



# Evaluating the Effectiveness of Leadership Development Initiatives

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## ABSTRACT

Leadership development initiatives are a major investment for organizations seeking to cultivate leadership skills and drive long-term success. Despite their importance, the evaluation of these programs' effectiveness remains inconsistent and often superficial. Traditional evaluation methods focus heavily on initial reactions, learning outcomes, and behavior changes, but often fail to assess the broader organizational impact. This paper explores the significance of leadership development, examines various frameworks and methods for assessment, and highlights the persistent challenges faced in evaluating program effectiveness. Using a case study approach and a review of best practices, the research identifies key performance indicators, innovative evaluation models, and emerging trends. It proposes a more holistic and multi-dimensional strategy for leadership development evaluation, emphasizing the need for ongoing assessment, stakeholder involvement, and a balance between qualitative and quantitative measures. Future directions for research and practice are also outlined, offering insights into how organizations can better capture and enhance the true impact of their leadership development initiatives.

**Keywords:** Leadership development, Training evaluation, Program effectiveness, Organizational impact, Key performance indicators (KPIs), Qualitative assessment, Leadership capability.

## INTRODUCTION

Leadership development programmes are widely implemented across organisational contexts to facilitate leadership skills, knowledge, and behaviours, with the intent of creating business impact. Despite many organisations investing considerable time and resources in the implementation of leadership programmes, the actual effectiveness of such initiatives is rarely evaluated post-delivery to establish training transfer and demonstrate impact. Consequently, much of the resulting research regarding programme effectiveness is often based on the initial development and/or delivery stage of the training cycle. Traditional training effectiveness criteria are largely concerned with how well the training was received, including a focus on participant reactions, learning, and behaviour, whilst the limited research on evaluation largely focuses on more traditional inputs, outputs, and learning. In contrast, the concept of training impact encompasses a broader focus on the effects of the training perceived by firms, including changes in the bottom line or financial performance, employee turnover, employee motivation and performance, and workplace conflict. This compartmentalisation of training assessment is problematic, as it implies a difference in how learning transfers and is sustained in organisations (i.e., learning-focused and knowledge-based roles), and it reinforces a perception of lower-level evaluation criteria being acceptable for softer skills such as leadership. Furthermore, whilst large organisations may be able to justify resourcing more traditional measurement and valuation techniques, smaller firms may generally not have such resources available. Consequently, this research aims to advance the nascent field of leadership capability development programme evaluation by seeking to better understand how the impact of these training initiatives is defined, measured, and understood in organisations. The paper aims to investigate these questions through an exploratory qualitative study of a professional services firm, which has implemented a leadership development programme throughout its various divisions across five

countries. Through a multi-faceted approach to data collection and analysis, this research aims to contribute to the theoretical and applied understanding of leadership development programme evaluation and impact through the articulation of a construct of training impact as it relates to organisational and leadership development training initiatives [1, 2].

### **The Importance of Leadership Development**

There is an increasing expectation of organisations in all sectors, public, private, and not-for-profit, to demonstrate accountability and value for money. Increased stakeholder scrutiny means that organisations are finding it increasingly important to demonstrate that significant resource investments in initiatives that have an uncertain return on investment, such as leadership development, are justified. This increased scrutiny applies to higher education institutions, and there is pressure from governments and others for HEIs to provide evidence of the wider impact of leadership and management development initiatives. Leadership development is a fundamental component of the success of an organisation. The individuals responsible for leading and managing employees, and ultimately the organisation itself, must facilitate, train, manage, and steer the organisation towards longevity, profitability, or the achievement of the goals/mission as proposed. It is on these individuals that the success of the organisation will ultimately lie, and as such, the need to produce and maintain excellent leaders should be high on the agenda of every business. Organisations that take a proactive approach to the development of their leaders will be better placed to face the challenges of tomorrow's world. Effective leaders are flexible, responsive, and decisive, and promote speed across the organisation as a means of coping with the increasing rates of change and complexity. The collaboration of those required to develop the strategy, and those charged with developing the individuals to execute the strategy is essential to ensure the successful delivery of both. The importance of the development of high-potential individuals in organisations is often articulated, with a myriad of reasons offered as to why organisations should go about doing it, and most complicit about what needs to be done. The creation of business aware leaders who can think laterally and beyond the norms of accepted practice for organisational development ahead of the curve is crucial [3, 4].

### **Frameworks For Leadership Development**

The complexity and dynamics of organizations require leaders who are adaptable and can use different styles depending on the situation. Research suggests that leadership effectiveness, defined as the degree to which a leader accomplishes his or her stated goals, is positively correlated with a leader's ability to adjust his or her style to the requirements of the situation. This effective flexibility or adaptive knowledge is a challenge for training and development programs. However, organizations invest heavily in training leaders using methodologies such as formal training programs, peer coaching, executive coaching, on-the-job action-learning, and mentoring. To date, it is not clear which of these methods is most effective. Collectively, company leaders spend billions of dollars training leaders each year to enhance those leaders' skills and behavioral effectiveness. Engagement in training to develop leadership skills has become commonplace. Yet, for decades, the need for clarity concerning what these training programs accomplish has persisted. A leading organization in management training recently ceased offering formal leadership training, stating that after two years of training and extensive expenditures, leaders remained, for the most part, unchanged. The inability to evaluate the effectiveness of leadership development initiatives is a significant problem for practitioners that is poorly addressed in the academy. More than a decade later, the question of whether leadership development initiatives are effective remains unanswered. Although practitioners who design and deliver programs may have implicit models specifying how development initiatives will lead to positive leader behavior change, explicit theories of change are rarely documented. In practice, the absence of a published model of leader behavior change limits both accountability for program designers and implementation in organizations. The context and content of programs vary widely, but iterations and cross-fertilization remain informal and limited. This is not ideal [5, 6].

### **Assessment Methods**

There is a long history in the field of management and leadership development of attempting to assess the effectiveness of training initiatives. The effectiveness of management and leadership development was assessed. On the negative side, a study of leadership training for a postal company reported no improvement following training, a speedier assessment of co-design initiatives than anticipated being a reason offered. Effectiveness was assessed from the perspectives of intermediate outcomes, that is, changes in participant behaviour and knowledge, with some current success. Outcomes related to participant knowledge and behaviour elicited greater success than systemic outcomes. In-depth qualitative data were gathered from various perspectives (participants, clients, facilitators, managers) using semi-structured interviews. Several, including changes in behaviours reported by clients and managers, were common to an assessment. A systematic review identified methods used to assess

effectiveness. There is a difficulty in devising random assignment situations for leadership effectiveness assessment because of the normal ethical issues of conducting a study with zero pre-program training or support. In the assessment literature, process issues of the programme itself (the “how”) were assessed. Aspects of approach, delivery, content, design/delivery fit, willingness to participate, and degree of adjustment during were considered. Evaluation methods ran the gamut from light touch tools to in-depth qualitative methods, focusing on specific components of the initiative rather than across components. With the exception of an extensive framework, no evaluation framework was found in the assessment literature. Most evaluations gathered only perceptions of reactions and initial learning. In-depth, qualitative investigation of behaviour change and impacts was less frequent, although qualitative data gathering was involved. Only one commenced an assessment of organizational impacts at 3 levels, of which said standards were levels 2 (results/behaviour change) and 3 (organization/system changes). No use of specifically designed measures to assess behaviour change was found, although other measures of varying appropriateness were employed. Both studies aggregated designs into classical measures of pre- and post-effectiveness. Most attempted to triangulate, but mostly with ambiguous combinations of qualitative and quantitative data [7, 8].

### **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)**

Success of leadership development initiatives may not be measurable through a series of simple quantitative measures such as the number of training hours or the percentage of certification increase over time. Although these quantitative measures are important to the process, they do not directly translate into measures of success of leadership development. Fulfilling the success criteria of leadership development initiatives requires a specific set of key performance indicators (KPIs) to be established. These KPIs should not necessarily capture how effective training is rolled out. Leadership development is an ongoing process that may take several measures of credibility and legitimacy. Because of its nature, it may take years before the benefits, either direct or indirect, are realized. Therefore, it is crucial to determine how progress on the success criteria can be captured before more formal KPIs are put in use. For the same reasons, KPIs need to account for the holistic nature of leadership development. It may encompass more aspects than tangible formal training and learning. Change to leadership development prioritization, progression, practice, enthusiasm, attitudes, and the associated change to organizational culture are all aspects that may alter perceptions of the success of the entire process and, in time, lead to observable changes in attitude, behavior, skill, and performance. The success of measuring the effectiveness of leadership development is essential to monitor progress on the success criteria governing this. Very shortly, specific quantitative measures of effectiveness based on these thematic areas will be put into use. In the years to come, different quasi-experimental designs are planned to be put in use to empirically measure causal effects and effectiveness. Hereby, learning metrics, assumptions upon which the development efforts are built, and measures of the cost or investments in the process, would capture how effective the current design is and how to modify efforts as needs change [9, 10].

### **Evaluation Models**

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Leadership Development Initiatives: Grounded Theory Study of the Role of Programme Evaluation in Computerised Decision-Making in a Global Oil and Gas Company. Management and leadership development is a key priority for many organisations and a sizable industry. Influenced by frameworks like Hay/McBer that classify leadership competencies, the development industry asserts that numerous psychometric tools can accurately measure individuals’ competency levels or training gaps. For fifty years, measuring the effectiveness and impact of management development has challenged practitioners and academics alike. Studies indicate moderate effectiveness regarding participants’ reactions to programmes and self-reports of learning, highlighting that while managers perceive programmes positively and believe they have learned, they are less certain about actual behavioral changes as a result. Attempts to connect development interventions to organisational performance yield only moderately helpful measures. Some evidence suggests that a more engaged workforce is generally more productive, but rigorous causal links between specific management interventions and productivity improvements remain unfounded. Event tracking, combining qualitative and quantitative measures, monitors long-term impacts, while performance simulations are increasingly popular. However, few large-scale assessments robustly link interventions to outcomes. Metrics like promotion scores and compensation are common, but no widely accepted performance metric exists, leaving investments in human capital interventions as speculative. Despite ongoing interest, empirical attention to deviance theory evaluation’s usage in organisations is limited. While emerging expertise roles in infrastructure evaluation are noted, experts often take oversight roles in cumulative investment decisions. Given the reliance on objective numerical evaluation, it’s uncertain if new evaluation styles will

be welcomed by practitioners and experts. A key critique among respondents about researchers' findings relates to the tension between 'academic interest' and the needs of practitioners and experts [11, 12].

### **Challenges in Evaluation**

Despite a well-documented interest within both academic circles and practical settings regarding the thorough evaluation of management and leadership development initiatives, alongside repeated calls for organisations to take greater account of the pivotal role and tangible effects of such activities on their overall effectiveness and performance outcomes, it is also abundantly apparent that the process of evaluation remains an enduring challenge for many organisations across various sectors. The difficulties faced by these organisations in embarking on effective evaluation strategies vary widely and might include the following key factors: Involvement of or support from key stakeholders – it is absolutely essential to have the unwavering support and active involvement of a diverse array of stakeholders if the evaluation of management development is to successfully result in the necessary ownership, actionable insights, and learning required to lead to both ongoing and improved evaluation practice over time; Time – in many contexts, evaluation can be thought of as a luxury activity that some organisations feel they cannot afford, unless one's approach to management and leadership development is firmly evidence-based and the rationale for its continuation is clearly demonstrated and understood. However, evaluations that are framed in a way that does not take an excessive amount of time to conduct, and which have a clearly delineated purpose, a practical scope, and a method that is sensible can be effectively undertaken with only a moderate level of investment in terms of time and resources; Organisational capacity to conduct evaluation – the skills, knowledge, and experience required for effective evaluation will vary widely across different organisations, with some having well-established protocols while others may struggle; Range of competing priorities/holdings – for many organisations, there is typically a long list of priorities they need to address, the majority of which are often competing rather than complementary. Thus, the evaluation of management and leadership development initiatives is frequently relegated to the status of a 'nice to have but not top priority' holding, which can undermine the importance of such evaluations; Complexity of evaluation – management and leadership development is not a simple or straightforward linear process, and demonstrating direct cause and effect relationships becomes increasingly difficult as more complex systems thinking approaches and advanced data collection techniques are employed and utilized. However, adopting too simplistic an evaluative approach can lead to criticism of the evaluation process and its results; and finally, the cosmetic nature of much evaluation – in many situations, evaluation can be perceived as a cosmetic addition to a management and leadership development initiative – something that is merely conducted afterwards to show that all is well. What is more crucial is the commitment to ongoing understanding and thoughtful analysis of events that unfold [13, 14].

### **Case Studies**

Cranfield University highlights the complex requirements set by client institutions regarding the measurement and evaluation of leadership development's effectiveness. Primary research with participants, managers, and providers informs their recommendations, which are organized into five categories: Leadership Development rationale, Pre-programme requirements, On-programme requirements, Post-programme requirements, and future research areas. For the Leadership Development rationale, institutions should clarify their reasons for investing in LLDP and the expected short- and long-term outcomes. The Pre-programme requirements involve creating a checklist and stakeholder map, defining key components before LLDP starts, and interviewing stakeholders. The On-programme requirements focus on assessing LLDP progress. Facilitators and participants should establish measurable targets and criteria, and maintain an objective stance towards feedback to ensure impartial evaluation of disagreements during the program. Post-programme requirements explore various factors affecting LLDP effectiveness, including costs related to executive time away and potential reputational risks if issues arise, such as a senior executive mishandling significant transactions due to biases or conflicts of interest. The evaluation's complexity stems from differing institutional cultures, participant characteristics, and the varied learning techniques used. Overall, there is no universal metric for all institutions, complicating the design of effective measurement and evaluation of LLDP outcomes [15, 16].

### **Best Practices for Effective Evaluation**

An increasing number of organizations provide leadership development programs (LDPs) for their employees, drawing upon a variety of delivery mechanisms such as workshops, retreats, assessments, on-the-job projects, coaching, and mentoring. However, little is known about the effectiveness of such LDPs, especially in the public sector. To build knowledge about the effectiveness of LDPs in the public sector, this research explored what measures are used to evaluate the effectiveness of a major LDP. Given that



the initial focus of the study was the analysis of a public sector LDP, the research examined its evaluation process at the organization and program levels. Different levels of evaluation (e.g., program, organization) as well as a multitude of types, measures, and methods of impact evaluation in both an analytic framework and a listing of measures are utilized. Assessment of LDP effectiveness is located at the program and organization levels of evaluation. Existing measures at these two levels are then summarized, and the inadequacy of evaluation tools is presented. Use of existing measures at the program level is assumed to identify the range and effectiveness of a public sector LDP. It is noted that these measures are better able to capture less difficult impacts, ultimately leading to local validations and informal learning about effectiveness at the program level. No comparison of quantitative and qualitative measures is included, and it is suggested that the effectiveness of an LDP is always the sum of the evaluations at both levels. Understanding of other types of effectiveness, such as behavioral impact of LDPs in organizations or external effects on public policy, organizations, families, or wider communities, is still in its infancy. The organization level of effectiveness is overlooked in research. Discussion is offered on new avenues for expanding study and evaluation of LDP effectiveness, given that LDPs are likely to be one result of the increasing number of training/development programs in organizations. The importance of understanding LDP effectiveness for the public good is emphasized. The study also has practical implications for the evaluation of a public sector LDP, both in terms of a question template for practitioner use and more broadly concerning different evaluation levels, measures, and methods [17,18].

### **Future Trends in Leadership Development**

Advice from interviews with five well-known scholars on evaluating leadership development initiatives will be outlined. As organizations invest significant resources in these initiatives, there is a growing need to measure their effectiveness. Rapid changes in the world have led to new methods for evaluation, with 11 techniques highlighted for assessing leadership development effectiveness: (1) deeper impact assessment; (2) whole systems assessment; (3) observational measures; (4) combination and ongoing assessments; (5) vibrancy assessment; (6) assessment "recipes"; (7) internal evaluator-driven assessments; (8) focus on the 70 in the 70-20-10 model; (9) merging performance management and leadership development; (10) assessing virtual leadership development; and (11) longitudinal assessments. Suggestions for how evaluators can seize these opportunities will also be discussed. The articles cover various critical topics for leadership development, with some general approaches and others focusing on specific leaders or processes. As human capital becomes increasingly important, leadership development gains prominence. In the knowledge economy, organizations must shift from top-down leadership to leveraging the contributions of a broader range of skilled professionals. Consequently, the number of individuals with leadership development roles is on the rise [19, 20].

### **CONCLUSION**

The evaluation of leadership development initiatives is crucial yet remains one of the most challenging aspects of organizational development. While traditional approaches often emphasize participant satisfaction and immediate learning outcomes, they seldom capture the long-term behavioral changes and strategic impacts that leadership training is intended to generate. Through a critical examination of current evaluation frameworks and methods, this research highlights the need for a shift towards more comprehensive, multi-level assessments that integrate both qualitative and quantitative data. Key challenges—such as stakeholder engagement, time and resource constraints, and the complexity of causal attribution—must be thoughtfully navigated. Best practices suggest that leadership development evaluations should be ongoing, integrated into organizational strategy, and tailored to the specific context of each program. As organizations increasingly operate in dynamic and complex environments, future evaluation efforts must embrace innovative methodologies, such as longitudinal studies and systems thinking, to ensure that leadership development initiatives truly deliver sustainable value and drive organizational success.

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