

# In It for the Long Haul

## Coaching Is Key to Continued Development



So you've gone through a weeklong leadership development program, and now you're back in the real world of work. Will you be able to sustain the learning process that began in the program and effect substantive behavioral change, or will the energy created during the program evaporate over time? Evidence shows that one way to help ensure the former result is to engage in follow-up coaching.

As valuable as programs in leadership development are, they are rarely events that by themselves change the lives of participants. Real behavioral change is seldom the result of any single developmental experience, whether it's a one-day workshop or an intensive, weeklong program. Even when leaders achieve significant self-awareness or make real commitments to change behavior, the energizing *glow* of the development experience can fade with time. For leaders, making the difficult transition from the safe and supportive environment of the leadership development experience to the real world of work—with all its stress, uncertainties, and old habits—can be a major obstacle to effecting real and lasting change.

The difficulty of making this transition to the real world is particularly

pertinent given the challenges that face leaders in today's rapidly changing, turbulent, and complex business environment. Participants in leadership programs clearly recognize this dilemma. They tend to talk about it during the course of the programs and when interviewed afterward.

Because personal and professional development occurs over time and through repeated efforts, it is necessary to supplement any single developmental experience with activities that continue to reinforce action plans and provide support for change. *Follow-up coaching* is an effective way to do this.

In a recent study (see the sidebar on page 16), interviews were conducted with two groups of graduates from CCL's Leadership Development Program (LDP)<sup>®</sup>. One group had par-

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ticipated in a follow-up coaching program; the other had not. The study looked at the goals and self-reported behavioral changes of both groups. In addition, those who had follow-up coaching were asked what it was about the coaching process that they believed helped them achieve positive behavioral change.

The study indicated that even a minimal coaching program—one phone conversation a month for three months with an experienced coach—offers significant benefits in reinforcing the developmental experience and producing on-the-job behavioral change. Although the type of tangible, bottom-line results organizations want to see from their leadership development efforts are not easily ascertained, the study findings suggest that organizations can maximize the returns on their investment in leadership development by implementing a coaching program—even a basic one. The expectation is that accomplishing desired changes in individuals' leadership behavior will lead to improved productivity of work groups, which in turn will enhance the ability to meet organizational goals—and this is where financial impact will be felt.

## DEFINING AND SUPPORTING

For leadership development to be sustained, program participants must be able to continue the learning process after returning to their turbulent, real-world environments. Coaches foster this transition by helping leaders articulate their goals and by supporting leaders' efforts to achieve those goals.

Individuals who participated in follow-up coaching differed from those left on their own in three ways. First, they tended to be more focused in forming their developmental goals and objectives. Second, they were significantly more successful in achieving their goals. And third, their new learning and behavior was more

closely related to their roles as leaders and managers.

*Focused and clearly defined goals.* One of the keys to attaining goals is to set and clearly define a relatively small, realistically achievable number in a few key areas. This allows people to concentrate their efforts and not become overwhelmed with the scope of the behavioral change they hope to accomplish. When people try to change their behaviors in too many areas and ways, the developmental process may feel more like a behavioral overhaul and consequently a monumental task. The leaders who were coached set fewer and more focused developmental objectives. Their coaches helped them to be discriminating in their choice of goals and to clearly define those goals. The leaders who were not coached set more goals, across a wider variety of areas.

*Achieving the goals.* From the participants' perspective, at least, the leaders in the coached group were more successful in achieving their goals than were the leaders who weren't coached. After the coaching was completed, participants from each group were asked to rate the extent to which they had met the behavioral objectives they had set. Those who were coached felt they had attained their behavioral objectives to a significantly greater extent than did the leaders who were not coached.

*Pertinent change.* One of the most interesting findings of the study was that the kinds of behavioral change experienced by the coached group were much more related to leadership than the changes reported by those who weren't coached. The coached participants noted three key areas in which behavioral change occurred: their ability to empower others, their own coaching skills, and their interpersonal behaviors.

With regard to empowerment, one participant commented, "I have quit

micromanaging, and I added staff with the needed expertise to make it happen." Strengthened coaching behaviors included increased use of support and rewards as well as goal setting and follow-up. One leader said, "I make a concerted effort to praise and reward my people in public." The changes in interpersonal behaviors took two forms—showing more thoughtfulness and empathy toward others, and being more forthcoming with and accessible to others.

In contrast, the group of individuals that didn't receive coaching reported significantly more change related to work-life balance. (Half mentioned this area, compared with 10 percent of the coached group.) One participant who didn't receive coaching remarked: "Work isn't everything. I have put things back in perspective."

It's clear that having an acceptable work-life balance is important for the well-being of all employees, including leaders. However, improved skills in empowering others, coaching, and relating to others are more directly related to the ability to lead.

The coached leaders placed special emphasis on the improvements in their own coaching skills—almost three-fourths of them gave examples of behavioral change in this area, whereas just 15 percent of the leaders who weren't coached said they had made behavioral changes related to coaching. So it appears that being on the receiving end of the coaching

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# Piecing It All Together

CCL began implementing a follow-up coaching option for its Leadership Development Program (LDP)<sup>®</sup> in November 1999. The study on which this article is based was begun with the goal of determining the impact of that coaching. The design of the research incorporated both a coached group (LDP participants who had elected to pursue the follow-up coaching after attending the program) and a control group (participants who did not choose the follow-up coaching). The

typical coaching contract for those in the first group provided for three phone calls, one a month for a three-month period. There were nineteen subjects in the coached group and twenty in the control group. Both groups were interviewed twice. Once a coached subject was identified, a control subject was chosen from the same LDP class. Subjects were also matched by gender and, when possible, by organizational position—a vice president with a vice president, for

instance. For the coached participants, the coach conducted the first interview during the initial coaching session. A CCL researcher conducted each control subject's first interview over the phone. The first interviews for the control subjects were scheduled and conducted as close in time as possible to the first interviews of their coached counterparts. The second interview for both groups was conducted at the completion of the coached participants' coaching.

process highlights the importance and value of coaching.

This is a particularly important finding for organizations that recognize the developmental power of relationships and the importance of enhancing access to developmental relationships in the workplace. Organizations that want *informal* developmental relationships to occur regularly for more people might find, paradoxically, that a *formal* coaching program can pave the way.

One leader in the coached group spoke at length about how she had in turn fostered coaching in her organization. "I have created a coaching climate," she said. "I have made coaching and development a priority in our organization; they like it and value it."

The participants who chose to pursue the follow-up coaching program might have already recognized the value of coaching. However, it's interesting that even though coaching and its benefits shone more brightly on the radar screens of the coached group than the uncoached group from the start, this variance was magnified as a result of the coaching experience. When asked at the start what their objectives were, about one-fourth of the coached leaders cited

behaviors related to coaching. When asked during a second interview—conducted after the coaching program—how their behaviors on the job had actually changed, nearly three-fourths said they had had a coaching-related change in behavior. In contrast, not a single one of the individuals who didn't have follow-up coaching mentioned coaching in his or her initial behavioral objectives, and only 15 percent referred to coaching-related behaviors during the second interview.

## DRAWING A ROAD MAP

When asked what it was about the coach and the coaching process that had been particularly effective in helping them attain their behavioral objectives, participants offered responses in line with what are known to be the critical components of a developmental relationship—*assessment, challenge, and support*.

- An effective coach offers an objective assessment of a leader's developmental needs and provides effective feedback. One participant valued "the coach's ability to size up the situation quickly and key in on things that mattered."

- A coach challenges leaders to hold themselves accountable, keeps the process and goals alive, and provides concrete advice and action planning. One participant said, "My coach was tough on me; she gave me homework and held me to it."

- A coach works hard to provide support, encouragement, and positive reinforcement. One participant said, "There was a real cheerleader effect; my coach would find the good part of what I did."

## LEVERAGING THE EVENT

A key ingredient of leadership development is a coaching relationship to help leaders as they are thrown back into the real world. Even a relatively modest, short-term coaching program can help leaders articulate and clearly define their goals through assessment, feedback, and action planning; hold themselves accountable and keep those goals salient; and support their efforts toward achieving their goals. When added to an event such as a leadership development program, coaching helps people continue the learning process and make the most of that learning when responding to situations and problems in their organizations. 