



## From a course in leadership to a day at the office

**Being able to attend education at work is both inspiring and rewarding. However, how do you implement your newly acquired skills, insights and tools at the office? It's not unusual for that energy to disappear among everything you have to do and all the meetings you have to attend. This article describes how you can work on training and endurance – and how your ideas about leadership can become a part of your work.**

“What if it shows that I've attended a course in leadership?” No one wants to be perceived as a robot spouting leadership phrases. Everyone has had bosses who suddenly, mechanically ask questions like “How do you feel about this?” or who suddenly start giving positive feedback about tasks that were never noticed in the past.

As trainers, we often notice how participants in our courses worry that someone could discover that they are practicing new tools, that they are changing who they are too dramatically, or that what they are doing might seem fake.

It's often an obstacle to think that leadership should come naturally when you're acquiring new skills. If we break down what leadership really is, namely a palette of behaviors that can be varied and combined infinitely, it goes without saying that it can be taught. Instead, imagine that you have attended a course in how to manage one of the new IT systems at the office. The new system will probably require you to change how you manage a certain situation. Sure, it might seem difficult at first, but you understand that you need training and support when you're stuck, and that it will probably be easier as time passes.

### From insight to a day at the office

Everyone knows that it isn't enough to just ask people to change – but it can still be hard to accept that people don't always react rationally. A lack of knowledge about what constitutes human behavior makes us overconfident in believing that knowledge automatically leads to a stronger skillset. We underestimate how difficult it is to change behaviors.

Leadership courses often aim to mediate knowledge and insights. Theories and models are explained and new insights and eureka moments provide participants with great satisfaction. Unfortunately, the step from having the insight to being able to do what the book says in a real work environment is pretty steep. This requires practice, and practice is demanding...

It's often about changing a habit or developing a new behavioral pattern in a specific situation, for example maintaining eye contact with everyone during a meeting or asking open questions to get information. Changing a habit can often be experienced as something difficult in the short term. Trying something new can make you feel insecure, and usually the positive results will come way later, in the long term. This is where most of us have a difficult time with endurance. Results don't come quickly.

## **Get help!**

Even if we start our new practice, we can still run into trouble. We will surely ask ourselves more than once if what we're doing is any good, and perhaps we will notice that we aren't getting the results that we were hoping for. It will most probably feel a little bit uncomfortable, and there will be a need for encouragement. However, we don't have a trainer! There is no one there to look after us, who can tell us that we are doing the right thing or if there is something that needs to be adjusted.

Of course, insecurity is not a nice feeling, making the risk that we go back to our familiar rut significant. Further, our everyday life at work usually demands us to do things fast. Here, it's usually better to just get things done than to test something new and take some time to reflect.

When the participant gets back from a leadership course he or she is usually alone with his or her plan and goals for change. Sometimes there's a general dialogue with a close manager about the participation in the course and what is to be achieved. Since the changes are usually about behaviors that are to be developed or changed in a specific situation, the targets are often way too vague and support and feedback from the manager is sometimes not enough to help the co-worker in their work.

It's also not unusual that the manager lacks knowledge and skills that are necessary in order to provide the co-worker with the support and feedback that is needed. As other things are prioritized and rewarded, it's not unusual for there to be a lack of important conditions that are necessary to engage in leadership.

## **Change – for real**

Lastly, the education provider has a great responsibility that the design and content of the course supports real change in behavior. It's continuous work to be updated about ongoing research. In addition, the research needs to be converted into tools containing instruction value for the participants.

In other words it shouldn't be "this is how things are", but instead "on this basis, you could act like this in these types of situations". One of the most prominent trends in leadership is that we develop our way of talking about leadership, which is the easy part. In order for skills to develop we need to practice concrete behaviors in real situations where the results of the behaviors are evaluated.

As we've mentioned before, many of us have experience of leaders that in good faith use the screwdriver when in reality the hammer would have worked better.

## **Have you attended a course?**

- Hopefully, you've chosen your course with care and you're now equipped with tools that can help you in different kinds of situations. If not, it might be time to give feedback and have a dialogue with your education provider.

- Best case scenario, you have practiced how to act in different kinds of situations and have received feedback on how your behavior affects other people. Do you feel like you are ready to bring your newly acquired knowledge and tools to your home environment?
- This is where it begins! Even if you are full of energy and would like to become a better leader in many ways, the probability that you succeed with change increases if you choose a couple of important tools/behaviors that you want to practice, preferably in well-defined situations. Set realistic goals and plan a couple of activities that will take place. If you implement one thing it will provide you with motivation to continue with the next thing.
- You will probably feel that the new way of acting feels a little bit uncomfortable and forced. We recommend that you make a plan for development in steps in order to get started more easily. If for example you want to get better at solving problems in a systematic way, you can start with:
  - 1) practice identifying situations for problem solving,
  - 2) study what others are doing when they work on problem solving,
  - 3) practice the process of mapping problems that arise during your project meetings using open questions,
  - 4) practice summarizing of information etc.
- As we've mentioned before, most of us will have difficulties with endurance. Maybe you can ask a colleague to sit down with you and tell him or her what you have learned and what you are working on. Ask for encouragement and specific feedback. Hopefully you and your manager are in agreement about what you should be doing and what results you are expecting to see. If not, you can take the initiative and tell your manager what you've learned and ask for what you need in terms of feedback and check-ups.
- Lastly, have any of your colleagues or leaders attended a course? If so, now is the time to look for what they are doing that you feel has a positive effect on you and your work. Be generous with encouragement and feedback. They are developing new skills, especially when they also get feedback from their surroundings in combination with the opportunity to reflect on how the new way of acting affects other people.



## About the writers

Annika Strömsten and Maria Forsgren at Wenell Management work on spreading knowledge about how our way of acting and communicating influences our surroundings. They are specialized in converting science into tools that can be used in everyday life and developing new, efficient ways of practicing skills. Their motto is that small changes in how you act can give great results, both individually and organizationally.

They are both licensed psychologists with a background in behavioral analysis, where you will find the keys that govern human behavior. Annika and Maria both have extensive experience in training leaders, both in Sweden and internationally. They primarily work on developing communication skills in leaders by practicing different kinds of feedback and follow-up by both behaviors and results.