significantly increased employee empowerment.

75% showed increased or significantly increased management capabilities.

Although the average impact of the program was high, leaders who exhibited the most change in key leadership parameters were more likely to have strong support from their bosses. Those who exhibited no change after their leadership course were more likely to lack boss support. For example, there was a 16% gap in boss support between leaders who made significant improvements in their organizational effectiveness and those who made no improvement. There were similar gaps of 8% and 13% in empowerment and management capabilities, respectively.

So bosses can literally make — or break — the effectiveness of an organization's leadership development program.

How to Be a Supportive Boss Before & After Your Direct Reports' Training

So, are your direct reports preparing to take part in an in-person or virtual leadership development program?

If so, plan to have a couple of conversations with them. Meeting with your employees both before and after they attend a leadership training program is a great way to maximize their success and communicate your buy-in. It needn't require a large investment of your time, but it helps convey you're a supportive boss and adds considerable accountability to the process.

These types of conversations can happen in person, of course, but can be just as effective if they happen remotely. (Just keep in mind how to craft your persona for effective virtual communication.)

Before the Training: How to Show Boss Support

Ideally, participants would take a 360-degree feedback evaluation tool, like one of our Benchmarks® 360 assessments, that includes input from their boss, which provides further fuel for the leadership development experience. At this stage, a supportive boss will also help their direct reports choose a strategic challenge to work on during or after the program.

During your pre-meeting, plan to ask questions for 20% of the meeting and then listen to each direct report's responses for the remaining 80% of the time. Don't feel like you need to memorize these questions — we recommend that you have the questions

and topics you plan to cover in front of you. It will keep the conversation flowing and can serve as a checklist. Ask:

1. What do you hope to get out of the training? Have them articulate their goal, and follow up by asking, "What else?"
2. What developmental areas do you want to work on as you go through the program? This will allow them to admit what they think they aren't great at. Ideally, participants also take a 360 evaluation that includes input from you. Encourage them to consider that feedback when choosing a strategic challenge to work on after the program.
3. What do you believe are your strengths, and how might you improve upon them? Our research shows that great leaders are known for their towering strengths rather than the absence of weaknesses, so improving strengths is still crucial. Most people over-focus on weaknesses.
4. What sort of support and help do you need in order to apply the learning back at work? You may be surprised what they actually need from you as a manager to keep it growing.
5. During training, what support do you need so that you can fully disconnect from your daily responsibilities? You want participants to soak up the learning in the program so they can implement real changes when they return. If you skip this step, expect them to be distracted during the training.

Before your conversation ends, schedule a follow-up meeting for after the program. This will help ensure that it occurs, and it also lets your direct reports know that they have boss support, that you're committed to their success, and that you'll be checking in again after the training is complete.

After the Training: How to Show Boss Support

Once your direct reports are done with leadership training, your goal is to help them turn their learning into action items. After all, the new insights and skills gained in a leadership development program are only valuable if they're applied.

After the program, participants ideally would apply their new skills and insights to the strategic challenge they agreed to with their bosses during the preparation phase. In addition, organizations can provide resources to the bosses of program participants so they understand what the participant learned and how to support ongoing development.

The post-training meeting creates an opportunity for direct reports to publicly commit to personal goals and allows them to capitalize on their enthusiasm coming out of the training before too much time passes and their interest wanes.

Similar to the pre-meeting, we recommend that bosses spend 20% of the meeting talking — mostly asking questions — and 80% of the time in active listening and coaching mode. You can ask:

1. How was the program? This general question will help the conversation start off on a casual note.
2. What did you learn? Move into discussing both the content and personal insights they came away with. How do they plan to apply their new skills and insights to the strategic challenge you discussed during the preparation phase?
3. How are you going to bring this back to work? Next, discuss implementation. How will they convey what they learned to their team, or talk about their identified strengths and weaknesses? Team members who didn't attend the leadership

development experience are often curious to hear about it and can benefit from your reports' experience. Encourage them to share insights with colleagues.

4. How can we work together to expand your network? In many leadership development programs, participants have opportunities to build relationships with other people in their organization — often in other functions or “silos.” In open-enrollment programs, participants may meet other professionals from their industry or even different industries. This often develops into a formal or informal support network and sometimes includes peer coaching and accountability. Express your support for these relationships, which can help both employees and their teams.

5. How can I support you? Similar to the pre-meeting, it's important to ask how you can support them in implementing changes. Not only does it illustrate your commitment, but you may learn something about how you can be more effective, too.

You'll notice that there's some overlap between these questions and the topics you covered in the pre-meeting, which is intentional. The first meeting sets the tone and helps prepare your direct reports, while the follow-up is designed to see it through and reiterate your support. You can even turn it into a coaching conversation, reinforcing lessons learned and helping your employees take responsibility for their actions and their development.

If your post-training meeting comes fairly soon after the training, you'll be able to help your direct reports focus on applying what they learned and execute a plan that will make their training — and your time — well worth it.

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