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Strength Based Approach to Leadership Skills Development: Role of Awareness; Alignment; Action

Leadership Skills Development in Business Organizations is a Critical Talent Management Practice. The Leadership Skills Development Initiatives across Business Organizations focus on Self Awareness training, Action Learning, Coaching, and Contextualization as critical success factors for developing Leadership Skills. However, whether to focus on strengths of individual leader/participant or to focus on removing weaknesses/ to focus on individual areas of development remains a key issue which affects the design and deliverables of Leadership Skills Development Initiatives.

The study presents qualitative analysis of a Leadership Skills Development Initiative which used Strength Based Approach for 50 senior executives from a large scale Public Sector Organization. The analysis of Leadership Coaching, Action Learning within Business Context used during the Initiative indicates role of Awareness; Alignment; Action as key input variables impacting the outcomes of the Initiative.

The paper also presents a framework for Strength based Approach to Leadership Development and Training Practices for creating Awareness, Alignment, and Action among participants of Leadership Skills Development Initiatives.

Key words: Leadership Skills, Leadership Development, Leadership Coaching, Action Learning

Introduction

Leadership Skills Development in Business Organizations is a Critical Talent Management Practice. The Leadership Skills Development Initiatives across business organizations focus on Self Awareness training, Action Learning, Coaching, and Contextualization as critical success factors for developing Leadership Skills. The impact of Leadership Skills Development Training

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is vital for managing change in the context of dynamics of competition in most of the business organizations. In both private and public organizations, organizational change has become the rule rather than the exception (Kieselbach et al., 2009).

One interesting question which often is deliberated upon is whether to focus on strengths of individual leader/participant or to focus on removing weaknesses/ to focus on individual areas of development? The approach taken has bearing on the design and deliverables of Leadership Skills Development Initiatives. Another question which faces trainers and facilitators is on the job v/s class room training.

Especially in context of Leadership Skills Development, transfer of learning from classroom to workplace setting, often turns out to have limited or no effect (Allio, 2005; Burgoyne et al., 2004).

Moreover, in times of continuous organizational change, Managers need skills to maintain a productive and motivating work environment. Such skills are not restricted to theoretical knowledge about Leadership. On the contrary, true leadership is not about theoretical knowledge - it is a "performance sport" as opined by Doh, 2003.
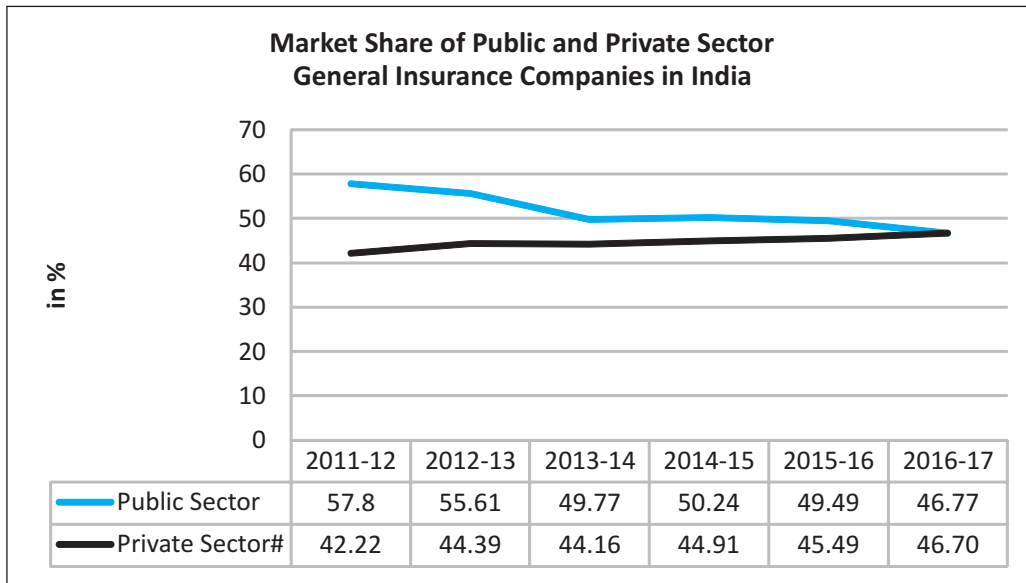
In this paper, the researchers discuss components, flow, and qualitative Analysis of Leadership Skills Development Intervention using Strength Based Approach for 50 senior executives from a large scale Public Sector Organization. The paper highlights Context of Public Sector General Insurance Companies in India, Methodology adopted for the long term Leadership Skills Development, and Outcomes achieved.

Public Sector General Insurers

Public Sector General Companies were nationalized with effect from 1st January 1973. After opening of the sector in 2000, the General Insurance Sector in India has seen steady growth in number of private players. Presently there are 18 private General Insurers and 6 standalone Health Insurance Companies are operating in Indian Market.

The four Public Sector Companies have a combined Market Share of 46.77 % in 2016-17. *Figure 1* shows Market Share movement over last five years for four General Insurers namely New India Assurance, National Insurance Co. Ltd., United Insurance Co. Ltd., and Oriental Insurance Co. Ltd. vis a vis other Private Players. It is evident that the Public Sector Companies are facing competition from Private Plyers. Therefore, the issue of Growth with profitability is of major concern to all the four Public Sector General Insurers.

Figure 1
Market Share of Public and
Private Sector General Insurance Companies in India

Market Share of Public and Private Sector General Insurance Companies in India

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
Public Sector	57.8	55.61	49.77	50.24	49.49	46.77
Private Sector#	42.22	44.39	44.16	44.91	45.49	46.70

(Source: Annual Reports of IRDAI, www.irdai.org.in)

In view of recent decision of Govt. of India to list the Public Sector Companies further creates challenges in terms of bringing transparency in operation and maintaining healthy top line and bottom line growth.

Availability of talent is critical factor in Business Growth and sustenance of Business Performance. On Manpower Side, the Public Sector have experienced but aging population. Although during last ten years these Companies have recruited in large numbers, yet the burgeoning numbers of retirement in coming 2 to 3 years pose tremendous challenge in terms of availability of technically sound and business oriented workforce.

The PSU General Insurance Companies mostly recruit Generalists, who are trained and rotated in various functions and domain areas to develop well rounded Insurance Professionals. The practice of recruiting Generalists also creates bench strength to utilize available talent to take care of retirements as well as growing business needs. The home grown leaders thus face challenges in terms of reinventing and applying themselves to deal with dynamic business environment. As the Top Management Officials rise through ranks, it is important to expose them to focussed Leadership Skills Development Intervention. Developing future ready leaders among Generalists thus is a major challenge for majority of Public Sector General Insurers.

To sustain the Growth momentum, it is imperative to develop a Leadership Pipeline, which can manage new business realities. Considering the nature of recruitment and availability of Generalists in Public Sector General Insurance Companies, it is desirable to harness Leadership Potential through a Focused Developmental Approach. This aspect gains importance because the officers during their career in Company are expected to manage different positions and functions. However, given the challenges at a senior level, these officers need to reinvent themselves to adapt to changing business needs rather than rely solely on past successes and approaches.

Leadership Skills Development Intervention

In the month of November 2015, one of the Senior Executives working in the Public Sector General Insurance Company under study raised a pertinent question during the Performance Review of Business about legacy and who will be the torch bearers for the Company in future and what the Company is doing to develop them? This question led to conceptualization of Leadership Skills Development Intervention for Middle Management.

To remain competitive in today's marketplace, nearly 50% of executives have emphasized the importance of Leadership Development initiatives, yet only 6% actually have a structured plan for implementation in place (Mathews, 2011).

The researchers along with Three Executives from the company nominated for internal communication and coordination, initiated structured and long term approach to Leadership Skills Development.

The methodology of the study included Training Needs Analysis through Personal Interviews with seven Top Management Officials, 10 prospective participants of the Intervention, 5 Superiors of the prospective participants. Based on the responses and data collected, the researchers made a presentation on Objectives, Intervention Design, and Deliverables of the intervention, to the Top Management Officials of the Company. Subsequently, the Design of Intervention was finalized based on the feedback received from the Top Management Officials.

Approach to Leadership Skills Development Intervention

Conger, 1993 has opined that conventionally, the approaches to leadership development are not innovative and are based around four areas which have been used for many years: Skill-building (e.g. decision-making), concepts (e.g. what makes Leaders different from Managers) outdoor adventures (to build teamwork) and feedback (ranking on a scale of Leadership dimensions). Ready and Conger, 2003 explored why leadership development efforts may fail. These authors describe programmes that are "products", rather than being designed around the issues within the organisation that need to be addressed as tending to fail. The authors argue that the metrics used to

assess the effectiveness of such leadership development approaches may be inappropriate since they focus on activity rather than capability.

Day (2000) concludes that there is a difference between developing leaders – using a "traditional, individualistic conceptualisation of leadership" – and leadership development which "has its origins in a more contemporary, relational model". Which requires more contemporary approach in terms of a model of Competency (Doh, 2003). Moreover, Yip and Raelin (2012) found three aspects of learning to be important for Leadership Development, namely variation, enactment and reflection, which calls for Leadership Development Training/ Intervention to incorporate Competency based, diverse, multi-pronged, to leadership skills development.

Importantly, Leadership Training and Development is expensive for companies, both in terms of money and hours invested (Hannah and Avolio, 2010), hence it was important for the General Insurer under study to adopt an approach which is directly related to business context and the impact of Leadership Skills Development Intervention may be determined by behavioural changes as well performance.

For the General Insurer under study, the researchers focussed on Approach depicted in *Figure 2*.

Figure 2
Approach to Leadership Skills Development Intervention
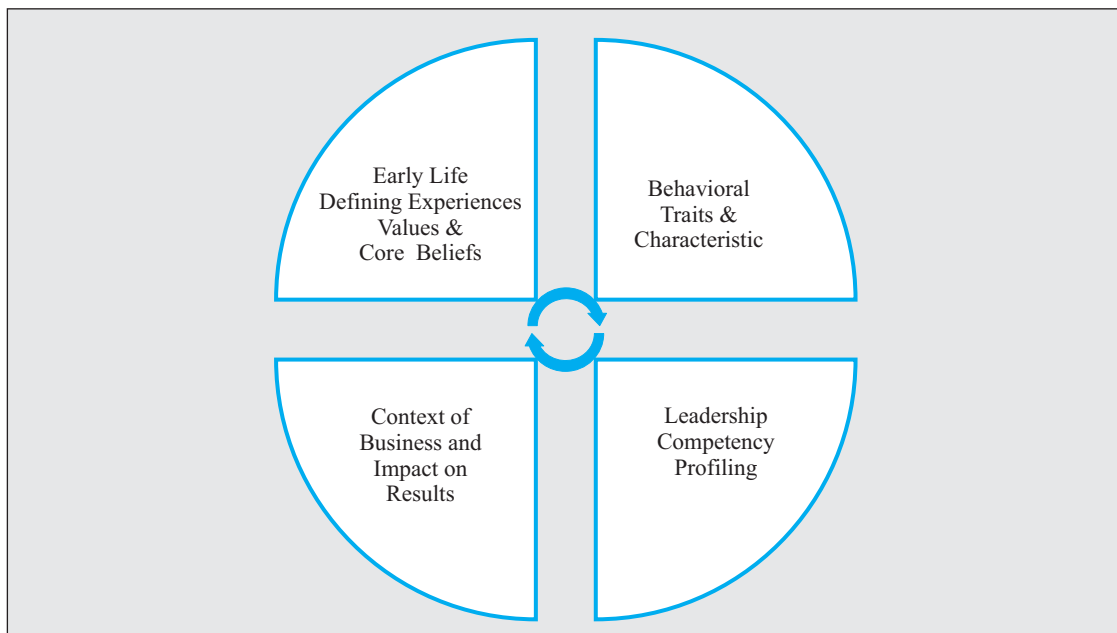
Objectives of the Leadership Skills Development Intervention

The Leadership Skills Development Intervention under study provided participants (Leaders) a developmental opportunity to maximise their leadership potential and accelerate performance.

The Intervention aimed to create a leadership mirror to help leaders identify key leadership strengths, build skills & competencies to enhance leadership effectiveness, help leaders adapt to new roles in a wider business context and, build a leadership pipeline for continued business success.

The Leadership Skills Development Framework also aimed at providing necessary insights and direction to help participants in creating a development path to actualize one's innate leadership potential.

Key Components

- 4 days Leadership Skills Development Programme organized in the month of June 2016.

- Leadership Competency Potential Assessment using Saville Wave® Leadership Competencies

- Leadership Development Action plan across- Leading for Results, Leading Teams, and Self-Management

- Personal Coaching over Phone (Three Coaching Calls per participant)

- Final Review at the end of 6 months of Leadership Development Action plan across- Leading for Results held in the month of January 2017.

The Coaching programme was designed to help participants to successfully implement their action plan, use a **Strength-based approach** towards accelerating performance and develop competencies to further enhance their leadership potential.

Boarden (2006) studied impact of a Leadership Development Programme provided for and funded by, the National Health Service. This programme showed characteristics of effective development programmes, a strong action learning approach, using direct personal and business issues as the focus of activity, encouraging and expecting participants to implement changes in their work environments, and having the strong support of senior management and the support of line managers.

To take care of the issue of support from senior management and the line managers, One Day Mentoring Dialogue Workshop was conducted for the immediate superiors of the participants. The workshop oriented the Superiors on Leadership Action Plans formulated by the participants

focusing on Leading for Results, Leading Teams, Self-Management.as presented in *Figure 3*.

The Interaction with Superiors during the Workshop also heled the researchers in fine tuning Coaching Sessions and rooting the sessions in organizational context as well, apart from tailoring them to individual participants' strengths and development needs

Holten et.al. (2015) proposed a model for the development of effective leadership teaching and learning. The authors applied the nudging strategy to reinforce behavioural change and extend learning into daily organizational life. To promote participants' application of their new skills and change of behaviour in their daily practice, they integrated SMS technology in the programme. The SMS technology is applied as a tool to nudge ongoing development and improvement of leadership strategies. Nudging consists of a variety of potential choice architectural principles, e.g. giving incentives, giving feedback, structuring complex choices. These principles can take the form of a variety of specific nudges (Sunstein, 2014).

Based on the nudging approach described above, during the Six months' time period between the Leadership Skills development Programme and Review of individual Leadership Action plans achievement, the researchers offered support through articles, video links and various reflective exercises. During each Coaching call, the leadership action plan and activities agreed upon by the participants were reviewed and feedback was provided.

Figure 3

Key Components and Flow of Intervention
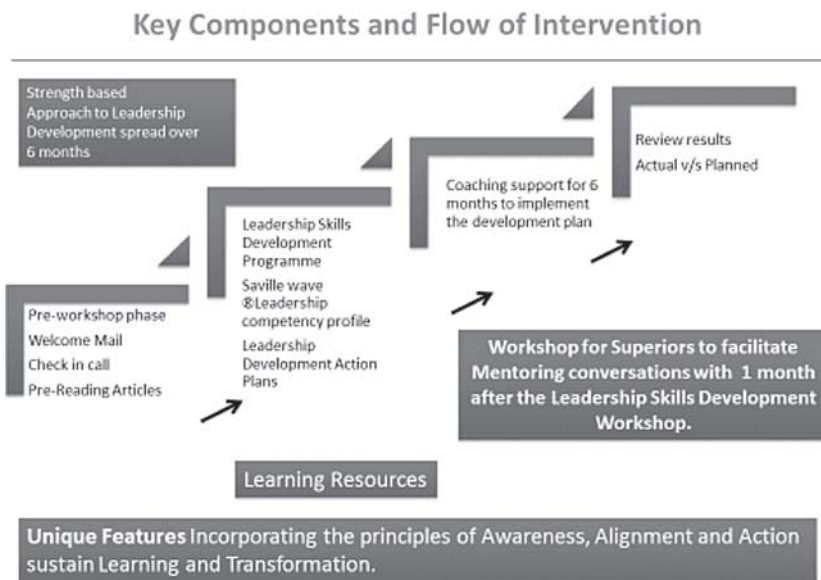
Participants' Profile

100 participants were nominated for the Intervention. Four batches of 25 participants each was formed. In this paper Analysis of the Leadership Action Plans related to leading for Results and Feedback of 50 participants from first two batched is presented.

The average age of participants was 52, average no of years of service left was 8 years. Average number of experience was 26 years. The participants were individually responsible for Performance (Results) which could be quantified.

Role of Awareness; Alignment; Action

Considering the long experience and exposure of the participants it was evident that the participants have experienced fair amount of success and some setbacks as well in their careers.

Through the Leadership Skills Development Intervention, the researchers focussed on Awareness; Alignment; Action. These three aspects are critical because it is important that the individual not only identifies but owns up his/ her Strengths as indicated by Saville Wave® Leadership Competency Profile **(Awareness),** he/ she is able to identify how these Leadership Competencies are getting manifested in terms of Behaviours at Workplace **(Alignment)**, and he/ she consciously chooses / deploys them at work situations and challenges **(Action).**

Fritz Perls, the father of Gestalt therapy said, it's the awareness, the full experience of how you are stuck, that makes you recover." Perls said that learning equals discovery and what you are discovering is yourself. Awareness is a means to discovery. Coming into awareness; coming into the moment, creates a clear mind. It gives them access to creativity and inner resourcefulness (Lasley et al, 2011).

When the participants/ individuals are in zone of awareness they become aware of possibilities. If they work with limiting beliefs, old patterns and inner critics, the progress is limiting, however, when they start working with their strengths they are confident, feel energetic, and are more accepting of themselves.

Consciously choosing Action based on one's Strengths is equally important. Action provides opportunities to explore, stretch oneself beyond what is obvious and the results become source of motivation in future. Even set backs are analysed by what else could have been done rather than why I could not do it?

Strength Based Approach

On first Day of the Leadership Skills Programme, the participants took online Leadership Competency Potential Assessment using Saville Wave®.

The participants prepared their Leadership Action plans on fourth day which included action steps related to Leading for Results, Leading Teams, and Self-Management. During Coaching Calls also the focus was on creating Awareness, Alignment and Action on the basis of Strengths as indicated by High Scores on Saville Wave® Leadership Competencies Profiles.

In this paper Analyses and Observations related to 'Leading for Results' only is presented. The qualitative feedback form 20 participants is given in *Annexure I* which includes participants' comments on other two components of Leadership Action Plan namely Leading Teams and Self-Management. *Figure 4* presents activities carried out during the Intervention.

Figure 4
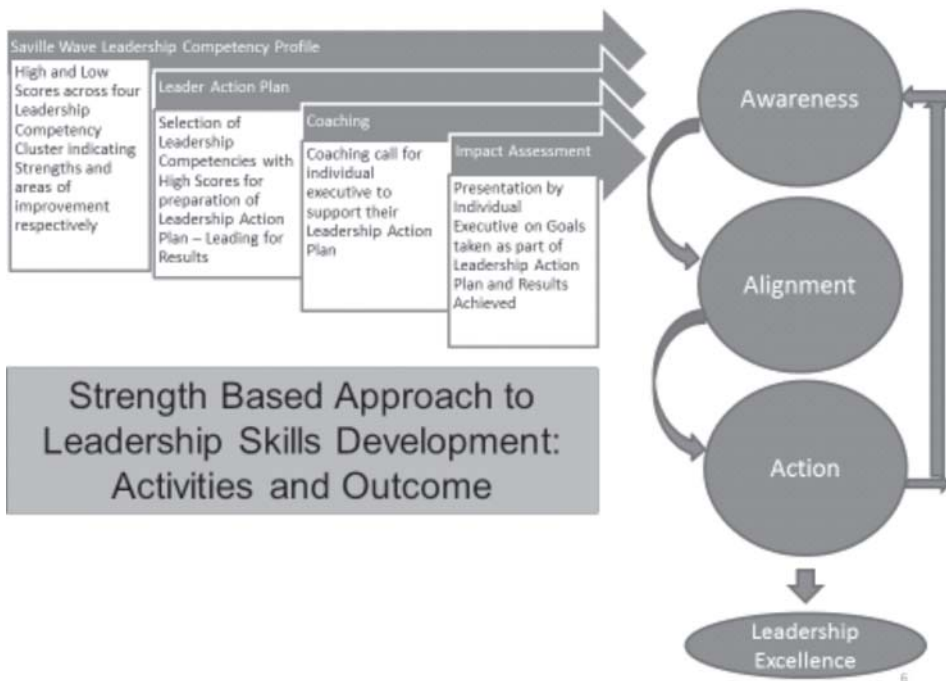
Insights from Saville Wave®

An integrated suite of the most contemporary global assessment tools with modern and relevant content. The suite includes aptitude assessments and styles/ competency assessments. It offers excellent insight to support selection, development, performance coaching, leadership, team building and managing talent. It is a self-report assessment tool.

The Saville report gives sten scores (on a scale of 1 to 10) based on comparison with norm group (1240 international professional & managers)and indicates high, average, and low scores across four leadership clusters and 12 leadership competencies.. A sten score of 4 and below is Low, 5-6 is moderate and 7 and above is considered as high.

1. **Cluster: Solving Problems**

   The Solving Problems cluster covers stylistic characteristics that underpin problem-solving behaviour.

   Competencies: Evaluating Problems, Investigating Issues, Creating Innovation

   1.1 Evaluating Problems: This relates to examining information, documenting facts and interpreting data.

   1.2 Investigating issues: This relates to developing expertise, adopting approaches and providing insights.

   1.3 Creating innovation: This relates to generating ideas, exploring possibilities and developing strategies.

2. **Cluster: Influencing people**

   The Influence cluster covers characteristics that underpin successful Influencing in the work place.

   Competencies: Building Relationships, Communicating information, Providing Leadership

   2.1 Building Relationships**:** This relates to interacting with people, establishing rapport and impressing people

   2.2 Communicating information: This relates to convincing people, articulating information and challenging ideas.

   2.3 Providing Leadership: This relates to making decisions, directing people and empowering individuals.

3. **Cluster: Adapting Approaches**

   The Adaptability cluster covers emotional, behavioural and social adaptability respectively

   Competencies: Showing Resilience, Adjusting to change, Giving Support

   3.1 Showing Resilience**:** This relates conveying self-confidence, showing composure and resolving conflict.

   3.2 Adjusting to change**:** This relates to thinking positively, embracing change and inviting feedback.

3.3 Giving Support**:** This relates to understanding people, team working and valuing individuals.

4. Cluster: Delivering Results

The Delivery Cluster covers characteristics that underpin how assigned tasks are performed at the work place.

Competencies: Processing Details, Structuring Tasks, Driving Success

4.1 Processing Details: This relates to meeting timescales, checking things and following procedures.

4.2 Structuring Tasks: This relates to managing tasks, upholding standards and producing Output.

4.3 Driving Success**:** This relates to taking action, seizing opportunities and pursuing Goals.

Alignment of Strengths to Leadership Action Plan

For formulating the Leadership Action Plan related to 'Leading for Results', the participants were asked to choose one Leadership Competency with highest score from Solving Problems Clusters or Delivering Results Clusters. These Leadership Competency related to the above mentioned clusters are directly related to managing task, outcomes, and delivering results.

Additionally, the participants were asked to think about a situation at work place during last one year which they handled successfully and they feel extremely satisfied with what they did, we supported each participants to identify Leadership Competency and Behaviour the participants at that point of time. There was high correlation between their event and the scores related Leadership Competency from Solving Problems Cluster and/ Delivering Results Cluster.

Review of Leadership Action plan related to Leading for Results

The participants were asked to finalize their Leadership Action Plans within 15 days after attending the four days Leadership Development Programme. The time period was utilized by the participants to collect data, crystallize their though and discuss their Leadership Action Plan with their respective superiors.

The review of Leadership Action plan related to Leading for Results was held in the month of January 2017 in same batches. Each participant presented their Leadership Action Plan, Goals taken and Results obtained. The participants also shared examples or anecdotes in terms of situation faced, action taken, and results achieved. Out of 50 participants 40 reported for the review sessions and made presentations.

Analyses

Based on Presentations, data, and Examples each participant was rated on a scale of 1 to 3. Score of 1 represented under achievement of results, score of 2 represented achievement equalled targeted Goals, score of 3 represented achievement of results beyond the targeted Goals. To avoid observer's bias, the rating was corroborated with Saville Wave® Reports, Coaching Logs, Data presented and post presentation discussions.

Usually it is observed that there the data follows normal distribution especially in random sample. In the Leadership Skills Interventions the past performance history of the participants was not considered, age was the only criteria. Hence it was likely that the data follows a normal distribution.

The scores obtained by respective participants indicated that the data is positively skewed.

Table 1

% of participants and respective scores on Leadership Action Achievement

S No	Score	No of Participants	% of Participants
1	3	24	60%
2	2	11	28%
3	1	4	12%

The data indicates only 12% of the participants underachieved on the targeted goals related to Leading Results.

The anecdotal evidence/ examples/ success stories were captured during the presentations. The Behaviours and Language clearly indicated the Competencies displayed related to Problem Solving Cluster (*Competencies:* Evaluating Problems, Investigating Issues, and Creating Innovation) and/or Delivering Results Cluster (*Competencies:* Processing Details, Structuring Tasks, Driving Success)

The participants mentioned following reasons which helped them in achieving results:-

1.   Focussed Approach

2.   The Strength Based Approach helped them in confidently facing situations as the activities planned to achieve results clearly emanated from what works from them.

3.   The setbacks were handled with reflective questions like what else could have been done. Or did I fully utilizing my potential? Rather than getting disappointed or frustrated.

4.   The participants were aware of the Review Process and they themselves had selected their Goals. The targeted Goals were aligned to respective Key Performance Areas assigned by the organizations, hence they felt it was in their benefit to stay focussed on Goals.

5.   The nudging strategy helped them in being in Awareness about their leadership action plan.

6.   Participants appreciated variety of training methods used namely experiential learning, Coaching Support, relevance to business, and Follow up Programme.

7.   Opportunities to transfer learning to workplace by way of Leadership Action plans.

8.   Support and Review by Superiors at least once during the Intervention.

The observations are in line with Kleim and Jones, 2008; Wilms, 2014. The authors have opined that the adaptive learning mechanisms of the brain play a role in transfer, as it has been demonstrated that the transfer effect of training highly depends on the variability and settings of the training itself.

Empirical research supports the notion that transfer of learning depends on a variety of trainee characteristics, work environment variables and features of training design such as learning goals, content and context relevance and feedback practice (Burke et al. , 2007; Speelman and Kirsner, 2005). The Intervention under study for PSU General Insurer encompassed the above mentioned features.

Boarden (2006) in his paper evaluated Leadership Development Programmes and emphasized learning at both personal and organisational levels. He posits that the increased awareness and utilisation of evidence increases the discretionary leadership capabilities of participants.

The Intervention thrusted upon feedback through Coaching, review of Leadership Action Plan and Presentation of Actual v/s Desired Results. The basic learning mechanisms of the brain depend on immediate feedback which allows for future behaviour planning through adjustment of action plans and internal maps (Botvinick et al. 2001). Feedback mechanism is closely associated with behaviour. Feedback alters behaviour and optimizes pathways in the brain to allow humans skills to be built and new habits to be formed (cf. Cooper, 2005). The feedback process is descriptive of what occurs in both experiential and action learning. The high percentage of participants exceeded their own targets may have been impacted by the regular feedback participants received during the Intervention

Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

Ten participants did not attend the review process. Despite the recommendations of the literature (Alimo-Metcalfe and Lawler, 2001) that leadership development is best carried out over a period of time, rather than through a one-off course, we found the dropout rate for the attending the

Review in same batch was 20%. Boarden (2006) while studying Leadership Development Programme in NHS had similar experience and found that participants found it to increasingly difficult to take time away from the workplace at the same time day-to-day pressures, achievement of targets, including financial issues, took priority at times impacted commitment levels to the requirements of Leadership Development Programme.

Therefore, the researchers were not able to assess the actual results achieved by the drop out participants.

Another limitation of the study is to determine which Leadership Competencies have maximum impact on the results and why? The future researches may focus on isolating differentiating leadership competencies which impact Results.

The researchers studied Leadership Skills Development Intervention in a Public Sector General Insurance Company. The Observations may not relevant to Private Sector as well other industries.

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Annexure I: Qualitative Feedback – Participants

Sr. No.	Key Highlights of your leadership journey	How Leadership Skills Development Program helped over past 6 months to tap into leadership strengths and develop new competencies to drive performance?	Additional support you need (if any)	Self-assessment	
				Prior to attending program	After attending program
1.	• Learn to strike a balance between task and relationship • Learned to facilitate processors and involving team and giving credit to them. • Learned to let go possessiveness and 'me' factor.	• Adopt Structured and methodical manner to do work. • Coaching sessions were useful for better results as direction	Continue coaching sessions	7	9
2.	• To have a definite plan and work towards succeeding • Self-discovery of leadership qualities Learned to remain focused and positive	• Helped to accept fact • New competency	Being in touch with peers in this group to get support	5	8
3.	• Helped in preparing action plan	• Coaching sessions helped in achieving targets	Coaching sessions should continue	6	8
4.	• Exploring yourself • Feeling lighter • Getting rid of prejudices • Energize oneself	• Understand human better • Tough and understanding at the same time • Listen more • Adapt in a changing world	An annual structured self-driver assessment program on similar basis	7	9
5.	• Gratitude, positive outlook, focus, motivation, trust in colleagues	• Able to lead myself	Coaching programs at least once in a year for guidance and support	6	9

Sr. No.	Key Highlights of your leadership journey	How Leadership Skills Development Program helped over past 6 months to tap into leadership strengths and develop new competencies to drive performance?	Additional support you need (if any)	Self-assessment	
				Prior to attending program	After attending program
6.	• Savile report was an eye opener • Understand that resilience is key to face challenges	• Coaching session and mentor was useful for making progress • Helped in work life balance	Savile report and coaching to be continued	8	9.5
7.	• Help in enhancing leadership skills. • Leading for self was an eye opener.	• Help to cope up with different situation.	Blog should be created	6	9
8.	• Discovered major drawbacks of myself	• Right direction to be focussed and put best efforts irrespective results	Send leadership journey, motivations inspirational books to keep us strongly motivated	2	8
9.	• To become more focused and committed to the goals	• Enhance the character of partnership and control of emotions to become committed to a goal of self-actualization	Coaching sessions should go a long way	4	8
10.	• Increased level of commitment, anger control, realize ability etc.	• Team building Leadership beyond expectation	One more follow up program as post-graduation program	5	9
11.	• Inner strength to achieve target	• Visualise goals • Prioritise work • Renewed self-confidence and come forward with innovative ideas		7	9

Sr. No.	Key Highlights of your leadership journey	How Leadership Skills Development Program helped over past 6 months to tap into leadership strengths and develop new competencies to drive performance?	Additional support you need (if any)	Self-assessment	
				Prior to attending program	After attending program
12.	• Insight on my strengths and weaknesses	• Work on weaknesses		6	8
13.	• Self-understanding strengths and weaknesses	• Focus on strengths and work on weak areas • Techniques of communication • Coaching sessions gave us gap to make analysis	Yearly review of Savile pointer and coaching session	6	7
14.	• Realize self-responsibility • To become more organized, receptive and improve communication with colleagues.	• Received motivation and guidance in soft manner to improve • I became more confident and improved my wheel of life balance.	Regular interaction to monitor performance	7	9
15.	• Discovered that I should give time to myself and family. • Need to empower team and take ownership of team	• Help to delegate work • Increased my knowledge by reading thoroughly and take quick decisions at work	Need help to prioritises my work	4	7
16.	• Know yourself • Change is must	• Received Direction • Meaning of life It can be achieved' attitude • Settled many internal conflicts	• Build up synergy among ourselves • Blog could be helpful • Follow up program– tele coaching	4	6

Sr. No.	Key Highlights of your leadership journey	How Leadership Skills Development Program helped over past 6 months to tap into leadership strengths and develop new competencies to drive performance?	Additional support you need (if any)	Self-assessment	
				Prior to attending program	After attending program
17.	● Change attitude ● Self-discovery	● Realise potential and areas of concern ● The right direction and motivation for setting and achieving goals	● We need to be monitored as and when we need.	7	9
18.	● Know self-potential and competencies required	● Time management ● delegation	● Dedicated staff	5	6
19.	● Focus on target and focus on weak area towards initiating it.	● Identify strengths within	● Follow up program	6	8
20.	● Introspection and adopting remedial measures where required.	● Leverage my strengths ● Team building ● Delegation	● Interaction with co participants of the program	6	8

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