

Getting More Than 10% from Formal Training

James Cameron
Vice President, Global Talent Development
Walmart

The Context

The widely-accepted 70-20-10 framework for leadership development (i.e., 70% on-the-job, 20% coaching, 10% formal training) is based on what might typically unfold in an organization. But what if your organization is driven by rapid growth that outpaces the “natural” speed of building leadership benchstrength? What if you have to accelerate the readiness of high potentials to take on new roles? What if there are so many experiences that you need to acquire (digital, global, multi-functional) it would take a life-time on the job? That is exactly the context we’ve been working in at Walmart. To meet this challenge, we needed a more strategic and powerful approach to formal training—one that would get us more than 10% of development.

A Leadership Academy as Challenging as On-the-Job Experiences

Our response was the Leadership Academy. Started in 2008, the Academy houses programs targeted to each of three groups: (1) individuals being prepared to step into a store or club manager job, (2) middle-level managers who are ready to move up, and (3) senior directors and VPs. Each program extends over a three-month timeframe. On average five weeks of that time is residential.

Our approach to getting more from training is *to make the Leadership Academy as real, relevant, and challenging as on-the-job experiences*. We do this through nine design elements (see Figure 1 below):

- **Time the program for career transitions.** Participants attend when they are at an inflection point in their career—what got them to this point in their careers won’t be enough for success in the new role they are about to take on. The course content is directly relevant to that new context. Knowledge and tools that can be immediately applied are more likely to stick.
- **Build in supervisory support.** We orient the participants’ supervisors to make sure they are knowledgeable about the program’s goals and design. And we educate them on the fact that their attitude about the program can have a huge impact on what their direct reports gain from the experience. If they say, “This is an important program, you’ll have a great experience,” they are setting positive expectations. If they say, “You’ll be where next week? Who’s handling your job?” they communicate that the Academy experience is not real work with real consequences.
- **Expect more than is expected on the job.** We select high potential candidates and expect them to be open to learning. If you are not, you go home. During the first residential week, it is important for participants to get in a reflective mode. The faculty closely monitors the class, looking for signs that each participant is self-aware and open to learning. We give them feedback that first week and look for change the second week. Again, those who don’t hear and respond to the feedback might no longer be in the program. At the same time, the faculty has to truly believe that the participants can be great learners. Research has shown time and again that students do indeed learn more and perform at higher levels when their teachers have high expectations.

- **Utilize faculty with credible leadership experience.** Each faculty member has deep leadership experience and is savvy about the organization and how it operates. In teaching, they draw on their own mistakes, relevant experiences and share personal stories. These individuals also have “skin in the game.” They are motivated to develop participants because faculty cycle back to the business and any one of them might later end up in the faculty member’s unit. Their reputation is linked to how well the participants perform in the organization.
- **Link the content to the 70%.** Classes are broken into eight-person cohort groups. Each group has an expert cohort leader—someone currently succeeding in the job that the participants are headed toward. The cohort leader’s job is to connect the course content to the challenges participants will face in their new role—through examples, discussion, and sharing their own experiences. Interestingly, the highest performers are not always the best cohort leaders. Top performers are often so smart that they forget what it takes to learn! On the other hand, good performers (e.g., in the Q6 quadrant of the 9-box) are often the best teachers. They know the power of failure and mistakes and share that with the group. They are able to be both confident and humble.
- **Design the class mix to reflect the business.** All elements of the business (e.g., logistics, operations, HR, global e-commerce) are represented in the class. In working on cases or examining an issue, participants teach each other. The different perspectives arising from different parts of the business come to the surface, creating a powerful learning experience. With the more senior leaders, we are deliberate about having an international mix in the class. The interactions with their peers from around the world change their whole view of the company.
- **Create opportunities to practice leadership in the class.** We assign aspects of leading the program to participants, for example managing the class for the day, introducing speakers, teaching from their own experiences. And in addition to practicing leadership in class exercises and activities, they have opportunities to practice outside the classroom. For example, a class might organize a food drive for a local food bank. They are evaluated in these leadership roles and get immediate feedback. Managing fifteen, high-maintenance, opinionated peers through a project is great practice for our highly matrixed business – and they are watched while they do it. How many times do we actually watch our leaders lead? Usually we only hear of their strengths and weaknesses second or third hand.
- **Space residential sessions to provide time for practice.** Back-home class assignments push participants to apply and refine knowledge and insights they’ve gained in the program—and to bring those experiences back to the classroom for further reflection and sharing with others. We also make use of special projects between residential sessions. These projects have to be real work—something the business really wants and needs.
- **Create experiences not available in current jobs.** The program provides experiences that the participants don’t normally have access to, such as working with senior leaders and investigating a strategic issue with people from different parts of the organization. In creating experiences, we put emphasis on what these leaders are going to be dealing with in the future. For example, e-commerce is a big growth area for Walmart. So we may take a class to the Bay area and spend a week there, visiting organizations, talking with investors, spending time with partners and vendors—all to immerse them in e-commerce and its challenges.

The Leadership Academy is succeeding at accelerating the best leaders into more demanding roles so that their talent is leveraged. And it is making that talent more visible to the business (and making the opportunities in the organization more visible to the talent). Yet the Academy is about more than

developing individuals. It is about having a shared experience that creates a collective impact. We are working to change what the organization believes and how it thinks. You can only make that happen in a collective environment.

Figure 1.

