

# Good Leaders Are Good Learners

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Dave Wheeler for HBR

Although organizations spend more than \$24 billion annually on leadership development, many leaders who have attended leadership programs struggle to implement what they've learned. It's not because the programs are bad but because leadership is best learned from experience.

Still, simply being an experienced leader doesn't elevate a person's skills. Like most of us, leaders often go through their experiences somewhat mindlessly, accomplishing tasks but learning little about themselves and their impact.

Our research on leadership development shows that leaders who are *in learning mode* develop stronger leadership skills than their peers.

Building on Susan Ashford and Scott DeRue's mindful engagement experiential learning cycle, we found that leaders who exhibit a growth mindset diligently work through each of the following three phases of the experiential learning cycle.

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First, leaders set challenging learning goals in the form of "I need to learn how to..." For some leaders, the goal might be to become more persuasive or to be more approachable. With a goal in mind, leaders can identify opportunities to make progress toward it. These could include a new project, an international assignment, a job rotation, or simply striving to approach routine encounters in a fundamentally different way.

Next, they find ways to deliberately experiment with alternative strategies. A leader interested in increasing their persuasiveness, for example, might experiment with sitting in a different place or speaking first or last in a critical meeting. Creating and capitalizing on learning opportunities can be bolstered by having a coach or peer provide feedback and act as a sounding board.

Finally, leaders who are in learning mode conduct fearless after-action reviews, determined to glean useful insights from the results of their experimentation. Candidly reflecting on what went well, what did not go so well, and what might work better in future are essential though often neglected initiatives for learning from experience and discerning what to focus on learning next.

Understanding these principles is important for organizations not just because it means that leadership development doesn't have to be expensive, but also because it means that leadership skills can be systematically learned and practiced.

**How can leaders enter learning mode?** Leaders can construe setbacks as meaning they have not *yet* developed the required capabilities, rather than them being just not cut out for the task at hand. They can also avoid the trap of constantly seeking out places and tasks to highlight their strengths, as well as feedback that affirms their innate talents and self-esteem. Simply asking themselves, "Am I in learning mode right now?" can be a powerful cue to wholeheartedly focus, or refocus, on their leadership *development*, as well as their leadership *performance*, and thereby truly learn from their experiences.

**How can organizations help leaders enter and remain in learning mode?** Organizational leaders can help rising leaders focus more on being progressively better than they were in the past, rather than on constantly benchmarking themselves against others. They can model construing mistakes as potential learning opportunities rather than as indicators of leadership inadequacy. In hiring and promotion, organizational leaders might give priority to those most likely to grow and develop in a role. Finally, they might conduct an audit of fixed mindset cues in their organization – such as the use of psychometric testing to select the most “innately qualified” high-potential leaders; forced ranking performance appraisals; and winner-take-all reward systems – and tweak them to focus more on *developing* than *diagnosing* leadership capabilities.

The bottom line is that by supporting leaders being in learning mode, organizations can develop the capabilities that leaders need to anticipate, respond to, and continually learn from the stream of emerging challenges to organizational prosperity.



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