

Making leadership development stick

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Image from Unsplash

“The true art of memory is the art of attention.” **Samuel Johnson**

Time, time, time. The number one enemy for leaders everywhere. Once we’ve factored in core work, team development, strategic planning, broadening networks and influence (and the list goes on), the time available for personal development seems rather sparse. Even where this time is cut out for leaders in formal training programs or coaching sessions, we are faced with the question: is a one-off ever going to fundamentally change how we operate as leaders?

The short answer is – typically – no. The practices we commit to slowly erode over time without attention. Leadership development, like any personal development goal, must be a constant movement of self. Something we return to, finesse, and reinforce. This reality can seem daunting, like an additional task to add to the already voluminous list of *things to do*.

However, it's important to try and push back against the idea that leadership development is just an added extra. Rather, it is the substance of what leaders do. Any investment not only *creates* time because it *creates* impact – it also energises. When we are more efficacious, we feel good. When we reflect on what's really important to us and the person we want to become, we are excited. As is evinced by any leader leaving a well put together leadership development experience, there is a heightened sense of possibility, of drive and of purpose.

So, we know it's worthwhile, but how do we make it happen in the busy day-to-day? Some new research in relation to memory gives us an intriguing angle on how we can make this happen.

Retention: The Old Way

When it comes to memory, repeated, spaced out exposure to information is the number one predictor for retention (the 'spacing effect'). This effect has been reproduced in studies on memory for decades. And it bears out in practice. For example, as any subject matter expert knows, if we are working in a role for many years, doing the same tasks and utilising the same body of knowledge – this information is highly accessible. It's locked into our memory and always on hand for recall.

However, what if we simply do not have the time to return to the subject matter with as much militant regularity as we would like? Even our best intentions – you know that goal to learn a new language – can come up against the significant difficulties

of time constraints and motivational blocks. As our development goals change over time, we also might experience challenges in continuing to add more and more onto this schedule of review.

New Perspectives

Well, fortunately, memory retention is also aided by a second factor: exposure to the knowledge in variable relationships with other concepts. In fact, this actually seems to work more quickly in building the networks in our brain which support us in remembering.

This means if we want to retain things more quickly then we need to see the 'thing' we want to learn in multiple combinations. Recall it and connect in our mind to other parts of the world. This aligns with research showing how student retention of material demonstrate only two high efficacy learning techniques: spaced study and practice testing. In practice testing, we are required to extract the information from different inputs and apply it to different circumstances: involving multiple recombinations.

So, what might this look like? Rather than revisiting content once a month for a year, try over a two-week period, to examine it in different contexts. Here are three suggestions:

1. Apply the tool in a new context every day for a week

Strike while the iron is hot! If you're feeling the motivation, you can make a real impact by taking a focused approach over a week or two. However, it needs to be not just returning to the same information in the same way, but combining it with new sources. At the start of each day, think about one (different) opportunity to use the leadership practice and then make it happen.

2. Consider the tool, theory, approach through three different media:

Rather than returning to the tool in one form – something you've written down or a diagram. Look at it through three different media forms : written, video, audio. This allows you to encounter the information in different ways, from different perspectives, and thus encodes it more strongly. In our work, for example, we will often use an article, a Ted talk and a leadership podcast as complementary learning modalities to reinforce retention.

3. Explain the tool, approach, mindset to three different colleagues

Teaching is often the best way to learn, as we know. Giving a rundown to a few colleagues will help you to get this concept more deeply into your mind and demand that you reframe and contextualise it for different people's situations. Select three people who have slightly different roles or career experiences so that it requires you to stretch your own framing and share learning with them.

Through taking a more intense but targeted approach to learning new information, you can ensure it sticks without having to spend hours on it in spaced study.

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