



TRAINING: when it works, why it works

by Dr. Mark Frein, Managing Director - The Refinery Leadership Partners Inc.

"I'd take it again," was one comment that caught our attention. We were reviewing impact-assessment data from the customized supervisory leadership development program (the "SLDP") we have delivered over the last three years for Goldcorp, one of the world's leading gold companies. This comment made us smile. All too often, participants in corporate training hardly want to be present the first time around, much less for a second go.

In the leadership development business, we believe the work we do has a positive impact on people and by association improves organizational performance. Most of us are in this business because of this deeply held belief and the hope that our work makes a difference in people's lives.

Yet it is rare that we can truly say that we *know* our work has added organizational value. In many cases, we do not have the opportunity to deliver enough wide-ranging learning to a population to feel comfortable asserting organizational impact. In other cases, the cost associated with studying impact is not perceived as worthwhile either to a client or to the provider.

We chose to study the Goldcorp program in depth not only because our client was intensely interested and committed, but because we wanted to test our own assumptions regarding the impact of learning in the workplace. In terms of costs, we assigned roughly 30% FTE of a consultant to this project over the course of the three years simply to study the impact.

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The data

Over the three years, we collected large amounts of qualitative and quantitative data through unsolicited feedback sent to us (or to Goldcorp senior officers) from supervisors attending the training.

Key outcomes included:

- 100% of the sample population surveyed agreed with the statement that the company's investment in the SLDP program was appropriate;
- 100% of the sample population interviewed confirmed that the program fostered partnerships between the company's sites;
- 100% of the sample population interviewed reported that the program impacted multiple dimensions of their leadership performance, ranging from emotional intelligence to organizational sophistication.

We collected in-depth data on the impact that the supervisors have on their own reports – in this case, teams of line workers from a variety of technical backgrounds. Our interest was in pre-test and post-test engagement between the participants and their direct reports. On every dimension, the line employees surveyed (more than 500) reported increased engagement.

Similarly, we collected data from the managers of program participants pre- and post-program. We asked the managers to rate the participants on the extent to which they saw evidence of behaviours associated with the skill and awareness goals of the SLDP program (see Graph 1). On every dimension, the performance of the supervisors was seen to improve as a result of the program.

Finally, we asked the participants to evaluate the improvements they made at their sites in the context of the six key areas that the company uses to evaluate its overall operational performance (see Graph 2). We expected to see people-related improvements linked to our work with the supervisors. We were pleasantly surprised that the program impacted at some level *all* operational goals at the organization.

As trained researchers with academic backgrounds, we know to take results with a grain of salt. There was the possibility of bias here – many participants knew us well, which could have impacted their evaluations. However, their managers and their line employees had virtually no contact with us. Despite the potential for bias, we believe we have direct, triangulated evidence of comprehensive, positive organizational impact from the program.



Why it worked

There is a one-sentence answer to this question, and a more detailed one. The simple answer is that the program worked because it became part of Goldcorp's culture. Participants developed their own language to describe the experience, appropriating concepts and words we "training folks" use for their own purposes. Participants would return from "cohort" and talk about their experience with the next set of supervisors preparing to leave. They would mischievously wink and inform their comrades that they "will see" what the program is all about. The program became something of theirs, not something done "to them."

Here is the more thorough answer regarding how the SLDP became part of the Goldcorp culture:

1. The program was *intended* to be a culture-building experience – One of its primary purposes was to help create a common culture in the organization. The company was relatively new. Although Goldcorp had existed for many years, it had completed a series of acquisitions to establish itself as one of the largest senior gold producers in the world. The SLDP was one of many tactics to forge partnerships between sites and foster a common sense of identity and purpose for the company.
2. Clear executive accountability – The chief operating officer took visible and direct accountability for the program, supported consistently by senior managers in Human Resources and Training. Participants were individually invited and were aware from the first day of the program through the last that the executives cared about their involvement in the experience and expected them to treat it as time "at work" instead of "away from the job ". Such strong messages, combined with several designed encounters between senior executive leaders and the supervisors, helped to create a deep sense of commitment to the learning.
3. Speed and saturation – Goldcorp committed to ensuring that the bulk of the entire organization experienced the program within a relatively short time frame. Eight cohorts of approximately 16 to 20 participants each started and finished the 18-month program within 2.5 years. The cohorts met face-to-face four times during this period and were supported throughout, with a comprehensive self-initiated project serving as the program capstone. This commitment was tremendously important for generating increased interest and ultimately "saturating" learning in the culture.



Many organizations balk at the cost and demands that training at this level presents. For any initiative to have cultural impact, it must have enough force behind it to create "buzz." The fact that in some sites, all supervisory-level employees had started and finished the program in the span of two years was critical to a shared sense of accountability.

4. Our willingness to engage with the supervisors on a human level - we had developed the program after spending considerable time at various mine sites, travelling deep underground in the company of supervisors, touring multiple mills. There was, however, still much skepticism about the ability of "old dogs" to learn new tricks. And, much skepticism about the ability of a bunch of leadership trainers from a somewhat quirky West Coast firm to connect to mine supervisors from small communities in Ontario, South Dakota and Nevada. Although it took time and patience, we spent as much time listening to the supervisors as talking to them. The program became a place where the supervisors could talk about their experience without being criticized or judged. Gradually, our genuine interest in their world and their lives helped create a sense of trust. We had fun together, both inside the conference rooms and after hours. We "threw in" with them on every level.

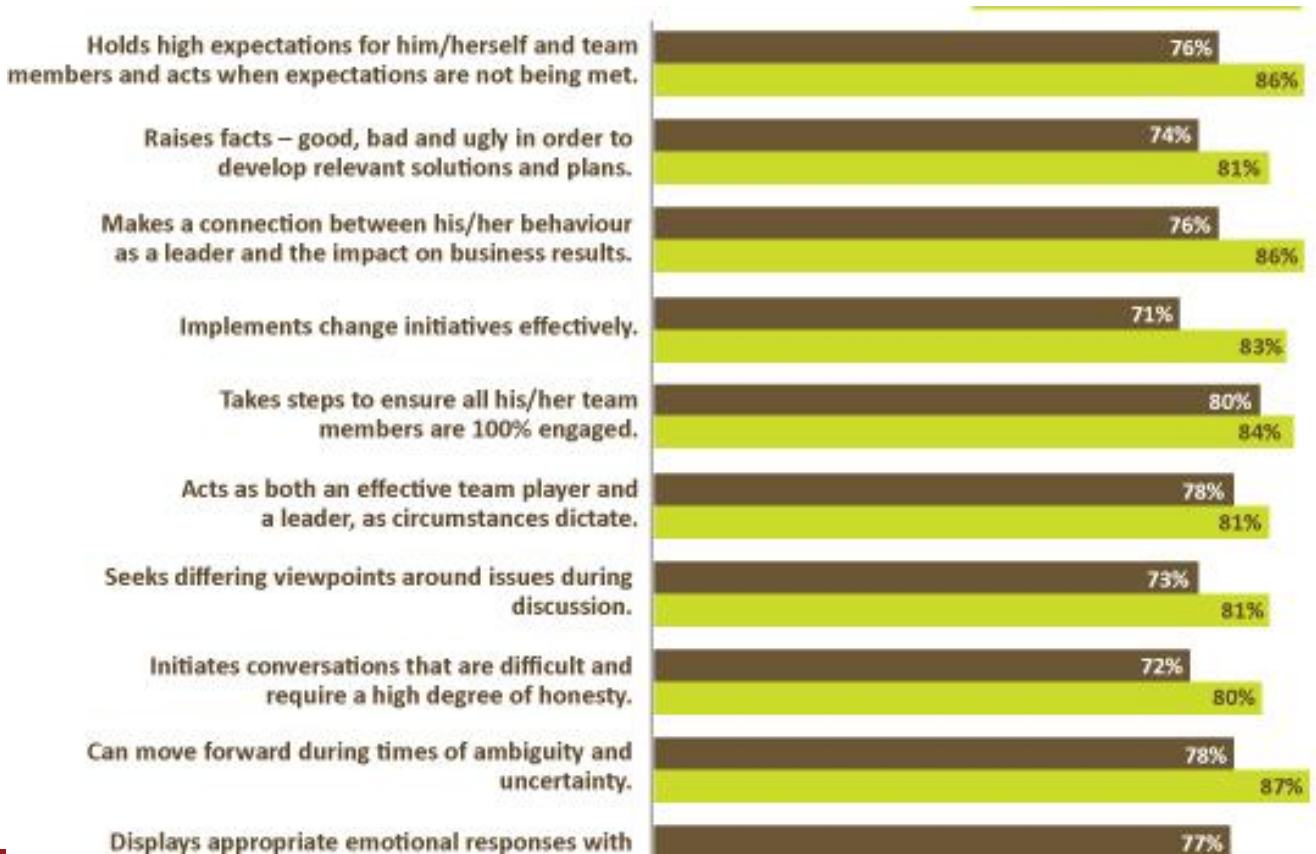
Of course, I also believe that our skill and ability to create and lead exceptional learning certainly did not hurt in ensuring an outstanding program experience. Our skill and ability remain the same across all client engagements, but the contextual factors detailed above and the leadership and collaboration demonstrated by our client partners made our job at Goldcorp all the more easy.

Leadership experts are well known for platitudinous statements, exhortations and slogans about what *should* be done to foster high-impact leadership in organizations. We are all guilty of such generalized advice from time to time. We are also occasionally guilty of having many strategies for our clients, but sometimes little in the way of demonstrated results. I have encountered numerous executives who are skeptical of leadership development precisely because of such acts of hubris.

Leadership development can be done successfully. It can transform an entire organization. It can even be proven to create change and impact. Yet it is not fundamentally "we" – our firm – that accomplishes this and I believe it never is. It was "We" – our team's deeply collaborative partnership with key senior executives, expert training and human resources managers, and most importantly, the supervisors – that made this success story happen.



Graph 1 - Manager Observation of Participant Skill and Awareness



Graph 2 - Operational Improvements reported by Participants

