

All the World's a Stage for Learning

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To help make the connections between theory and practice, some learning leaders are taking top talent out of the office and into alternative leadership development arenas.

Students in Michelle Buck's management class don't need their laptops as much as they need their dancing shoes. The professor of management and organizations at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University uses tango dancing as a leadership development metaphor.

After some professional instruction, participants are asked to dance the tango. The idea is to take them out of their comfort zone and teach communication and coaching skills that Stephen Burnett, professor of management and strategy and academic director for the advanced executive program at Kellogg, said can't be developed from classroom or virtual learning.

"The key is once these principles are demonstrated, the instructor and students have to make sure there is a discussion of how what was learned can be applied in a business context," he said. "If you fail to link the lessons back to business leadership, you have had fun but learned little of a practical value to your job."

With leadership development spending on the rise — U.S. organizations boosted spending by 14 percent in 2012, according to Bersin & Associates' report "The Leadership Development Framework: A Modern Approach to Leadership Development" — Burnett and Buck aren't the only ones using unconventional leadership development methods and tying them back to the business.

ON THE WEB

Using hands-on firefighting scenarios, the New York Fire Department teaches participants to manage the unexpected as well as the importance of clear communication and strong leadership: CLOmedia.com/articles/view/5361.

Improv Learning Is No Joke

Second City Communications, a Chicago-based improvisational comedy club and experiential business training company, offers students opportunities to develop their communication skills. Consultants from The Second City teach students improvisational skills by placing them on the same stage that has been used by famed comedians such as Mike Myers and Stephen Colbert.

"We create an environment that supports risk taking and creates room for collaboration," said Tom Yorton, CEO of Second City Communications. "Students have to think on their feet and make decisions with confidence."

Tim West, an accounting professor at Northern Illinois University, has put his class of masters of accountancy students through a Second City session every semester for the past two and a half years.

“Accountants are thought of as people that say ‘no,’” he said. “At Second City students first go through a ‘no’ exercise, then ‘yes, but ...’ and then ‘yes, and ...’ to teach them how they can adapt to situations and not be the predictable, inflexible employees that say, ‘No we can’t do that’ all the time.”

To ensure the program will have an impact, Yorton’s team meets with clients before sessions to establish goals. “We are trying to get as specific as we can with our clients about what they’ll measure so we can design and deliver a program that hits it,” he said.

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— Tim West, Northern Illinois University accounting professor

West said his goals for sending students to Second City are for them to work more effectively together and come up with more flexible ways to solve problems.

“I’m moving the students from task-oriented behaviors to thinking, collaborative behaviors, and that can’t be quantified,” he said. “You don’t think of accountants as influencers, ones to adapt on the fly. But once returning from the program I see them interact in the classroom in ways they didn’t before. That’s not tangible, but it’s a measurement.”

The average cost is \$5,000 to \$10,000 per group (size varies) for half-day and full-day sessions.

Jazz Hands, Leadership Minds

When his company grew rapidly and globally, Chuck Presbury, senior director of leadership development at The McGraw-Hill Cos., sent 30 of the company’s high-potential, mid-level managers to a Jazz Impact session three years ago and saw an effect similar to the one West experienced.

The program, led by Principal Michael Gold, is a fusion of insights and parallels from the world of business and the world of jazz. Gold said jazz uses a system that enables collaborative improvisation to thrive, the same skills many corporations rely on for success.

“While this doesn’t replace traditional didactic forms of learning, it helps people think in ways they wouldn’t normally be able to think,” he said.

Presbury’s team used the program as an introduction to a three-day leadership seminar. To begin, Jazz Impact employees played a few tunes. Performers took turns improvising solos while other band members provided accompaniment. They then explained how jazz improvisation happens and made the link to leadership, focusing on building passion and autonomy. From there, participants were divided into three groups and given instruments to join the ensemble.

“It’s energizing and educational,” Presbury said. “It breaks down barriers. It keeps employees from silos and interacting only with people they know about what they know. It encourages them to break out a little bit, share information, think about the world differently and be open to new ideas.”

Presbury said he saw an impact. “What you want to know is, ‘Are participants doing things differently on the job?’” he said. “While you can’t link a program like this to \$15 million in new products, when it’s time for 360 reviews, employees who engage with managers who participated in Jazz Impact say those managers listen more, ask for ideas, experiment more and bring in experts from other departments.”

Average cost is \$5,000 to \$15,000 per group of 12 to 30 or more. Sessions range from 90 minutes for large groups to a half-day or full day for smaller groups.

Building Better Leaders

In March, Paul Curran, vice president of revenue for Cox Media Group, an integrated broadcasting, publishing and digital media company, sent 500 of his company’s executives to a three-hour leadership development seminar hosted by Odyssey Teams Inc. Odyssey is a motivational team building and leadership skills company known for its philanthropy-focused training courses.

“Our goal is to get people’s heads and hearts, their full attention, into the projects they’re working on and their leadership roles,” said Todd Demorest, Odyssey Teams’ lead facilitator. “We want the groups moving and coordinating with each other physically. We want them to go beyond merely thinking to interacting.”

Curran’s team completed Odyssey’s Life Cycles program. The group was split into teams of 10 and all were given instructions to build bicycles. They were told to assemble the pieces within a specific amount of time and create a presentation for their final product. As they began the project, they realized different teams had different tools. To complete the task, they had to share equipment with other teams. Further, different team members demonstrated different skills.

“Each member of the team contributed in a different capacity,” Curran said. “And each member learned something new about their team members’ strengths and weaknesses. Now, back in the office, they have a better understanding of each other.”

After bikes were built and presentations given, Curran’s team asked Cox executives how they operated as a team, coordinated, made requests and offers with other teams and how this related to their work. After this discussion, the teams found out their bikes would be used for underprivileged children.

“No longer was it a race to build the bike first, but instead the focus turned to making sure we had built the best and safest bike,” Curran said.

Demorest said the team’s reaction is a leadership lesson. “Participants suddenly realize they just did enough to finish the project and that their focus was competing with others in the room,” he said. “It was all about getting it done, and in a nanosecond it flips to being about the customer. There’s always a customer in business. Whether it’s an internal customer or someone waiting in line for a cashier, leaders have to keep the customer in mind.”

Average cost is \$120 per person.

Row Your Boat Down the Leadership Stream

Jeffrey L. Holloway, Charlottesville, Va., site director for Northrop Grumman Maritime Systems, a global security company, spent 22 years working in the U.S. Navy and 14 so far in the corporate world. To him, leadership is emotional.

“Leading employees is about showing each individual that you care about them, that you believe in them, and that you support and respect each one of them, while holding them to high standards and performance,” he said. “It is about sincerely caring for each person while being open, honest and straightforward in communicating your vision and expectations.”

After joining Northrop Grumman, Holloway enrolled in University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business’s Leading Teams for Growth and Change course, which combines classroom work with competitive rowing, to strengthen his leadership tactics.

Lynn A. Isabella, associate professor of business administration at Darden, partnered with Dan Lyons, a former Olympian, to help participants develop strong, sustainable leadership and team-building capabilities.

Students spend half the time in the classroom exploring case studies, leadership exercises and research, learning about teams and how they should be used and managed, and the other half of the time rowing in boats of eight. The class culminates in a regatta.

“Adults learn best when they’re doing and when they’re learning what they need to learn as they go

along,” Isabella said. She said rowing teaches leaders trust, teamwork, and how to provide adequate coaching and feedback.

“Valuable motivational and leadership qualities became apparent [to participants],” Holloway said. “This helped each person contribute and achieve the team’s ultimate goal.” But it wasn’t easy, he said. “To obtain that ultimate ‘stroke’ while striving to establish a work environment to achieve a similar goal is very challenging as a leader.”

Average cost is \$7,750 per person for a four-and-a-half-day program. Cost includes accommodations, meals and materials.

The Art of Leadership

Derin Baratka, president and head art instructor at Chicago Art and Design Center, is aware of leadership’s challenges, so she said she made it a priority to bring out its more entertaining features. Her company gives participants the opportunity to create mosaics or paintings as a way to encourage team building, communication and out-of-the-box thinking.

“Using art in training is interactive, stimulating

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— Lynn A. Isabella, Darden associate professor of business administration

and memorable,” she said. “People are tired of doing the same things repeatedly, and employees do not use the full potential of their brains. A normal business atmosphere uses the left side. Through art, you use the right.” According to the left-brain, right-brain dominance theory, the right side of the brain is best at expressive and creative tasks.

When Hillary Hohman, manager of campus recruiting at PricewaterhouseCoopers, took 30 college sophomores and juniors to Chicago Art and Design Center as part of a two-day leadership program for prospective employees, she said she was surprised to see how engaged participants were. After a short art lesson on how to choose brushes and paint colors,

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Baratka asks students to imagine a peaceful place and paint it on the easel.

“Suddenly, after five minutes, she asked them to stand up and move to somebody else’s easel and continue working on that person’s vision,” Hohman said. “It allowed them to work as a team to complete a project that wasn’t their vision to begin with but one they completed together with individual originality.”

Baratka said this leaves participants confident and proud. They learn about each other and their own ability to learn quickly and innovate effectively.

Average cost is \$35 per person.

Embody Health, Wisdom and Soul

At Mosaic Institute for Human Development, a yoga studio that offers programs in health, leadership and spiritual development, leadership development is designed to take leaders past the threshold of self-imposed boundaries and limitations. It’s a transformational process that invites a leader to discover wisdom, authenticity and purpose.

“The end goal is a leader’s ability to be self-correcting and self-governing while living one’s calling and vocation,” said Ryan Krupa, Mosaic’s founder.

Training is held in retreat centers in the mountains, and participants experience five days of activities relating to introspection, discernment, reasoning, yoga and meditation.

“Our approach is about making an ascent and exploring the courage it takes for a leader to listen and speak from what lives inside of them,” Krupa said.

Last spring Dave Cooper, retired U.S. Navy SEAL master chief and management consultant with consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton, took a small group of SEALs, officers and enlisted personnel on Krupa’s leadership journey in Julian, Calif.

“What we did, ultimately, was get back to our core,” Cooper said. “Who were we as individuals? What virtues, values and principles made us tick? Ryan helped us first discover our cores and then showed us how our leadership styles were a function of those core strengths.”

Cooper said unconventional leadership tactics like this help an individual get to know and comprehend the naked self and strengthen one’s core to determine a person’s values and how to act in accordance with those values.

“It’s not enough for me to have knowledge of tactics, techniques and procedures,” he said. “I need to know myself, and I need to understand how to think creatively and critically, all the time. These aren’t skills that can be learned in weeklong courses and then largely forgotten; they’re the warp and weft of our intellectual capital.”

Average cost is \$32,000 per group of four to 25 leaders for a four-day, 32-hour program.

As they continue to fight the war for talent, companies feel the shortage in leaders at all levels and are spending money to develop leaders from within. But as these examples illustrate, traditional tactics may no longer suffice. Alternate leadership development methods get students out of the office and into an environment where the lessons really make a lasting impression. **CL**

For the kinesthetic learners, the company provided workbooks to allow them to write information for better recall. Music also was used to help participants focus and remember the concepts they were learning.

“If managers were asked to reflect, the music choice was slower, mellower,” Stancampiano said. “If they needed to, say, do a kinesthetic activity, then the music choice would be more upbeat.”

With the U-shaped classes, participants also were able to challenge each other. One manager had previously worked at a company that used both ratings and rankings, from best to worst, and he continuously repeated how he really liked ratings because he felt numbers were more objective and fair.

“But the problem with that is it’s still someone’s opinion, and someone’s judgment expressed in a 3-point, or 5-point or 17-point rating scale,” Takushi said. “I could see there were some of his peers who were getting frustrated with his consistent marketing of rating and ranking people, and after the fifth comment extolling the virtues of ratings, one of his peers said, ‘Dude, let it go. It’s over. We’re not using ratings anymore.’”

Thumbs Up From Participants

Feedback about the training program from managers and employees has been positive, Takushi said.

One email from a technology manager said, “This was the best review experience ever! It was great to go in not having to think about the rating.”

Another email from an individual contributor said, “Working from the competencies for both [my manager] and I was really useful. We ended up in complete agreement on strengths and areas of improvement. ... Thinking about this process, I believe we are striving for an ‘enlightened technocracy.’ Enlightened: Having knowledge and spiritual insight. Technocracy: The governance or control of industry by an elite of technical experts. I am excited for the future of our team.”

According to an Expedia employee survey conducted in April, 59 percent said this year’s annual review process was simpler and less bureaucratic than previous years; 42 percent said it had more focus on performance strengths and areas for improvement; 38 percent said it had more focus on career and professional development goals; and 71 percent said it included a good discussion of future-facing topics for 2013 — expected business results, competencies/behaviors to continue, stop or start, and development planning.

Further, 87 percent of employees think the behaviors the company expects from them are aligned with company values and help employees understand how work gets done. Sixty-one percent think the program improved the way the company manages performance.

“This was not straight out-of-the-box management training. We really wanted our managers to become change agents, and they did,” Takushi said. **CL**

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