

“Walking a Mile in My Shoes” With Skillsoft’s Leadership Development Program



Industry: Learning and Development
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Executive Summary

Key Stakeholders: Chief Learning Officers, Chief Human Resource Officers, Learning and Development Directors and Managers, Corporate Trainers, Content and Learning Product Managers

Why It Matters: Today’s workers are being placed in leadership roles early in their career. Thus, there is a strong demand for engaging, scalable, and cost-effective leadership development training for the digital learner.

Top Takeaway: A key to leadership development is an emotional understanding of oneself and others. If you can effectively “walk a mile in my shoes,” you are well on your way to being an effective leader. This level of emotional understanding requires training content and delivery that recruits emotion centers in the brain (e.g., the amygdala and other limbic structures). Skillsoft’s Leadership Development Program engages emotion centers in the learner in a highly effective manner.

Skillsoft’s Leadership Development Program: Overview

On April 11 – 13, 2018 I attended Skillsoft’s Perspectives 2018 event. I spoke with numerous current and prospective clients, channel partners and several Skillsoft executives. I was briefed on several recently launched offerings and Skillsoft’s vision for the future.

Heide Abelli, the Senior Vice President for Content Product Management, briefed me on a new initiative, the **Skillsoft Leadership Development Program**. Given my extensive background and [writing on the brain science of effective people \(aka soft\) skills training](#), I was skeptical of the potential effectiveness of this offering. I have shown that most computer-based training recruits the [cognitive skills learning system in the brain instead of the behavioral skills learning system in the brain](#) (Ashby & Maddox, 2011; Maddox & Ashby, 2004). Given the fact that people skills, such as leadership, are about “how” we behave as leaders, not “what” we know about leadership, I figured that this program would be marginally effective.

However, while taking a deeper dive into the details of the offering and evaluating it from a psychological and brain science of learning perspective, I found it to be quite effective. The Program content and delivery likely engages emotion centers in the brain that facilitate information retention. In addition, the use of scenario-based storytelling provides a psychological scaffolding for the learner that allows them to see themselves in the training. It is well-

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established that the more the learner sees themselves as an active participant in the learning, the more they learn and, most importantly, the more primed that they are for true behavior change.

Although the [Skillsoft’s Leadership Development Program](#) does not directly engage the behavioral skills learning system in the brain and does not directly train behavior, it leaves the learner poised for true behavior change and with the tools necessary for effective experiential learning. Let me elaborate.

Skillsoft’s Leadership Development Program: Content

Skillsoft’s Leadership Development Program is comprised of courses covering 20 critical leadership competencies. These include courses on: the emotionally intelligent leader, the agile leader, developing people, embracing diversity in leadership, and managing conflict, to name a few. Each course is approximately one hour in length and is comprised of short 5 – 10 minute video segments built with single concept micro-learning in mind. Brief, targeted content of this sort is well suited to the working memory and attentional resources available to the learner. Each course begins with a brief reflective question that primes the cognitive system in preparation for the subsequent learning and activates existing knowledge, thus providing a rich context for learning.

I find the thoughtful psychological explanations and descriptions of the challenge of leading individuals, each with their own personalities and agendas, to be especially effective. The content makes clear that leadership is difficult and nuanced (like all people skills) but can be learned and effectively engaged. Periodic knowledge checks are also included and a performance threshold must be exceeded to continue the training. Extensive research suggests that knowledge checks and testing make excellent training tools (Roediger & Karpicke, 2006a, 2006b). The cognitive effort expended to retrieve information from memory, strengthens that memory in the process. In addition, testing makes clear to the learner what topics were learned well and what topics require further study. Finally, each course concludes with a brief, but concise review.

Skillsoft’s Leadership Development Program: Learning Design and Delivery

From a science of learning standpoint, this is what elevates the Skillsoft Leadership Development Program to a high standard. The Program is grounded in a storytelling, scenario-based training approach with a common set of characters and a “mentor” who guides the training. Each video segment includes one-on-one discussions between the mentor and the leader-in-training. Highly contextualized scenarios follow in which the characters in the story face real challenges and attempt to work through them. Commentary from subject matter experts are also incorporated to lend additional credibility and thought leadership. The scenarios model all aspects of human interaction including verbal and non-verbal cues, attitude and tone. This draws the learner in so that they begin to see themselves as part of the story. The learner is “walking a mile” in one or more of the characters’ shoes. This engages the prefrontal cortex and medial temporal lobes (i.e., the cognitive skills learning system), but can also recruit emotion centers in the limbic system of the brain that would facilitate information retention and broaden the contextual scaffolding for the learner (Maddox & Markman, 2010). This leaves the learner poised for true behavior change and with the necessary tools readily available for experiential learning.

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A mobile app is also currently under development that will provide the necessary training “boosters” to effectively ward off forgetting. Users should embrace this offering as soon as it is released as it “Trains for Retention.”

Overall Evaluation

My overall evaluation of Skillsoft’s Leadership Development Program is that this is a high-quality offering. The content is engaging and well-constructed with a nice mix of high-level commentary from subject matter experts, dramatic and pragmatic storytelling from a consistent cast of characters faced with real-world problems, and a mentor to guide the leader-in-training through the process. The content is delivered in such a way that it recruits the cognitive skills learning system in the brain while simultaneously activating emotion and motivation centers in the brain. This draws the learner into the situation and they begin to see themselves as part of the story. This “walk a mile in my shoes” experience increases information retention and primes the learner for experiential behavior change. Skillsoft’s team clearly put significant time and effort into constructing this Program, and that time and effort has paid off.

References

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About Us

TODD MADDOX LEARNING SCIENTIST/ RESEARCH FELLOW



Todd is a Learning Scientist/Research Fellow at Amalgam Insights. He focuses on the Learning & Development sector and the challenge of leveraging learning science—the marriage of psychology and brain science—to provide customers with optimized

learning and development solutions.

Prior to Amalgam Insights, Todd:

- Established himself as a leader in the field of human learning, memory, and performance in a 25-year career as an academic and researcher.
- Was awarded over \$10 million in federal research funds for his own human learning and performance laboratory.
- Published over 200 peer-reviewed research reports and was cited over 10,000 times by fellow researchers.

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