

How to Get High-Potential Employees Interested in Leadership Development Programs

Leadership training can make a huge difference in preparing professionals to advance in their careers and succeed in leadership roles. Many companies offer leadership education programs to high-potential employees, but these programs don't always receive much interest. How can leaders and HR departments motivate professionals to enroll in leadership development programs?

Given how political and business leaders are celebrated in modern society, many HR managers might assume that highlighting the possibility of becoming a leader would motivate employees to engage in leadership development. We tested this idea in our current research.

To assess whether the promise of becoming a leader motivates employees to participate in training, we sampled 530 working adults from the U.S. who had never taken a leadership development course. We presented employees with a description of a leadership course. However, there were two versions. One stated the program would help students become a leader who makes effective decisions, whereas the other said the program would help students learn and improve leadership skills like effective decision-making. Aside from this, the two descriptions were identical. We asked people



how difficult they thought the course would be, and how interested they would be in taking it.

Participants who saw a course description focusing on becoming a leader thought that the course would be more challenging and difficult, compared to those who saw a course description focusing on learning leadership skills. And those who saw the becoming a leader course were less interested in signing up for it.

This finding suggests that how you frame leadership education can affect people's interest in pursuing it. Although we did not ask people to explain their responses, we believe that a course focused on "becoming a leader" can discourage people from taking it, because it's not clear how this would be achieved. There is no easy and clear path to becoming a leader right away. On the other hand, the focus on learning leadership skills may be more motivating because the task seems reasonable and doable.

In additional experiments, we also found that framing the content of leadership education may impact how effective a course is. For example, in one study, we presented students with educational materials about the "seven models of how to be a leader." Half the students received content framed in terms of leaders (e.g., "Leadership is all about the leader. What are their strengths and weaknesses?"), whereas others received the same content but framed in terms of leadership skills (e.g., Leadership is all about the leader's skills. What are their strengths and weaknesses?).

After students studied this material, we assessed how well they remembered what was taught. We found that when people received leadership course material framed in terms of leadership skills, they had 29% better recollection for the content than when they received the same material framed in terms of leaders.

Our research suggests that to motivate people to engage in leadership education, particularly those who have never had any previous leadership training, organizations should consider reframing the goal of the course as learning leadership skills rather than becoming a leader. Doing so may also help students grasp and retain the material.

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