



The Leadership Application Problem

Why Leadership Development Fails When Application Is Left to Chance

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Organizations invest heavily in leadership development through workshops, coaching, assessments, and academies, yet many still face the same challenges.

Leaders return from training with useful ideas, but daily pressures quickly take over and old habits return. What they know never fully becomes what they do. So, the real issue isn't leadership development.

They have a leadership application problem.

Knowing Is Not the Same as Doing

After more than 25 years in global learning, leadership development, and executive coaching, I've seen this pattern again and again.

Most leaders don't need more information. They already know the value of listening, clear communication, delegation, trust, coaching, and accountability.

The hard part is using that knowledge consistently when pressure, conflict, uncertainty, and competing priorities set in.

Leadership shows up in everyday moments:

- When a team member disagrees
- When performance begins to decline
- When a difficult decision must be made
- When two departments are working at cross-purposes
- When a high-potential employee needs honest feedback
- When the leader must choose between expediency and the harder, more responsible conversation

In these moments, leadership development either becomes real or stays theoretical.

The Missing Connection Between Learning and Work

Traditional leadership development often centers on a workshop, course, assessment, or coaching session.

Those experiences build awareness and offer useful tools, but they're only the beginning.

The real value appears when leaders return to work and use what they learned in situations with real people and real consequences.

Too often, organizations leave them to do that alone. Without reinforcement, reflection, feedback, and accountability, daily demands quickly overpower good intentions.

Development becomes an event instead of an ongoing process.

Why the 20 Percent Matters

The 70-20-10 model points to three main sources of development:

- Approximately 70 percent through experience and challenging assignments
- Approximately 20 percent through relationships, coaching, feedback, and social learning
- Approximately 10 percent through formal education and training

The percentages aren't a rigid formula, but they make one point clear: formal training is only part of development.

Organizations often invest most visibly in the 10 percent and assume the 70 percent will happen naturally at work.

But the 20 percent, the coaching, feedback, relationships, and social learning that turn experience into action, is often left unstructured.

That 20 percent gives leaders space to discuss real challenges, learn from peers, test their thinking, and prepare for difficult decisions. It's where knowledge starts becoming behavior.

Leadership Does Not Develop in Isolation

Leadership is relational. It grows through conversation, feedback, reflection, experimentation, and experience.

Leaders develop when they can think with others, not just learn beside them. That's what makes peer learning so powerful.

In a trusted, well-facilitated setting, leaders can work through current challenges, question assumptions, spot blind spots, and explore better approaches. This dialogue also makes leadership less isolating.

A trusted network lets leaders acknowledge uncertainty without weakening their credibility. The point isn't simply to make leaders feel supported. It's to help them lead better.

From Individual Insight to Organizational Capability

Many initiatives develop individual leaders without building a consistent leadership environment across the organization.

One leader coaches while another commands. One team values candor while another avoids conflict. Employees can end up experiencing a different culture based on who leads them.

A stronger approach connects individual growth to shared organizational capability.

Leaders need opportunities to practice common behaviors, discuss shared expectations, and apply principles to real work.

Over time, this aligns how leaders communicate, decide, manage performance, and develop people. Leadership becomes part of how the organization operates, not just a collection of individual strengths.

Sustainable Behavior Change Requires More Than Awareness

Understanding listening isn't enough. Change happens when a leader listens differently in a difficult meeting, reflects, gets feedback, and adjusts next time.

The same is true for trust, delegation, coaching, accountability, conflict management, and emotional intelligence.

These skills grow through use, not exposure alone.

Sustainable behavior change requires:

- Repetition
- Reinforcement
- Feedback
- Reflection
- Accountability

That's why development must stay connected to a leader's daily work. The workplace isn't where leaders go after learning. It's where learning continues.

A Different Question for HR and L&D Leaders

When results fall short, organizations often look for a new program, provider, model, or set of content.

Sometimes that makes sense. But another question may matter more:

What system exists to help leaders apply, reinforce, and sustain what they have already learned?

That question shifts attention from content delivered to behavior supported in practice.

It asks whether leaders have:

- Opportunities to discuss real business challenges
- Trusted peer relationships that support honest reflection
- Skilled facilitation that turns conversation into learning
- Feedback that helps leaders understand their impact
- Accountability for applying new behaviors
- A clear connection between leadership expectations and daily work

With these conditions in place, development is far more likely to change behavior and culture.

Building Leadership as a System

At Pinnacle Paths, we believe leadership development should work as a connected system, not a series of separate events.

That system should link formal learning to real work, individual insight to peer dialogue, and behavior change to organizational priorities. It should help leaders learn from experience, not simply accumulate it.

That's the thinking behind Pinnacle Networks.

These structured, facilitated groups help leaders work through real challenges, learn from peers, try new approaches, and strengthen the behaviors that shape culture. They don't replace training, coaching, or assessments. They connect those tools to application.

The Real Measure of Leadership Development

Leadership development shouldn't be judged only by attendance, satisfaction scores, or the quality of the learning experience.

Those measures matter, but the bigger questions are:

- Are leaders behaving differently?
- Are conversations improving?
- Are teams experiencing greater trust and accountability?
- Are leaders addressing difficult issues earlier?
- Are employees receiving clearer direction and more meaningful feedback?
- Are leadership expectations becoming visible in the everyday life of the organization?

That's where the real return on leadership investment shows up.

Development creates value when knowledge becomes behavior, behavior shapes culture, and culture strengthens performance.

The goal isn't simply to help leaders know more. It's to help them consistently act on what they know.

That's the leadership application problem, and organizations can't afford to leave it unresolved.

About the Author

Sonia Mejias is the Founder and CEO of Pinnacle Paths. Drawing on more than 25 years in global learning, leadership development, and executive coaching, she helps organizations turn formal training into lasting behavior change and stronger leadership capability.

About Pinnacle Paths

Pinnacle Paths helps organizations close the gap between leadership knowledge and application by activating the social learning in the 70-20-10 model.

Through Pinnacle Networks, executive coaching, team effectiveness solutions, assessments, and tailored support, Pinnacle Paths helps organizations build leadership capability, strengthen culture, and turn learning into measurable behavior.

Bridging Knowledge. Building Leaders.