

How to choose the best course to improve your leadership skills

“An Introduction to Project Management” on this website attests that leadership and emotional intelligence skills are the key to becoming a great project manager. Barry’s article “Top 10 qualities of a Project Manager” reinforces this. No-one is born with these skills; they are all acquired, informally through trial and error and deliberately through education and there are many organisations supplying training in this area. Whilst some of this is excellent, much of the learning never makes it out of the classroom or training event. If you want to become one of the great project leaders or simply to do your job more effectively, how can you sort the wheat from the chaff with all this diverse provision? How can you make sure you invest your training money, time and effort wisely and get the long term results you want?

Here I offer you a short guide, distilled from my personal experience and the best practice guide from The Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations. This coalition of researchers and practitioners from business schools, the US government, consulting firms and corporations undertook an extensive search of the evidence of the best approach to acquiring and improving these personal and interpersonal skills (Goleman 1998).

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts

This guide is a series of elements that can be likened to a successful team. Each element has an individual part to play but is not truly effective until brought together with the others. The combination of the elements is cumulative and adds an extra dimension as each supports the others and strengthens their contribution to create a greater impact. So if you want to get the maximum impact, choose a course that is fielding the full team by asking these questions:

Does it recognise my current skills and those needed for my job? Why waste time and money acquiring skills you don’t need or, worse still, get bored listening to what you already know. Choose a course that starts with an assessment of *your* needs and tailors the content to meet them.

Does it start at the right point for me? You have a unique background knowledge, what you have learnt from your formal education and work experience, how well you know yourself, how easy you find it to accept challenge and learning and are willing to try out new ways of doing things. Check the course content, does it assume too much or too little of you, hold your interest without lecturing, patronising or baffling you with jargon.

How does it seek to motivate me? You will use new ways of thinking and different ways to approach your work when you apply this new knowledge. The course you choose then must gain your commitment to using these new ways, not only because it makes sense but because, emotionally, you want to do it.

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Does it focus clearly on my work & personal goals? You are a busy person and your work and private life brings many distractions. Clear work based goals will help you concentrate, achieving these goals will give you the satisfaction and confidence to continue with your new work practices. Look for a course that helps you set these goals and then focuses on giving you the skills to make them happen.

Will I direct my own learning? Over the length of the course you will acquire new knowledge and confidence; you may face new issues at work that have not seemed important before. Check for flexibility that allows you to change content and direction to meet your evolving needs.

Will I be able to control the pace of the course? You will find that trying out new ways of working and preventing your self slipping into old habits can be difficult and often takes more than one attempt to get it right. Again look for flexibility where you control the timing and can make space to try things out, reflect and revise your actions.

How will I know if I'm improving? The best way to know if your new approach is working is to find out from the people who are affected. Feedback can help you decide what areas you want to improve, it encourages you when people comment on the difference and also they can stop you making new bad habits. Ideally the course should incorporate continuous feedback from the assessment, through your work based practice and when you evaluate your progress.

Will it help me apply my learning to the real world I work in? Your new skills and techniques require practice to perfect, before they can become second nature. This requires time and opportunities for refining the skills in the real world as well as in training sessions. Seek out training that incorporates supported practice at your work.

Will I get the support I need? It is an emotional experience to challenge and allow others to challenge your long held beliefs and ways of working. Having someone to talk to, who has been through a similar experience, can help you cope with these feelings and stop you getting disheartened when something doesn't go right first time. Choose a course that builds in this support, either a coach or another participant.

Will my new ways of thinking and working fit into the culture of my organisation? Your enthusiasm for your new ideas and ways of working will affect your working relationships with your seniors, peers and junior colleagues. The accepted ways of doing things within the organisation will either help or hinder you. Your ability to influence and adapt your new knowledge to the organisation may be part of the new skills you want to acquire. Check the course explicitly addresses this and includes these influencing and adaptation skills in your goals.

What will I get as a reward for all this extra effort? You will be investing a lot of time and effort into acquiring these new skills. If you have applied the elements above you will also have expended some emotional energy and taken some risks. To motivate yourself to start and continue you will want to know how you will benefit as a result. Be clear about the benefits and rewards you want, and then confirm that these can be delivered within the course or by your organisation before you commit.

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Can I work with this person? This type of training is highly personal and you will need to feel confident in the abilities of the trainer but also that they can relate to you and your concerns. Make sure you have met your trainer before you commit.

How will I know this course actually delivers what it promises? If you check the elements above are present then your course should deliver the long lasting results you are looking for. However you should check what evidence the provider has to confirm their promises. A good course should have a formal evaluation procedure that demonstrates the impact on participant's performance over time.

References:

Goleman D. 1998 "The Billion-Dollar Mistake" in Working with Emotional Intelligence, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London.

Jacky Sherman, MSc, Dip. in Performance Coaching.

Jacky Sherman is a qualified leadership coach and consultant and co-founder of Pharos Performance Ltd. As well as an extensive coaching practice she leads the organisation's research and development. Previously she has over 20 years experience in hands-on management, much of it managing complex change projects involving multiple professional groups and culminating in a period as Chief Executive within the NHS.

Pharos Performance Ltd uses a suite of structured leadership and personal development programmes based on 15 years of experience of coaching leaders in a wide variety of corporate and entrepreneurial organisations across the UK and Far East. Their unique approach of a structured programme delivered within the flexibility and individuality of a coaching methodology has proven results for clients at all stages of their development as leaders.

For more information call +44(0)1582 842 595 or email jacky.sherman@pharosperformance.co.uk

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