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Can we Really Train Leadership? (Abstract)

By Jay Conger

Leadership ranks second behind quality as the most popular training area and if the millions of dollars spent annually on leadership training programs is any guide, the answer to the question, "Can We Really Train Leadership?" should be an unqualified "yes." But Jay Conger, who is executive director of the Leadership Institute at the University of Southern California, believes most of these expensive programs are simply too shallow. Companies are not critical enough, he says, about how they are designed and what they actually accomplish.

Based on a two-year study in which he interviewed some 150 participants, Mr. Conger has produced his own "ideal" set of components for a leadership course. He recommends a multi-tiered approach: personal growth, skill-building, feedback and conceptual awareness. Follow-up training is an essential part of his model. Dogged persistence and commitment are what it takes, he says, not a quick whitewater joyride down the Colorado.

Aside from the actual design of a program, Mr. Conger makes his most telling point in explaining recent radical modifications in our conceptions of leadership, and how these must be reflected in modern-day courses. We now think of leaders as "change masters," Mr. Conger notes, and good leadership training must teach managers and executives how to anticipate what is on their industry horizon and how to mobilize their organization to shape the future. No matter how thorough and contemporary the training program, however, nothing will work unless it has the complete support and direct involvement of top management.

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