Leadership development training transfer: a case study of post-training determinants

Yabome Gilpin-Jackson

Wray Consulting Group Inc., Vancouver, Canada, and

Gervase R. Bushe

Management and Organization Studies, Faculty of Business Administration,
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to understand what contributes to transfer of soft-skill, leadership training.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper presents a literature review resulted in five broad factors that may influence transfer of leadership training. These were used to guide a qualitative, exploratory study. Interviews were conducted with 18 participants of an extensive, soft skill oriented leadership development program, along with peer observers. Where possible, quantitative analyses are used to test and confirm qualitative findings.

Findings – The results showed substantial transfer of training and suggest that actual utilization of newly learned skills is influenced differently than judgments about the value of the training. The greatest inhibitor to transfer appeared to be fear of breaking cultural norms and the most important remedy, the number of other managers who receive the training. In particular, having one’s boss take the same training was strongly associated with post-training utilization. Some kinds of social support, like encouragement and verbal praise, were associated with positive judgments of the training but not with utilization. Instead, observing others use the skills and being able to coach one another was the kind of ‘support’ that affected utilization, which depended on colleagues and bosses also receiving the training.

Research limitations/implications – As an exploratory case study, the study lacks a large sample and the kind of methodology that could prove the validity of the findings.

Practical implications – A number of implications for training managers wanting to ensure their leadership development programs have real impact are discussed. In particular, the study points to a need to plan for rapid diffusion of the training and for cultural change processes in parallel with leadership development courses.

Originality/value – The paper meets a need for empirical investigation of factors associated with transfer of soft skills into the workplace, as called for by researchers like Cheng and Ho. It identifies differences in what impacts judgments of value versus what actually impacts transfer. It also identifies how changing leadership behavior is as much a cultural intervention as a change in skill sets.

Keywords Leadership development, Training, Skills, Canada

Paper type Case study

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