



Rotman School of Management
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO



THE PARADOX OF
LEADERSHIP
DEVELOPMENT
PROGRAMS

Stephanie Hodnett
Executive Director, Rotman Executive Programs

Leadership development programs have been around long enough that you would expect any inherent paradox to have been resolved by now. Surely we have studied the common traits of effective leaders long enough to establish a set of widely agreed-upon guidelines and principles. However, there remains tension and discomfort within the practice of improving leadership skills. And the paradox of developing great leaders is not an obstacle to good leadership training, but instead absolutely essential to it

What do we mean by paradox? It is simply that the people who might benefit the most from advancing their leadership skills are often the most resistant to undertake training. They have habits and behaviours that have brought them to a senior role in an organization and may not see the value of analyzing those behaviours. Forcing them to do so by mandating training, let's say, is unlikely to be helpful to the individual, and may negatively influence the experience of the program's other participants who are there to learn from the instructor but also from one another. Committing to leadership growth requires a personal investment which cannot be imposed from the outside. Forcing someone to be in a room with others who have decided to make that personal investment is counterproductive to all concerned.

Second, in order for the program to be effective, leaders must reveal their vulnerabilities. Senior executives may be willing to admit they have to learn how to leverage an emerging technological trend, or about a new risk on the horizon. Leaders are unlikely to admit needing help with leadership skills when they believe they already possess the needed qualities.

Rather than pretending these problems don't exist, or suggesting that there is a single approach to resolve any of them, it may be more effective to come clean about the challenges and conflicts. We might acknowledge, for example, that mandatory leadership training is ineffective given that you can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped. But what about the reluctant participant, who knows he needs help yet is conflicted about letting go of long-held habits? A truly effective program builds a sense of trust which allows each participant to embark on deep, transformative change. That trust can only be established when we acknowledge that the work itself can be uncomfortable, and must be done with compassion and integrity.

Similarly, we may need to accept that effective leadership does not lend itself to a single assessment tool, nor a one-size-fits-all set of rules. We may be more comfortable investing in skill-development programs where the outcome is clearly measured. But if we admit that leadership development is more like a video game with infinite levels, where you must continue to face new scenarios as you advance in your career, then we have a better chance of accepting that discomfort is not an obstacle, but in fact exactly the point.

Stephanie Hodnett is Executive director, [Rotman Executive Programs](#) at the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto. This article [originally appeared](#) in the Globe & Mail's Leadership Lab on 1 March 2019.