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What Makes Leadership Development Programs Succeed, And Why They Fail

The David Goggins Perspective

by Brent Gleeson   Forbes > Leadership   Mar 21, 2023

> ❝ **Only you can master your mind, which is what it takes to live a bold life full of accomplishments most people consider beyond their capacity.** ❞
>
> *- David Goggins*

The quote above applies equally to teams as it does individuals. Why am I using the perspective of David Goggins in writing this article you might ask? David is a long-time friend and former Navy SEAL teammate of mine, so I've had the benefit of absorbing his philosophies on mental toughness for many years - from the first time we ran down the beach together in Coronado, wet and sandy, with a large black rubber boat on our heads. So, when I decided to write what became my new #1 bestselling book, Embrace the Suck: The Navy SEAL Way to An Extraordinary Life, I thought to myself, who better to write the foreword for a book about resilience and overcoming adversity!

If you aren't familiar with David, he is a retired Navy SEAL, globally recognized extreme athlete, and the #1 bestselling author of Can't Hurt Me: Master Your Mind and Defy the Odds, which has taken the world by storm. So, I pulled a few of his quotes - minus some colorful expletives - to guide the content of this piece. But let's get to the topic at hand.

Annually, global organizations spend approximately $60 billion on various forms of leadership development programs. And, as one could imagine, the results vary. In our work and research over the years at TPL, partnering with Fortune 500 to medium-size organizations, and everything in between, we have had the unique opportunity to uncover why leadership development programs thrive and drive sustainable change (in the individuals and the organization) and where they fall short.

Based on our qualitative and quantitative data and case studies, here are the fundamental areas that should be addressed - with some unique insight from our friend David Goggins of course.

1. Organizational Ripeness

"If you choose to do something, attack it!"

- David Goggins

How ripe is the organization for change? Leadership development programs are educational "courses" designed to promote skill building for leaders and teams to enhance the ability to generate and maintain cultural and strategic alignment, engage and retain talent, and drive the mission and desired results of the organization. Most senior leaders and stakeholders understand that this investment of time and resources is critical for growth, sustainability, and adaptability. But some are more ripe for change than others. Knowing it, and doing it are two different things.

Great companies are learning organizations - this is part of the culture. Their leaders are lifelong learners, and so are their team members. But this doesn't just happen. It is by design. Organizations that just want to check the box, or address leadership development in a mediocre (or what they deem to be more cost effective) manner, while possibly experiencing some moderate short-term gains, will ultimately fail in this endeavor. Timing is of course important. But the "*we just don't have time right now to develop talent*" mindset will ensure nothing changes at all.

2. Developing the Whole Person

"We don't rise to the level of our expectations, we fall to the level of our training."

- David Goggins

This is a philosophy embraced by the entire special operations community. Preparedness trumps planning all day long. If nothing else, we are a learning organization. Constantly training. Continually applying lessons learned and adapting on the battlefield. Individual and team readiness is why we win. Period.

Leadership development programs that show measurable results and business outcomes, first aim to develop the WHOLE person. And not just in the areas one might imagine fundamental to great leadership skills. In the SEAL teams, we have made a concerted effort to provide training and resources that focus on the well-rounded warrior who is ultimately a great human, husband, father, mentor, and meaningful contributor to the community.

Leadership development is less about learning specific, tactical management skills than it is about cultivating the broad capabilities, such as self-awareness or resilience, that are necessary to adapt to dynamic, evolving challenges. These attitudes and behaviors are inherently widely applicable, and so effective leadership development must work with and transform not just leaders' performance of concrete job tasks, but their whole selves.

3. Self-reflection and Purpose

"Never let people who choose the path of least resistance steer you away from your chosen path of MOST resistance."

- David Goggins

This is where we begin all programs - leaders spending time reflecting on their goals, their purpose, their values, and where these elements align with the organization's mission and culture. And where they might not. This exercise is an important foundation to the leadership journey (it is not a destination) and generates self-awareness critical for identifying developmental priorities. All leaders will have varying degrees of ripeness (see above) and different needs when it comes to motivation and support. And it should be uncomfortable! Hence the reference to choosing the path of greater resistance. And all programs should involve feedback from others (360 feedback is preferrable), but we'll get to that in a minute.

We believe that values orientation is imperative for authentic leadership. Leadership teams must deeply embrace the organization's values both on and off the battlefield in order to be effective stewards and mentors to their teams.
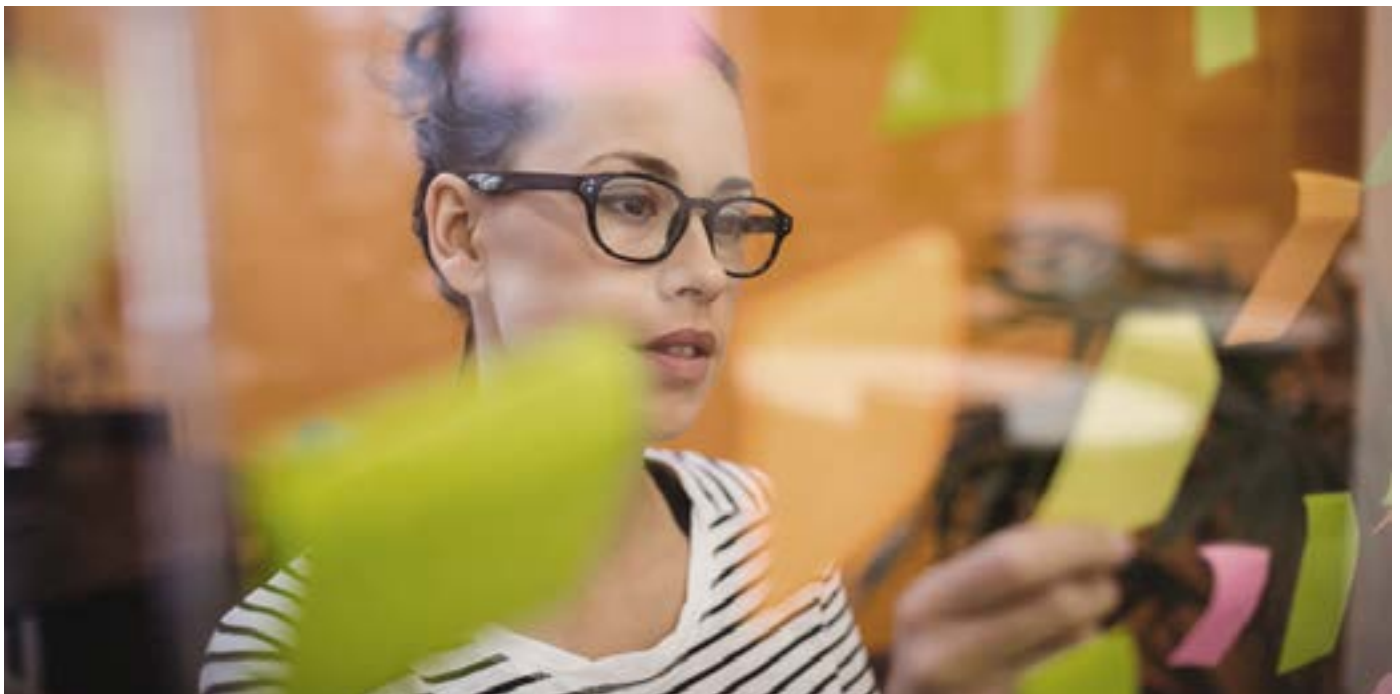
4. Psychological Barriers to Growth

"Pain unlocks a secret doorway in the mind. One that leads to both peak performance and beautiful silence."

- David Goggins

Similar to organizational ripeness, leaders with a strong desire to grow still must often overcome significant mental barriers to personal and professional development. We're not claiming leadership development should incorporate physical pain (we'll keep that within SEAL training)...ok fine, maybe a little pain...but should definitely involve a little bit of discomfort. The adoption of a growth mindset.

In a growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work - brains and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment. This is accomplished through gaining open feedback from those around you, clarifying that feedback, identifying developmental priorities, and creating an action plan. Accountability is key. Great programs encourage a healthy dose of peer-to-peer learning and support!

Now that we have identified some of the fundamental areas programs must address,

let's look at the HOW.

Short-term versus long-term development:

"Nobody cares what you did yesterday. What have you done today to better yourself?"

- David Goggins

Our research does show that brief programs such as 2-day leadership alignment events can have a very positive impact on people and teams. But without accountability at the individual, team, and organizational level, lasting change is rarely the outcome. These programs can (and should) focus more on goal-setting and strategic alignment than actual growth and development which takes time, tools, and guidance.

Longer-term programs that incorporate **(1) in-person training, (2) team building, (3) live virtual courses, and (4) e-Learning tools** have a much higher propensity to generate measurable outcomes that cascade across the organization (vertically and horizontally) because participants have the time to incorporate tools and frameworks into their leadership and management approach. Think it terms of what you want to measure. Employee engagement and retention? Improvement based on baseline and follow-on assessments? Financial outcomes? All of this requires time for implementation.

Measurable Goals & Alignment on Desired Outcomes:

From the onset, all stakeholders must collaborate on the qualitative and quantitative metrics they want (and have the ability) to measure. If, to the example above, improving employee engagement is a top goal, the program must be designed to provide skills for mentoring, coaching, developing, and engaging teams. Leaders must have the ability and resources to identify disengagement and burnout, conduct proper one-on-one meetings, set time aside to mentor, and understand what motivates each member of their team. These are actual learned skills and habits!

If the program is for a sales organization where both topline and bottom line goals are being measured, programs must involve skill building around not just sales tactics, but also things like collaboration, sharing of best practices, debriefing, engagement, overcoming objectives, conflict resolution, and again...coaching and mentorship.

Regardless, if you can't find some methods for measuring outcomes, go back to the drawing board. Because they do exist! Leadership development SHOULD be a revenue, and more importantly, a profit generating activity. ***So get after it!***

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