Adding More Fuel to the Fire:
How Bosses Can Make or Break
Leadership Development Programs
And What Organizations Can Do About It

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Center for Creative Leadership®

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Executive Summary

Two studies from the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) on the effectiveness of leadership development programs share one important finding. They indicate that boss support for a leader's development can make a significant impact on leader development outcomes. Self-awareness, leadership capability, and leadership effectiveness were all significantly improved when bosses are involved and supportive. Strong boss support also resulted in leaders having greater impact on the teams they lead. Specifically, leaders who reported having supportive bosses also received more favorable ratings on organizational effectiveness, management capabilities, and employee empowerment.

For organizations investing in the development of their people—whether entry-level contributors, mid-level managers or C-suite executives—the message is clear. Engaging program participants is not enough. To get the most out of your investment, you will need to engage bosses in the development of your people. When you do, you can produce clear and sustained improvements that benefit both individual program participants and the organizations they serve.

The Process: Two Global Evaluations

To determine the impact bosses have on leadership development, CCL explored data from two global evaluation resources. First, we analyzed 2,461 responses to a Return on Leadership Learning (ROLL) survey that is routinely sent to participants in five CCL leadership development programs two months after program completion. The results go beyond initial impressions to show us how participants report the program impacts work performance once they return to the job.

In addition, we analyzed Reflections® 360-degree feedback data for 1,895 leaders who attended CCL's Leadership Development Program. The Reflections data are collected three months after the conclusion of a program and provides insight into how much organizational impact has occurred—from the boss' perspective—as a result of changes in the leaders' behavior.

Up Close: The Return on Leadership Learning (ROLL) Survey

The ROLL survey gave us data from participants in five CCL leadership development programs:

- **Leadership Fundamentals** (individual contributors)
- **Maximizing Your Leadership Potential** (first time and frontline managers)
- **Leadership Development Program** (mid- to senior level managers)
- **Leading for Organizational Impact** (vice presidents)
- **Leadership at the Peak** (C-level and senior executives)

Individuals were asked to score leadership development outcomes on a 1–10 scale, with 1 indicating the program had little to no impact and 10 indicating the program had maximum impact. Participants also scored boss support on a 1–10 scale, with 1 representing little to no support and 10 representing maximum support. We were able to use the data to gauge the impact of boss involvement on an individual's developmental outcomes.

Up Close: The REFLECTIONS® 360-degree Feedback

We explored 360-degree Reflections feedback data for leaders who attended CCL's flagship Leadership Development Program over a five-year period.

Using a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates a significant decrease or worsening and a five indicates a significant increase or improvement, bosses rated program participants based on the impact of their efforts to change were having on the parts of the organization they were responsible for leading.

Reflections also includes data from program participants about their bosses. Individuals were asked to score boss support on a Yes/No scale. If individuals responded with "Yes" on at least 4 out of the 5 boss support items, they were considered to have high boss support. If individuals responded with "No" on each of the 5 items, they were considered to have low boss support. We were able to use the data to gauge the impact of boss involvement on organizational outcomes.

THE IMPACT: Greater Boss Support Drives Better *Individual* Outcomes

The ROLL survey looked at four key outcomes of leadership development:

Self-awareness—having an accurate view of one's strengths and weaknesses and how they impact others.

Leadership capability—the degree to which individuals believe they are capable and ready for their roles.

Leadership effectiveness—the application of new knowledge and skills learned in a leadership development program.

Engagement—passion and dedication individuals bring to their work and their organization.

On average, participants reported that their leadership development experience made a significant impact on each of the four parameters. When we took a closer look at the data, though, we uncovered significant differences across each of these four developmental outcomes between those who reported high boss support and those who reported low boss support.

Participants with high boss support reported much greater improvement in developmental outcomes.

Participants who rated boss support as high scored significantly higher on self-awareness, leadership capability, leadership effectiveness and engagement due to the program than those who rated boss support as moderate or low. For example, those who had high boss support reported an average rating of 8.1 on improved engagement, while those with low boss support rated engagement a 6.5—**a 21% gap**. Strong boss support produced a 17% difference in improved leadership effectiveness, a 9% difference in improved leadership capability and a 5% difference in improved self-awareness.
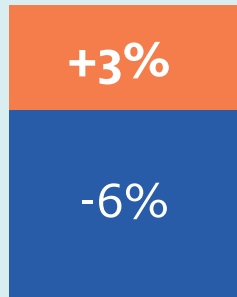
Boss Support

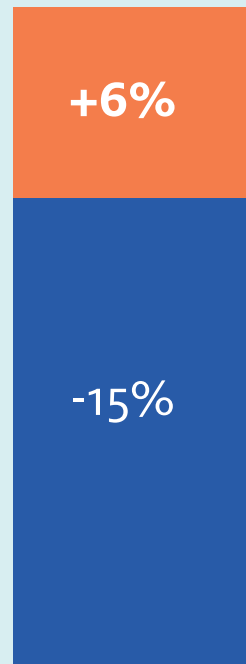## High Support

SELF-AWARENESS
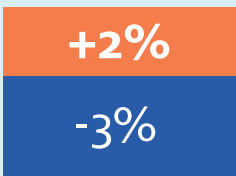
+2%
-3%
MEAN 8.9

LEADERSHIP CAPABILITY

+3%
-6%
MEAN 8.4

LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

+5%
-12%
MEAN 8.1

ENGAGEMENT

+6%
-15%
MEAN 7.6

Low Support

Outcomes were rated on a 1–10 scale, with 1 indicating that the program had little to no impact and 10 indicating that the program had maximum impact.

The ROLL survey showed that even average boss support can improve leadership development outcomes. Those who get little to no support from their bosses for their development activities, though, lag well behind those who receive some or a lot of support.

THE IMPACT: Greater Boss Support Drives Better *Organizational* Outcomes

While the ROLL survey focused on individual performance, the Reflections® 360-degree feedback data provide insights into the impact leadership development can produce across the broader organization. We can look at what others think about changes in the areas the leader is responsible for managing: management capabilities of their employees, organizational effectiveness, and empowerment.

Reflections data show that bosses rated most leaders participating in the Leadership Development Program with high marks for organizational impact resulting from program participation:

79% showed increased or significantly increased organizational effectiveness.

64% showed increased or significantly increased employee empowerment.

75% showed increased or significantly increased management capabilities

When we factored in the level of boss support, though, there were significant differences noted between leaders who said they had strong support versus those who said they had little.

Leaders making the greatest positive changes had high levels of support from their boss.

Although the average impact of the program was high, leaders who exhibited the most change in each of the three key leadership parameters were more likely to have strong support from their bosses. Those who exhibited no change after their leadership course were more likely to lack boss support. For example, there was a **16% gap** in boss support between leaders who made significant improvement in their organizational effectiveness and those who made no improvement. There were similar gaps of 8% and 13% in empowerment and management capabilities, respectively. It is clear that boss support is key to enhancing successful transition of classroom learnings into the workplace.

How to Improve Boss Support

Given that leadership development outcomes are linked to the level of boss support, what can you do to encourage boss involvement? When and how will boss involvement be most likely to produce a positive impact?

CCL recommends a three-step model that is based on what research tells us about adult learning experiences. To generate maximum impact from any leadership development initiative, it's important to focus on what happens before, during and after the experience. The tips below can help you build boss support at each of these three distinct points in the leadership development continuum.

1. Prepare

It's important to be engaged in your leader's development journey. Including bosses in the preparation for leadership development program will encourage their support and buy-in from the beginning. One effective strategy: Ask bosses and participants to collaborate on the selection of a strategic leadership challenge that can become a focal point for the individual's leadership development experience. Doing so has a two-fold advantage.

1. Participants will be poised to explore how their newly developed leadership capabilities can be used to address the challenge their boss helped them identify and

2. Bosses involved in the preparatory process are more likely to view the development program as relevant, aligned with the organization's strategy and focused on producing results that matter.

2. Engage

Build exercises and activities into the program that allow leaders to collaborate with their bosses, their colleagues and other learners. For example, ask participants to develop personal developmental goals they will work on during their course and to share them with their boss. Bosses in turn can listen, support and help the individual find ways to connect their individual development goals with on-the-job objectives.

Bosses also have a role to play in encouraging and supporting new networks. Leaders attending a development course often will form strong connections with other participants. These new contacts can help the individual connect with others across organizational silos or even across companies and industries. Bosses who encourage active engagement in these new networks help to solidify the learning experience and to build relationships and social capital that can benefit the broader organization.

3. Apply

Learning is a process, and classroom work is just one piece of the puzzle. Leaders are more apt to transfer learning to the job if they have a developmental relationship with someone who is committed to helping them succeed. Ask bosses to help participants reflect on ideas and insights from their program experience and to think through how to apply what they've learned to the day-to-day demands of the job.

To formalize the process, consider offering a brief workshop or coaching session to help bosses get started. Teach them how to connect each participant's goals and challenges to what happens in the workplace. Encourage them to suggest new projects where the knowledge, skills and behaviors a leader learned in the classroom can be tried out in a real-world setting.

For Further Reading:

Make Learning Stick:
Best Practices to Get the Most out of Leadership Development

The Bottom Line on Bosses and Leadership Development

Our evaluation data show that bosses are critical to leadership development outcomes. They influence how their direct reports spend their time, the professional and developmental goals they establish, the support and opportunities they receive and the resources they are able to access within the company.

Both organizations and individuals benefit when you select, train and retain bosses who support the development of others.

Organizations choosing to formalize and encourage boss support for leadership development can link what happens in the classroom to what happens on the job and can produce better strategic outcomes.

About the Authors

Steve Young, PhD, is a Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) research scientist who uses data science to help leaders and organizations increase their effectiveness. He focuses on services that accelerate return on leadership development investment including a four factor approach to employee engagement called E4. Stephen earned MS and PhD degrees in industrial/organizational psychology from Florida Institute of Technology.

Heather Champion, PhD, manages CCL client evaluation services—working with colleagues, global clients and external evaluators to design and conduct custom evaluations. She has worked with clients across North America, Asia, Europe and Africa. Heather earned MS and PhD degrees in developmental psychology from North Carolina State University. She completed a post-doctoral fellowship in adolescent health at Wake Forest University School of Medicine.

Michael Raper is a senior evaluation analyst who gathers, analyzes, and interprets program data to serve CCL clients, and to further CCL's own knowledge of its programs and their impact. His areas of specialization include data management and analysis, statistical methods and measurement, survey design and analysis, and data visualization. Michael earned an MS in educational research methodology from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Phillip Braddy, PhD, is a member of CCL's senior research faculty who creates and validates leadership assessments and conducts scholarly research. Phillip cocreated CCL's WorkLife Indicator and Coaching Effectiveness 360° instruments. He is particularly interested in work-family boundaries, feedback, ratings comparisons, and skills that impact leader effectiveness. He earned his Master's at East Carolina University and PhD in industrial organizational psychology at North Carolina State University.

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Center for Creative Leadership®

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