

"We have found more engaging and supportive leaders have really helped us in our retention efforts," says Soehren. Research from Towers Watson's *2014 Global Workforce Study* agrees: The top driver of workforce engagement and enablement is leadership.

"Leadership development is the top priority of CHROs and CEOs," says Ed Trolley, senior vice president of consulting and advisory services for learning provider NIIT. "Learning is addressing this priority by building leadership and executive development curricula that utilize externally developed and delivered content

Three Learning Approaches For Leadership

David Letts, vice president of Raytheon Professional Services, advises that organizations pinpoint critical leadership behaviors that help to achieve business goals. Once traits are identified, companies will be better equipped to provide high-performing executives with the skills and expertise to execute change.

Letts recommends three learning approaches for leadership:

1. *Performance analytics* can help reveal previously unseen patterns, trends, and relationships in organizational data. By delivering real information, this will decrease the time to performance gains.
2. *Performance improvement* helps organizations achieve speed, quality, cost reduction, and increased customer satisfaction in the delivery of products and services. This leads to sought-after competitive advantage.
3. *Performance leadership* provides advanced skills that help catapult collaboration to the next level, sharpen critical thinking skills, and define visionary business models and strategies.

FAST FACT:

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And leaders are needed. According to Randstad Sourceright's *2015 Talent Trends Survey*, the top category of workers that organizations seek in order to succeed in the next five years is leaders, reports 44 percent of respondents. So even though these types of initiatives can be more costly than other types of training, the results are worthwhile and necessary. John Laverdure, product manager at learning services provider The Training Associates, says that if organizations are improving leaders from the top, the impact is often widespread throughout all levels of employees. "In a corporate landscape that includes CEOs like John Legere, Jeff Bezos, and Larry Page, CHROs are right to provide their leaders with the insight, skill refinement, and competitive advantage that leadership development can offer," he explains.

Organizations can leverage residential programs offered by universities and companies specialized in executive leadership. Trolley advises organizations align their leadership development with content that is highly relevant and connected to the business.

"Our learning programs help ensure our high potentials and leaders understand the business, the competition, our culture, and value systems," explains Comcast's Soehren. "This positions them to be great leaders within our environment."

More and more organizations are realizing the importance of aligning learning programs to business strategies in order to achieve results. According to Brandon Hall Group's *2014 Learning and Development Benchmarking Study*, 48 percent of organizations aligned learning and business priorities, and more than 70 percent of that group were able to improve company revenue.

FAST FACT:

According to Deloitte's *2015 Global Human Capital Trends* report, 78 percent of respondents feel leadership is very important—which is up 32 percent from last year.

"A training program can deliver measurable value if it is tightly linked to something important to the business and is delivered in a way that engages learners and enables them to quickly apply what they have learned," says Trolley.

Closing the Skills Gap

As organizations strengthen their workforce through leadership programs, they are also looking to learning to help narrow the skills gap. Randstad Sourceright's *2015 Talent Trends Survey* finds that 73 percent of HR leaders feel the war for talent is still going strong, which is putting additional pressure on organizations to ensure key roles are filled with the right-fit candidates.

"Learning has to lead the effort to understand what the skills and capability gaps are," says Trolley.

To address the skills gap, David Letts, vice president of training provider Raytheon Professional Services, advises that organizations take three steps:

- Analyze the skills required for each role;
- Assess current skill levels of employees; and
- Identify any gaps and take steps to fill them.

"The learning organization can help teams recognize and select the most appropriate means of addressing those gaps and conduct assessments to ensure the skills gap is closed," says Letts. He suggests organizations consider a variety of training approaches—coaching, mentoring, e-learning, blended learning, and mobile learning—based on departmental needs.

Internal training programs benefit companies by developing the skills they need while demonstrating

investment in employees, which has the added advantage of increased productivity levels and retention potential.

"Investing in employees' training and development is a great way to demonstrate how valuable they are to the organization," says Letts. "The key is to assure that the investments make a difference."

Empowering Female Executives

As organizations move toward developing learning programs around leadership, there is an increased focus on providing female executives with specialized training. According to Randstad Sourceright's *2015 Talent Trends Survey*, 45 percent of respondents say they are investing in programs that support women in leadership. This is welcome news considering that only 14.6 percent of executive officers are women, reports the Center for American Progress.

Comcast is ahead of the curve of this trend: The media and technology company launched the Comcast Women in Leadership at Wharton program in 2012 to provide female leaders with the skills and strategies they need to succeed.

"The program addresses topics that are important to our female vice presidents," says Martha Soehren, chief learning officer and senior vice president for talent management at Comcast University and Comcast Cable.

Comcast Women in Leadership at Wharton combines both research and technology to help participants improve their capabilities and develop action plans. The program is a mixture of classroom learning, team-based exercises, and coaching. Participants walk away with a better understanding of negotiation, communication, and critical thinking skills. A powerful investment, indeed.