

The Secret to Optimizing Classroom Learning **Bruce E. Roselle, PhD LP**

Most organizations recognize that the key to developing their leaders is to implement a continuous learning framework. In such an approach, leaders are exposed throughout their careers to a variety of challenging job assignments, cross functional task forces, mentoring/coaching, e-learning, and instructor led classroom training. Though e-learning options have built momentum over the last 10 years, the most popular mode of learning new leadership skills and perspective remains the classroom setting. There is something about being in the same physical space with the instructor and the other learners that makes the learning richer and more energetic. But does it stick?

A recent article in the T&D Journal of the American Society for Training and Development addressed this question. In a learning study, participants were assessed on a measure of emotional intelligence, given feedback and trained for half a day in emotional intelligence competencies, and then tested for what they had retained. They were also given a coaching session in which they discussed a plan created at the conclusion of the classroom training. The results showed significant improvement in competencies like assertiveness, emotional self-control, self-confidence, adaptability, and optimism.

Why are these results important? Because they confirm the impact of **individual coaching** in galvanizing the learning from instructor led training.

At Roselle Leadership Strategies (RLSI), we have offered a public workshop version of our Good Managers to Great Leaders™ classroom training for several years. We are offering it again starting in October of this year. Over these several years, we also concluded that it is critical to augment classroom learning if you want to make sure the participants apply the new skills and perspective.

Best practices in learning with adults. Based on our 25 years of experience in training and coaching leaders, we have developed a set of best practices that we employ. We suggest that you employ them when developing your own internal training, or use them as a template when you hire consulting organizations like ours to help you develop materials and a training framework. Research in the field of adult learning suggests that the following components, when used together, will optimize the classroom training or e-learning you provide for your leaders:

- Pretesting to establish a baseline
- Providing in-depth feedback on the participant pretesting
- Delivering classroom or e-learning training by a subject matter expert (include practice with new skills learned)
- Applying the new skills to real work situations
- Coaching to help galvanize the learning, apply it
- Involving the participants' managers
- Spreading the learning over time

Let's look at each one of these in more detail.

Pretesting. In the study cited, the participants were given a test of emotional intelligence. This type of norm-based instrument works well as a pretest, as does an established 360-degree feedback instrument, or one you might create specifically to assess the new skills and perspective to be included in the training. At RLSI, we tend to use our FULLVIEW Feedback Inventory™ to establish a baseline of competence. (This year, we are offering the FULLVIEW as an option when you sign up managers for our Great Leaders public workshop).

In-depth feedback. This can be provided at the beginning of the training session, or individually before the training begins. Either way, the objective is to help participants understand their style and approach, how others might perceive them, and what new skills and perspective would help them become more effective as leaders. This can provide the basis for their individual development plan that generates from the training.

Classroom or e-learning training. From the adult learning research, there are several characteristics that help make this type of learning effective. These include the following:

- Brief (15-20 minute) lecturettes to provide perspective, teach new tools
- Practice with new tools within 10-15 minutes of learning them
- Short training sessions of one-four hours total to maintain energy, focus

Application of the new tools. Assuming participants have learned some new tools and practiced them in class, the next step in learning is to apply them. This is a two-phase process. The first phase is for participants to teach the new tool(s) they have learned to someone else within the first 24 hours. The second phase is for them to apply the new tool(s) to an actual situation at work or home within a couple of weeks. This maximizes their retention and the likelihood of using the tools in the future.

Individual coaching. Though classroom settings and e-learning approaches usually allow for discussion and questions, participants often do not think of questions until later. Or, they try to apply new tools and experience frustration or resistance from others. They need time to talk through their experiences in order to create a breakthrough in the way they lead or manage. Often, their managers are not equipped or available to provide such perspective. Brief individual coaching can help. (This year in our public Great Leaders workshop, we are offering individual coaching as an option for participants).

Involvement of participants' managers. One of the most effective ways to insure that new learning is being applied is to involve the participants' managers from the beginning. Give them a chance to provide feedback, either on a 360-degree instrument, or informal conversation to determine what they think their direct report needs to work on. Include them in follow-up information that updates them on which tools were learned during the session, so they can give on-the-job, real time feedback as they see the new tools being employed.

Spreading the learning over time. Giving small doses of learning and spacing the training sessions over several months maximizes the likelihood that new tools will be employed. This is why our Great Leaders series meets once per month over six months.

Bottom Line. Use these seven learning components in your leader training, and you will optimize the retention and application of new skills and perspective. This will help you maximize your ROI on training costs and the value it brings to the organization.