COMMUNICATION

# Why So Many Leadership Programs Ultimately Fail

by Peter Bregman

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The topic in the Executive Committee meeting turned to Europe. The technology company, Alentix*, was doing well and growing annually at the rate of about 15%. But its European division was struggling. It had been five years since the region turned a profit.

Yet no one had addressed that issue. Jean, the head of the Europe office, had been with the company longer than anyone else around the table — he had strong ties with the board — and the topic seemed untouchable.

This time looked to be no different. When Jean said he was on top of things, no one challenged him. I looked around the room at the silent senior leadership of Alentix, all of whom had privately complained to me about Jean's performance in recent weeks. I suggested we take a 15-minute break.

Every one of these leaders was smart, knowledgeable, and capable. They'd all read innumerable books on leadership, taken leadership skills assessments, and attended multiple training programs — including executive leadership programs at top business schools. They knew as much as anyone about leadership.

So why weren't they *leading*?

The answer is deceptively simple: There is a massive difference between what we know about leadership and what we do as leaders.

I have never seen a leader fail because he or she didn't know enough about leadership. In fact, I can't remember ever *meeting* a leader who didn't know enough about leadership.

What makes leadership hard isn't the theoretical, it's the practical. It's not about knowing what to say or do. It's about whether you're willing to experience the discomfort, risk, and uncertainty of saying or doing it.

In other words, the critical challenge of leadership is, mostly, the challenge of emotional courage.

Emotional courage means standing apart from others without separating yourself from them. It means speaking up when others are silent. And remaining steadfast, grounded, and measured in the face of uncertainty. It means responding productively to political opposition — maybe even bad-faith backstabbing — without getting sidetracked, distracted, or losing your focus. And staying in the discomfort of a colleague's anger without shutting off or becoming defensive.

These are the things that distinguish powerful leaders from weak ones. And you can't learn them from reading a book, taking a personality test, or sitting safely in a classroom.

Ever since I started teaching leadership on mountaineering expeditions in the late 80's, the question of how to develop leaders has absorbed me. I've designed and taught everything from one-day team buildings to 30-day wilderness trips, from business school classes to corporate trainings, from simulations to executive leadership courses.

The goal of any leadership development program is to change behavior. After a successful program, participants should show up differently, saying and doing things in new ways that produce better results.

By that measure, most of what I've done — and what I've seen others do — has failed. Sure, the trainings are almost always fun, interesting, engaging, and filled with valuable, research-based content. But they fail the test of significant and sustained behavior change that produces better results *after* the program.

Here's why: We're teaching the wrong things in the wrong ways.

If the challenge of leadership is emotional courage, then emotional courage is what we need to teach. You can't just learn *about* communication, you have to *do* it, in the heat of the moment, when the pressure is on, and your emotions are high.

In everything I've tried, I have discovered two things that work:

**1. Integrate leadership development into the work itself.** This is the ideal environment, where the learning and the work are seamless. The Executive Committee meeting at Alentix is a perfect example. That was a real meeting, where the leadership team was doing their real work. The difference, though, was that I was there.

I knew each person's strengths and weaknesses. That's why I called the break. During those 15 minutes, I approached several people and we talked about previous conversations I had with them and their concerns about Europe's performance. *What will it take,* I asked them, *for you to speak up?*

Here's what I didn't do: facilitate the meeting or bring up the issue myself. That would have been doing their work for them and they wouldn't have developed their skills. *They* needed to bring it up. *They* needed to push the issue. And *they* needed to do it in a way that didn't alienate Jean or make him defensive. Yes, I taught them ways to do that. But they had to do it, in real time, with real colleagues, doing real work.

**2. Teach leadership in a way that requires emotional courage.** Most leadership programs strive to create a safe environment for people to learn. At best, they teach about courage. They articulate why it's important, what it looks like, how it plays out in a case study. Maybe they do a simulation.

But that's a mistake.

The only way to teach courage is to require it of people. To offer them opportunities to draw from the courage they already have. To give them opportunities to step into real situations they find uncomfortable and truly take the time to connect with the sensations that come with that.

For example, most leadership programs give people feedback from anonymously collected forms they and their colleagues fill out before the program. That's safe.

In the leadership week I conduct for senior leaders, I have people give each other real feedback, in real time, face-to-face with each other, based on what they're witnessing in the program. That's courageous.

And the more they take those kinds of risks during the week — risks to be vulnerable, to communicate hard things, to listen to hard things, to try a new behavior — the more they will take those same risks in real life, when it matters most.

When we returned after the break at the Alentix Executive Committee meeting, the CFO interrupted the agenda to say he wanted to address the issue of Europe. Jean quickly stepped in and reiterated what he had said before: "We already addressed it."

The room was silent and I could feel the tension rise. *This is the moment,* I thought to myself, *this is the hardest point in the conversation, in the meeting. Will someone step up?*

Sure enough, emboldened by our break-time conversations and by the initial bravery of the CFO, the head of human resources spoke up, followed by the head of sales, and then the COO. The conversation was happening and it was skillful, respectful, and powerful.

That's leadership. That's emotional courage. And exercising that muscle is what develops powerful leaders.

*Names and some details changed*

Peter Bregman is CEO of Bregman Partners, a company that strengthens leadership in people and in organizations through programs (including the Bregman Leadership Intensive) coaching, and as a consultant to CEOs and their leadership teams. Best-selling author of 18 Minutes, his forthcoming book is Four Seconds (February 2015). To receive an email when he posts, click here.

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