VIEWS FROM THE FIELD

Raising the Bar in Leadership Development

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Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: Could you please share your views on the current state of leadership and leader development?

Kaiser: The armed services provide a microcosm: The U.S. military is the best in the world. It may not, however, still be doing the best job of developing leaders. Good is good, but is it good enough? A growing number of people are calling attention to serious systemic issues with today's leadership culture and management of talent from the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Tom Kane, a former Air Force officer and author of Bleeding Talent; and the military writer, Thomas Ricks, to name just three.[1]

The same is true in industry: America has the largest economy in the world, and American management is widely regarded as the gold standard. But there are signs of trouble. Most companies believe they have a leadership gap that is getting wider. Succession and future-ready leaders are top concerns for most CEOs and HR/talent leaders. Part of it is labor economics: There just aren't enough good, seasoned leaders to go around. But there is also more to it.

Lindsay: What else is going on?

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1   Shanker, T. (2013, April 13). Conduct at issue as military officers face a new reality. *New York Times.* Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/us/militarys-top-officers-face-review-of-their-character.html
Kane, T. (2012). *Bleeding Talent: How the U.S. military nismanages great leaders and why it's time for a revolution.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Ricks, T. E. (2012, Oct.). Whatever happened to accountability? *Harvard Business Review, 90*(10), 93-98, 100, 130.

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Kaiser: The last national poll by the Harvard Kennedy School reported that 70% of Americans believe we have a leadership crisis and that the country will decline unless we get better leaders. This isn't just a symptom of today's polarized politics, it's part of an alarming trend. The Harris Poll conducts an annual survey to measure how confident the American people are in the leaders of major institutions such as local and national government, the military, small businesses, big business, and Wall Street. Since the mid-1990s the proportion of people reporting at least some confidence has steadily dropped from around 90% to 60%. We've all seen the engagement figures, or rather *dis*engagement figures. People are disenchanted with their leaders.

A leadership crisis has been building for a couple decades, and it seems to be reaching a tipping point.

Brothers: At the same time the leadership industry has become big business. The last industry report by Bersin estimated annual spending on leadership development in the U.S. at about $24 billion.[2] This includes internal training programs, vendor-provided custom- and open-enrollment programs, executive education, executive coaching, online courses, and so on. Leadership and management represent the largest category in corporate learning and development budgets.

Leadership has been a steady growth industry—even through the global financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath. Discretionary spending on people is usually the first to go in an economic downturn. But annual spend on leadership development has tripled the last 25 years.

Kaiser: And here's the rub: There's hardly any evidence that all of this money—not to mention time, effort, and energy—is improving leadership. Spending has tripled while confidence has dropped by about a third. Some might say we are spending more in response to a decline in leadership, but the macroeconomic data do not support that interpretation. Gordy Curphy, a former associate professor at the Air Force Academy, and I analyzed spending on leadership development and the Harris poll data on confidence in leadership since 1995. The pattern shows that confidence declines *after* an increase in spending on development, not before it.[3]

It is an open secret that leadership development isn't working very well. Most organizations do not believe their leadership programs are very effective.

Lindsay: We've been at leadership development for a long time. Why isn't it working better?

Brothers: For one thing, the world has changed. In the 20th century, command-and-control hierarchies

2   Bersin, J. (2014). *Corporate Learning Factbook*. Oakland, CA: Bersin & Associates.

3   Kaiser, R. B., & Curphy, G. (2013). Leadership development: The failure of an industry and opportunities for consulting psychology. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 65,* 294-302.

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worked for communication efficiency in the military and for economies of scale in industry. But the 21st century is a flatter, decentralized, and networked world where technologies have made instant, multidirectional communication possible at scale and have increased the velocity of change to levels we've never seen. It calls for a different approach to leadership, and different ways of learning it.

Lindsay: Do you really mean leadership is fundamentally different today?

Brothers: Good question. Let me clarify. Leadership is leadership: The same sorts of characteristics, behaviors, skills, and processes constitute leadership in most times and places. But their relative emphasis and importance may shift with context.

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For example, there is always a place for both empowerment and decisive, unilateral decision-making. But the hierarchical 20th-century leadership culture put more emphasis on strong, decisive authority, whereas modern leadership emphasizes a more collaborative, experimental, and agile approach. Even today, however, there is a time and place for unilateral decisions—for instance, in a crisis or the heat of battle.

Kaiser: I would add that today's fast-changing, disruptive operating environment puts an even higher premium on the ability of leaders to toggle through different approaches and apply the right one at the right time. This was the essence of the situational theories from the 1960s and 70s—those models that prescribed what leadership style was best for different scenarios.

Our team has been assessing, developing, and studying versatile leadership since the 1990s. There has been a correlation with effectiveness since the beginning, but that correlation has gotten stronger over the years. In recent samples, versatility accounts for about half of what it means to be considered an effective executive—it's evidently really, really important in a VUCA world.

Brothers: Context matters in another way, too. It shapes what competencies and skills look like in action. For instance, leaders who can capitalize on the latest technology always have an advantage. The first cavemen who made the move from throwing rocks to spears were more successful. Today, technology skills provide a great advantage in terms of leveraging the digital tools of the Internet age. So technological agility has always mattered, and today that means digital expertise.

Lindsay: What about teaching and developing leadership? Do you think we know how to do it well?

Kaiser: Yes, but even if they are designed within a modern paradigm, not all leadership training and development efforts are created, or executed, equal. This was shown in a couple of recent meta-analyses, in which hundreds of primary studies were reviewed and overall trends were analyzed.

The first thing they showed is that the impact of leadership-development interventions is rarely studied. The researchers had to go back to the early 1900s to scrape up 200 studies—that's less than two per year, even though there are thousands of programs delivered annually! The data showed two-thirds of these programs had a positive outcome of some sort.[4] In other words, a

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4   Avolio, B. J., Reichard, R. J., Hannah, S. T., Walumbwa, F. O., & Chan, A. (2009). A meta-analytic review of leadership impact research: Experimental and quasi-experimental studies. *The Leadership Quarterly, 20, 764–784.*

third did not.[5] Because programs that are systematically evaluated and written up are probably better designed and implemented than the many, many more that are not, the failure rate is probably a lot higher than one in three.

On the other hand, another meta-analysis looked at the effectiveness of the different components of development interventions leadership training and development, isolating those associated with a positive impact.[6] It was a really well done and important piece of work that identified several active ingredients that provide an evidence-based approach to designing effective leadership development.

Lindsay: What are these active ingredients?

Kaiser: First, start with the end in mind: Do a systematic analysis of what participants need to learn and what stakeholder definitions of success are and build to that. The design should include a range of training methods, combining various ways to present information like lectures, readings, videos, and experiential learning; provide examples of what good looks like through demonstrations and role models; and, most importantly, provide opportunities to practice in role-plays, simulations, and projects. And be sure to provide feedback as participants practice so they can fine-tune.

Next, space the program out over time, so that the participants can learn the content in class, apply it back on the job, then in the next class reflect on how it went, and adjust as needed. The iterative cycle of action and reflection is key to making behavior change stick, and the classroom provides a great place to reflect. And

again, provide feedback to reinforce and course-correct the learning process.

The content matters too. Including a mix of hard skills—such as business processes and management techniques—and soft skills—like leadership, relationships, and self-management—improves the transfer of learned content back to the job. Interestingly, it's the soft skills that are most highly related to improved results, because they are needed to apply the hard skills effectively.

Faculty can be either internal to the organization or external—the research shows both are effective. And a mix may be ideal: senior leaders for credibility, sponsorship, and accountability; internal talent professionals for a support bridge back to work; and external trainers for expertise and objectivity. Try to avoid or minimize self-directed learning—it is much less effective. After all, humans are social learners, and oftentimes we don't know what we don't know until we try to explain it to others.

Finally, the research shows that designing leadership programs in collaboration with an outside expert improves impact—for instance, by keeping things fresh, up to date, and based on evidence.

The know-how is there for doing development right. But the field suffers from a knowing gap: Many development professionals just don't know the research. It's really hard as a practitioner to keep up with the science. And there is also a knowing-doing gap. Even those who know better sometimes cut corners, rely on "best practices" because everyone else is doing it, or defer to stakeholders who are beholden to the latest fad. Some people in HR and talent management feel powerless to advocate for better practices supported by research. It is a special skill to make the case with a command of the science and a savvy, practical way of explaining it.

5   Kaiser, R. B. (2017). *Versatility: You can't lead without it today*. Retrieved from https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/versatili-ty-you-cant-lead-without-today-rob-kaiser/
6   Lacerenza, et al. (2017). Leadership training design, delivery, and implementation: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 102*, 1686–1718.

Brothers: I'm relieved. The way we do custom programs at UNC is consistent with the research findings!

Lindsay: Could you please explain how you do that?

Brothers: We take a solution-focused approach to design: What is the organization's strategy and what are the capabilities needed to execute? Ok, now do a needs analysis: What are the capability gaps? Those gaps define the problems, and the curriculum is designed to provide solutions—the hard skills around management processes, techniques, and systems. But different leaders have different challenges with implementing the solutions. They may need to learn different soft skills to apply them—for some its influence, for others its communication, and for some it is self-management.

We use a blended approach for teaching the hard skills and soft skills, and we like to include senior leaders from the organization in the classroom. We also prefer to space sessions out so that participants can practice what they are learning back in their work context, such as in action-learning projects with other participants who can give each other feedback. Then when we meet again, we review how things are going and encourage group dialogue and learning, especially around the soft skills.

Lindsay: That's interesting, John. So, you start with the organization and work back to the individual leader. That's an interesting approach as a lot of thinking about leadership starts with the leader.

Brothers: Yes, it's a particularly Western, individualistic bias. And the leadership industry seems to cater to that bias. For instance, the pivotal role of self-awareness is practically a truism. But to what end? What problem are we trying to solve? How does this individual's self-awareness connect to the company's competitive position? After all, we are working with organizations and helping these entities to become more nimble and creative in order to remain relevant and get results.

Kaiser: Maybe it would help if we started with a clear statement of what we mean by "leadership."

Lindsay: It sounds like we may be headed for that old line about how there are as many definitions of leadership as there are people who try to define the term?

Kaiser: Well, there is that danger. But, seriously, most definitions have more in common than not. Most leadership thinkers define it as a social-influence process for motivating people to work together for a common goal. The key is to realize that leadership is

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an adapted mechanism for solving the problem of collective effort: How do you get self-interested individuals to set aside their differences and personal agendas and work together for a larger purpose?

Lindsay: Rob, you've written about an evolutionary analysis of leadership—where it comes from and the role it played in the survival of our ancestors. Could you sum that up?

Kaiser: Sure. When you zoom way out and ask where leadership comes from and how it might have evolved, there are two competing explanations. The first one is dominance theory, which sees leadership as a by-product of dominance hierarchies that are part of our primate heritage. The second one is group-coordination theory, which suggests that the same instinctual social

dynamics that guide flocks of birds or schools of fishes were elaborated by primates and early humans to solve complex survival challenges that required everyone to work together.

Dominance theory is consistent with our self-interested nature and basically works on the principle of "Might makes right." But we are also social creatures who have always lived in groups and sometimes will do things for the "good of the group." Jonathan Haidt likes to say that humans are 90% selfish chimpanzee and 10% hivish bee.[7] Most of the recurring survival challenges on the Savannah of our ancestral past required a group effort: foraging for food, hunting big game, relocating to a more hospitable territory, warding off predators, defense against rival tribes.

We modeled these things with game theory and found that collective effort works best with a social structure in which one individual initiates a course of action and others either agree to follow or not.[8] We follow the leader when we think it makes sense to do so, when it's in our best interests to cooperate around a common goal. Sometimes people decide to not follow because they aren't convinced; true leadership is when people willingly choose to follow because they believe in the vision and purpose. And it sure beats a process where a bunch of alphas fight over how to proceed, with the winner making everyone do it his or her way. People naturally resent bullies and being told what to do. But more importantly for survival, internal competition destabilizes the group, making coordination harder and leaving the group ripe for the picking.

Brothers: That makes me think about how some organizations are evolving their leadership values and focusing more on things like vulnerability, empathy,

and authentic leadership. This is a move away from the heroic ideal to a much more relational approach that reinforces "we are all in it together."

Kaiser: Exactly. Darwin has that great quote about how a tribe of members who were always ready to help one another and to sacrifice for the common good would be victorious over most other tribes. We believe that leadership emerged as a mechanism for persuading self-interested individuals to cooperate. Well-led groups have better survival rates; it isn't the fittest individuals but the fittest tribes that survive. Do you know what they called the strongest individual in the weakest tribe? Desert. They ate him last!

But back to the point that humans are primarily self-interested: There is always the temptation for people in positions of power and status to exploit this for personal gain—at the expense of the greater good. So we have to be vigilant about who we choose to follow, who we put in positions of power. When selfish leaders are in charge, it puts everyone at risk.

Lindsay: Is this what you think is wrong with leadership today?

Kaiser: I do think we have strayed from this "greater good" mentality. The individualistic bias that John mentioned is everywhere. We have confused leadership as a process with leadership as a role: The process emphasizes the purpose, but the role emphasizes the person. And this leads to a focus in development on things like executive presence and networking. Sure, you can make a case that presence and networking can help the group. But first and foremost it helps the individual to get ahead. A lot of supposed leadership development is more about career development than about teaching how to persuade other people to work together, build a team, and achieve organizational goals.

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7   Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. New York: Pantheon Books.
8   Van Vugt, M., Hogan, R., & Kaiser, R. B. (2008). Leadership, followership, and evolution: Some lessons from the past. *American Psychologist, 63*, 182-196.

Others are also identifying self-interest at the root of many problems with modern leadership. The concern with toxic leadership in the military recognizes this. Army Doctrine describes toxic leadership as involving "self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors," as well as "an inflated sense of self-worth," and actions that "deceive, intimidate, coerce, or unfairly punish others" for selfish ends.[9]

Thomas Ricks' article in *Harvard Business Review* ("Whatever Happened to Accountability?") traces a softening of standards in the military to not wanting to stick your neck out and take a stand because it's risky to your career. We found the same thing in industry: Two out of three senior managers are seen as too soft on accountability, stepping back from the heat, and not wanting to be the "bad guy."[10]

Not to get too preachy, but when you think of what leadership is all about—why and how it emerged as an adaptation to aid group survival—you realize that it is a responsibility, not a right. Leaders have a moral imperative to serve their teams and organizations, to build and lift others to their best possible selves, and to do whatever it takes to achieve the mission, even if that means self-sacrifice. You can see a yearning to get back to this principle—for instance, in the evolution of leadership values in some organizations that John mentioned or the point of Simon Sinek's recent best-seller, *Leaders Eat Last*.[11]

Lindsay: So you think the problem with leadership development is that it is too focused on leaders as individuals and not enough on what leadership provides for the organization?

Kaiser: That's certainly a big part of it. And I think the sort of design thinking John described earlier, about how at UNC they start with the organization's strategy and capability needs and then target individual development around filling those gaps, is exactly the right way to do it.

Brothers: But there is another factor too. The research Rob mentioned earlier points to a dirty secret: We don't consistently and rigorously evaluate the impact of leadership-development efforts. There are two big missed opportunities. First, obviously, we miss the chance to see if a program or coaching engagement worked and how well it worked. But the other reason is even more important: If it didn't work, why not? How can we improve?

This is something that brought Rob and me together. We both really want to understand the impact of leadership development, and honestly look at what works and what doesn't so we can improve the practice.

Lindsay: How do you do that?

Brothers: First you have to think clearly about the purpose of the initiative, whether that's an internal program, an external program, executive coaching, or something else. What are you trying to achieve, based on a strategic needs analysis, solutions to fill those gaps, and tools for enabling participants to implement those solutions? This is where assessment comes in, to identify the particular learning and development needs of the individuals—this gets us into the soft skills and how to enable people to use the solutions. You have to get everyone singing from the same hymnal, and the lines are different for the altos, sopranos, and baritones.

Then you have to measure the concepts in this design: metrics at the organizational or unit or team level that represent performance processes and outcomes; measures concerning the systems and techniques

9   Army Doctrine Publication 6-22: Retrieved from: https://fas.org/irp/doddir/army/adp6_22.pdf
10   Kaiser, R. (2018). The accountability crisis. *Talent Quarterly, 5*(3), 58-63.
11   Sinek, S. (2014). *Leaders eat last*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin.

participants have learned through development; and assessment data on individual participants in terms of their ability to transfer the learning back on the job.

Kaiser: This last piece can seem mystical. To many people, leadership feels like such an ephemeral quality as to defy quantification and formal measurement; you just know it when you see it. It's true that the soft stuff can be the hardest stuff of all, and the question is how do you measure that stuff? Well, there is a science to leadership. It's not rocket science; it's behavioral science—it may not be exact but it works pretty well and is practical and useful.

Brothers: Look, all organizations are going through some sort of transformation right now. The question is whether their leaders can change their paradigms— their mind-set and behaviors—as quickly as the

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operating model is changing.

This can be greatly aided by the sort of self-awareness provided by assessment: It helps the individual leader understand what he or she has to do differently to apply the process or technique that the organization needs to execute its strategy.

Lindsay: Assessment is definitely a vital topic. However, there is a confusing array of tools out there. How do you sort your way through it all?

Brothers: We've been working on a simplified point

of view on that very question. Rob's been a helpful thought partner; Rob, why don't you break it down for Doug?

Kaiser: Sure. The first thing is to recognize that there are basically two different kinds of assessments for individuals: One concerns individual differences like personality, ability, and interests—your default settings, if you will—and the other concerns behaviors and decisions—how these tendencies get expressed in how you perform your leadership role. We like to say, "Who you are is how you lead."

Measures of *who you are* can be very helpful in development—for instance, how John describes their use in raising self-awareness about the soft skills needed to apply the hard skills. Suppose we are teaching a module on innovation. We can present a robust innovation process. But creative people who are flexible risk-takers but not particularly organized are going to have different challenges in implementing that process compared to very organized and conscientious people who are not as comfortable with risk. Everyone is different in some way, and understanding who you are through a personality or style assessment is helpful for tailoring the learning and development.

On the other hand, behavioral measures of what you do are helpful for diagnosing on the front end—who is good at innovation management, who may need to do better—as well as for measuring transfer after the program and back on the job—have innovation-management skills improved? Behavioral measures like these are usually better gathered with feedback from coworkers—self-ratings are notoriously plagued with

bias and error; coworker ratings are much more reliable and valid. We simply can't see ourselves as well as we can see other people. Plus, behavioral assessments from coworkers can provide useful feedback for fine-tuning and shaping the skills and behaviors in the program.

Lindsay: But even within these categories of *who you are* and *how you lead*, there are different tools available. How do you choose the right tool for the job?

Brothers: There are two considerations here. First, it is important to align what the personality test or behavior-rating instrument measures with program content. A lot of times people just use a tool they like and are familiar with but that may not always be relevant to what we are trying to teach.

The second thing is that assessments lie on a continuum. Some are fairly simple and provide feedback that is easy for everyone to accept. The Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI) is the classic one here, or something like the DISC which sorts you into one of four categories. These help everyone understand what makes them unique, their own superpower, if you will. At the other end of the spectrum are more complex tools that can identify your superpower—and also your Kryptonite. These tools dare to discriminate across several dimensions and provide more direct, constructive feedback—for instance, the Hogan personality suite, especially the Hogan Development Survey, which measures 11 common derailing tendencies that can get leaders into trouble. It can be tough to get a report that says you convey confidence but also tend to overreach and can come across as arrogant, or one that says you are passionate but can also be volatile, explosive, and unpredictable.

Kaiser: There is a trade-off here. On the one hand, where is the organization and where are the participants with assessment: Is the culture gentler and

are people new to assessment? If so, they probably need the simpler kind. Or are they more experienced, more battle-hardened, and ready to take the more direct kind?

On the other hand, the tougher, more complex tools are more statistically related to performance, which means they are providing feedback that is more relevant to results. Easier to take may not be as relevant to performance. Harder to swallow may make a bigger difference.

I am of two minds: Sometimes I think it is nearly criminal in this day and age to ask executives to take lightweight, parlor-game-type assessments that were never intended to differentiate high and low performers. On the other hand, I have seen these tools work by providing a common language for appreciating how each of us is different and what that means for how we work together. You do the MBTI in the morning, and that afternoon in the simulation they are giving each other feedback: "There goes your extraverted thinking again!"

So you can see the utility for some groups in even a simple framework for understanding oneself and how other people might be different. It depends on where you are personally and what you are ready for as an organization. You have to walk before you can run. Ultimately, though, you want to get to the point where you can talk about differences that really make a difference—for better or worse.

Lindsay: But now don't these assessments just take us back to the individual-bias problem?

Brothers: Almost! It's like I said before, "How does self-awareness connect to the organization's competitive position?" It can, but a lot of times the connective tissues is not made explicit and thinking

gets murky. The individual assessments are not the solution; they are an enabler of the solution. They connect the individual to the organizational process or technique, the solution designed to fill a strategic organizational need. From an evaluation standpoint, we want to connect what individuals learn in the program to changes in their behavior on the job and how that behavior change relates to the organizational processes and outcomes we are trying to improve.

Kaiser: This is where a lot of measurement goes wrong: By settling for measures of convenience. I can't tell you how many times I have seen an internal team present on the impact of their programs using measures such as attendance rates, what proportion of directors have been through the program, how many attendees remained with the organization versus turned over, or how many were promoted to a bigger job. These data are easier to obtain, but they don't really get at the basic question of whether we are increasing the organization's capability to lead its strategic imperatives.

As the research shows, program evaluation is rarely done, and even when it is, it frequently isn't very informative about how well leadership development is improving organizational performance.

Lindsay: So, is this a blueprint for determining return on investment (ROI)? It seems like a lot of people are concerned about ROI.

Kaiser: Not quite. I actually think ROI is the wrong issue, or at least not the next issue. We seem to have finance envy; it's probably part of the people side of the business wanting to have that proverbial seat at the table. But it's tricky business to get straight into the financial conversation with ROI. In principle it can be done, but, again, you have to walk before you can run—or, in this case, crawl before you can walk. There are some prior steps we need to address first. To that point, John has me excited by the concept of ROL.

Lindsay: John, what do you mean by ROL?

Brothers: Well, I certainly won't claim to have invented the ROL concept, but when I first heard the acronym for return on learning it captured my attention as I thought through all the challenges many learning organizations deal with when it comes to measuring ROI.

One of the major limitations of ROI methodology is that it relies on lagging indicators to measure impact—such as business-unit performance or financial outcomes. These sorts of measures inherently represent a significant time lag between the learning experience and the point of return for an organization. And too many other variables come into play and distort the link between learning and results. As a timely example, all the leadership training, skill enhancement, process building, and capability development in the world may not be enough to overcome the financial impact of tariffs in a trade war.

We need to step back and think through the logic chain for measuring impact, and first understand what impact really means to the organization. The Kirkpatrick framework for measuring impact has been around for over 50 years.[12] It presents four levels of progressively more organizationally-relevant types of effects that training and development can have:

Level 1: Affective—how do participants and stakeholders feel about the program, the content, and the organization?

Level 2: Learning—how much have participants increased their knowledge and expertise?

Level 3: Behavior—to what extent do we see the new learning transfer to on-the-job performance?

12   Kirkpatrick, D. L. (1959). Techniques for evaluating training programs. *Journal of the American Society of Training Directors, 13*, 21-26.

Level 4: Results—how does the change in job performance relate to better results in terms of more effective processes and outcomes in the participant's team or business unit?

Unfortunately, the framework has been extended to define "results" in terms of ROI, using financial measures of performance relative to the cost of development. It is understandable to want to go there, but it's premature.

Kaiser: Totally. First, that dirty secret John called out: Not to beat a dead horse, but impact evaluation isn't even standard practice, and when it is done, it is pretty weak. We do some Level-1 measurement with "smile sheets," asking how much participants liked the program. Maybe we even do some Level-2 measurement with a pre/post knowledge test. But we don't do much Level-3 evaluation—measuring behavior change on the job—and we do even less Level-4 measurement at the organizational level.

My point is that we are not consistent or very proficient as a field at measuring Levels 3 and 4, let alone linking measures at both levels of analysis. We need to master that next. Once that becomes standard practice, then we can start looking at how you monetize the improved results and express that as a ratio of the total cost of development. And that will require a lot of thinking and design work to create a good methodology. As John says, these lagging indicators are affected by a bunch of other things. And as development professionals, we don't have the expertise that finance professionals have. We will have to team up on an interdisciplinary approach.

Brothers: Right. ROL is all about firming up our ability to draw linkages from changes in Level 2 to changes in Levels 3 and 4, or from learning in the classroom to the successful implementation of the solution and a quantifiable improvement in process

and results at the team, unit, or organizational level. It's walking back in the causal chain of events and making sure we have strong links in that chain. The further we stray from strong, step-by-step links, the further we go from causation to correlation and invite noise into the methodology.

Lindsay: So how do you propose we firm up those links, especially from Level 2 to Level 3, and from Level 3 to Level 4?

Kaiser: It gets us right back into the topic of assessment. Level 3 is all about measuring behavior change. There is a science to that, with different available methodologies.[13] One is to measure behavior before the program and then after it. Self-ratings are a horrible way to do that. But even using coworker ratings can be troublesome because of a sort of psychological "Heisenberg Principle," where the development intervention itself can change your frame of reference and make Time 1-Time 2 comparisons like apples and oranges. Another way to do it is with retrospective coworker ratings of which behaviors changed and how much. This is actually more consistent with how human memory works—like a reconstruction versus a videotape.

Brothers: But next we have to make that leap from the individual participant and his or her behavior, to the organization. The logical next step is in terms of improved processes; for instance, let's say we are studying the impact of the hypothetical training on a new innovation process. Level 3 concerns whether the participant is demonstrating the soft skills needed to apply the hard skills we taught in class, and Level 4 concerns a measurement of the team or business unit actually using the innovation process: gathering user stories from customers to identify pain points or unmet

13   Golembiewski, R. T., Billingsley, K., & Yeager, S. (1976). Measuring change and persistence in human affairs: Types of change generated by OD designs. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 12*, 133-157.

needs, brainstorming solutions, stress-testing for feasibility, small-scale experimentation with the more promising solutions, scaling up the ones that work. Then, outcomes should be considered: new solutions brought to market, customer satisfaction with those solutions, increased productivity, what have you. Monetizing those outcomes with dollar figures is at the end of that line. And as Rob said, that's probably best done in a collaboration between talent and finance; it will take both kinds of expertise.

UNC has shifted our thinking to focus more on ROL. After all, we are talking about behavior change, and behavior change is human: We're not robots. So, let's start by identifying and measuring leading indicators of behavior change, and then relate those measures to broader organizational capabilities.

Lindsay: That's a pretty compelling argument, gentlemen. Thanks a lot for taking the time. We've covered a lot of ground—who would have thought we could connect macroeconomics to meta-analyses and cavemen to design a better program? Seriously, it's neat to see how the scientific research and practical applications can work together to improve leadership development.

Brothers: Thank you. It's been fun.

Kaiser: It has indeed. Thanks a lot, Doug.

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> *We're not robots. So, let's start by identifying and measuring leading indicators of behavior change, and then relate those measures to broader organizational capabilities.*

Let's follow the Kirkpatrick framework but use it as it was originally intended—to look for and measure behavior change and organizational impact. In doing so, we need to reframe the ROI conversation to an ROL conversation, so we can be more clear, precise, and rigorous in understanding the learning process and make sure that translates into how the organization does things. This is the most challenging part of the journey, and it is the next step to take on the road to improving the impact of leadership development.