

# 10 WAYS

## Leadership Development Programs Fail in Higher Ed

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In the past few years, institutions of all types and sizes [have started in-house leadership development programs](#)—programs aimed at developing key faculty, staff, and administrators.

This increased investment is critical—given [the call for a new skill set](#) for twenty-first century leaders in higher ed, the rapid retiring of aging leaders, and the need to engage in development of talent at every level of the institution if colleges and universities are to thrive in an increasingly complex, challenging, and competitive landscape.

Yet, higher education – unlike the corporate sector – doesn't have a strong tradition of internal leadership development. Historically, boards have hired executive leadership from outside the institution (despite [research showing that internally groomed leaders perform more highly than external hires](#)), and institutions have, until

recently, adopted a “sink or swim” approach to mid-level management.

While building in-house leadership development programs is a critical long-term strategy, these investments are not without risk. These programs often come at considerable cost and can potentially alienate some members of campus who are not selected to participate. To set programs up for long-term success, campus officials need to be cognizant of common pitfalls that derail a program or limit its effectiveness.

Here are ten of the most common ways internal leadership development programs fail and some strategies to deal with them.

## Failing #1: Not involving supervisors

Supervisors are integral partners in the leadership development process and should be included right from the beginning. Best practice programs will have a session targeted at supervisors so they understand the goals of the program, expectations for the participants, and the time requirements for the program.

That way, supervisors can act as partners in the process, providing the appropriate support whether that means clearing work off the participant's desk or offering feedback and coaching on key areas of needed development. We recommend that programs help supervisors understand the ways they can provide constructive accountability in this process as participants move through the program.

## Failing #2: No coaching

Participating in leadership development is a risky proposition for faculty and staff; it's not easy for anyone to receive feedback, especially on areas of needed development. [Leadership coaching](#) can make all the difference. Coaches, whether they are professional or peer, help participants process and interpret this feedback; they can suggest helpful resources, engage participants in role playing, and generally offer a more objective perspective.

We recommend that coaching is structured in a way that is focused on skills-building: helping participants with decision making, conflict management, delegation, etc. That way, coaches do more than just cheerlead from the side. In some cases:

- The participant's supervisor can serve as a coach, which helps ensure that coaching is actionable and purposeful.
- We have also seen past program participants serve in these coaching roles. This creates more connections between cohorts and keeps past participants engaged in their own learning after the conclusion of the program.

## Failing #3: Disconnect from day-to-day

The best way to build your leadership capacity is through practicing different skills in your day-to-day work. The Center for Creative Leadership has conducted extensive research on how leadership is learned. This organization recommends a 70/20/10 model:

- 70% of lessons are learned from tough jobs.
- 20% of lessons are learned from people (like your boss).
- Only 10% of lessons are learned from courses and reading.

Leadership programs have to tap into the participant's daily responsibilities. Daily work becomes the participant's practice field and provides the opportunity to apply what they are learning.

The best way to do this is to incorporate project assignments where participants get to work on real-life problems and challenges facing the campus. Ideally, the assignments align with the institution's strategic plan. In fact, best practice programs don't just offer project assignments but intentionally pair or team participants from different parts of the institution. This builds relationships across departmental or divisional boundaries and often results in highly creative and effective solutions that actually get implemented.

Beyond creating a tangible benefit to the institution, the more connected the content of the program is to participants' daily work, the more likely participants are to see the benefits of the program, helping them build critical momentum for their learning journey.

## Failing #4: No follow-up or evaluation

Most leadership development programs include some kind of an assessment, whether that's a 360 degree assessment or another style of instrument. The piece that is most often missed is meaningful follow-up after a reasonable amount of time, typically six months to a year. Often what happens is that the program ends and participants are left to their own devices to stay connected to their learning plans, coaches, and cohorts.

The more a program can build follow-up into its design, the more likely it is that participants will continue to invest in their leadership abilities after its formal conclusion. Leadership development cannot be a “one and done” experience. We recommend that programs help participants develop learning plans that will be supported by coaching and additional feedback after the program. After a year, consider deploying one of the same assessments that was used in the program (e.g. a 360 degree assessment) to track and monitor progress.

This step also makes it possible to demonstrate a return on the program and identify opportunities to improve it.

## Failing #5: Informal programs without an intentional structure

In an effort to “get something going,” many institutions will organize ad hoc events at which participants can get together, share common concerns, and build relationships across a group of people—often over lunch or dinner. While these events have their place, they are not a substitute for a true leadership development experience.

Programs have to be built on a research-based framework or on a leadership model, and need to incorporate content that improves participants' personal awareness, ability to work with individuals and teams, and capacity for managing change and complex systems. The content has to be evocative and rich; if it doesn't cause people to pause, think, and reflect, you won't see any real change in behavior. While the intention of these informal get-togethers may be positive, their impact is significantly limited.

## Failing #6: Inexperienced facilitators

Perhaps one of the most critical decisions an institution can make to ensure the success of a leadership development program is to choose the right program facilitator. Leadership cannot be effectively taught or modeled by talking heads. Participants have to be actively engaged and given the opportunity to practice, role play, reflect, problem solve, and simulate different situations, in order to draw out and demonstrate key leadership concepts and lessons.

One model that works well is to have an internal and external facilitator paired together to design and deliver the workshop. This draws on outside expertise while also building the capacity of internal staff to deliver the program in future years. Programs should also note that it's important to have the same facilitators throughout the duration of the program; this aids in the development of the cohort and creates a shared learning experience for all participants.



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## Failing #7: Cohort isn't developed

How participants are selected and how the cohort is developed is also crucial. If participants don't feel safe and comfortable with those they are working and learning with, they won't take risks. They won't raise tough issues or share personal concerns. If they can't take risks or be vulnerable in certain ways, they won't be able to grow as leaders.

Leadership is deeply personal, and participants need to think critically about their personal values and goals in order to lead authentically. Investing time to build relationships and trust in the cohort is the key to creating the right environment for this learning to take place. Best practice programs articulate and share specific criteria for why and how participants are selected. This practice sets a standard, helps to mitigate politics, and helps forge important bonds within the cohort. These programs also emphasize cohort development in their design by norming through introductions, mixing groups throughout the program, and debriefing shared experiences to create shared learning. Developing these relationships builds bridges across silos, which can activate new ideas and partnerships to move the institution forward.

## Failing #8: Spreading the learning agenda too broadly

Leadership programs must also help participants moderate the pace at which they attempt to improve their leadership. A poorly designed learning agenda can set participants up for failure and send dangerous signals to others who are considering participation. It's important that participants not become overwhelmed in attempting to address multiple areas of needed development simultaneously, and it is important to take a balanced approach of building on strengths while managing areas of weakness.

Programs should offer participants multiple ways of understanding their leadership styles—ideally through multiple instruments and feedback mechanisms. Encourage participants to find areas of alignment across these multiple lenses, and let that become the focus for the learning agenda.

Focusing on only one or two goals at a time will also help participants involve others in their development, so that co-workers, direct reports, and other stakeholders aren't surprised by someone who is acting erratically in an attempt to change multiple behaviors all at once.

## Failing #9: Senior leaders who don't model the way

Senior leaders on campus have to be vocal champions and supporters of the program. This does not mean that they need to be actively involved in delivering the program, but it does mean that leaders who are visibly investing in their own leadership abilities model the way for the rest of the campus. Ideally, campus leaders will participate in a program first to demonstrate their willingness to learn and to develop their own empathy later for others participating in the program.

Senior leaders who think they “know it all” or feel that they don't need to invest in their leadership because they are already in their roles send loud and clear signals to the campus about what they really value. A disconnect can arise if leadership programs emphasize collaboration, transparency, and shared decision making, while senior leadership is not supportive of those practices.

Participants usually are energized in powerful ways from their leadership development experiences; if the senior leadership doesn't have the same perspective or appreciation for these experiences, progress can grind to a halt. Alternatively, if senior leaders are willing to risk their vulnerability and share in the learning experience, these leaders will find powerful allies in effecting change and moving their agenda forward.

## Failing #10: Not including faculty in workshops

Faculty are the lifeblood of institutions. Programs that don't seek their input or include them risk alienating the most critical campus stakeholder (other than students). Institutions can definitely have multiple programs with multiple purposes, but when starting out, offering leadership programs only to administrators represents a missed opportunity.

Given the faculty's role in governance and the importance of building bridges across the administrative and academic divide, programs that serve mixed groups and seek faculty participation offer a much greater return on investment. Participation in such programs carries a certain amount of prestige and engenders significant good will in the participants, so faculty involvement can go a long way to improving trust and morale on campus. Best practice programs also make sure to invite faculty input into the program design—this builds the program's credibility and can be helpful when inviting other faculty to participate.

### Continue the conversation

If you:

- Are interested in participating in the conversation about best practice leadership development programs,
- Have a powerful example of leadership development programming to share, or
- Want to know about upcoming events and publications from AI on leadership development,

...contact Amit Mrig at [amit@academicimpressions.com](mailto:amit@academicimpressions.com). We would love to continue this conversation with you!