The Long And Winding Road To Self-Leadership: Ethnographic Insights Into Effective Training Transfer

What are the specific mechanisms and contextual factors that determine whether leadership training programs successfully translate into sustainable behavioral changes and improved team outcomes within organizations?

Ryan Sanders dissertation examines how leadership training works and why some programs succeed while others do not. Instead of focusing on abstract theory, his research looks at the mechanisms that allow training to transfer into real changes in behavior. Through an ethnographic study of two long-term consulting projects, Sanders traces how leaders and teams adopt, or resist, the skills and mindsets that training tries to instill.

The study shows that effective leadership training depends on four paired mechanisms: aligning trainees' goals with organizational goals, connecting theory with practice, providing repeated opportunities to practice, and reducing overload so that participants have the energy to change. When these conditions are met, trainees are more likely to internalize the tools of good leadership such as self-awareness, accountability, and reflective decision-making. When they are absent, even well-designed programs can fail to take hold.

A major theme in the dissertation is "the shadow of leadership," the idea that leaders' behaviors and attitudes set the tone for how followers respond to training. Effective leadership development is more than training content, it is about understanding the slow, complex process through which leaders internalize knowledge, experiment with behavior, and influence their teams.

The results show how theory can be applied and explain why change can sometimes take years. Accountability and self-awareness are enmeshed with workplace relationships causing outcomes do vary: some leaders successfully build citizenship behaviors and stronger teams, while others reinforce counterproductive habits.

The practical takeaway is that leadership training is not a magic bullet. It is most effective when organizations tailor programs to context, support reflection and feedback, and commit to sustained application over time. For managers, this means fostering environments where accountability is modeled and reinforced; for individuals, it means engaging with training as an ongoing process of growth rather than a one-time event.

MAJOR TAKEAWAYS:

● Training works best when goals align, theory meets practice, practice is repeated, and overload is reduced.

● Leaders' behavior shapes outcomes, fostering either accountability or counterproductive habits.

● Leadership training requires long-term commitment, reflection, and contextual support.

WHO NEEDS TO KNOW:

● HR Professionals
● Managers
● Employees

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