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Learning to lead

Could an interactive leadership training session help your organization?

Premium content from Birmingham Business Journal by Greg Heyman, Contributor

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There was something different about the training [Kevin White](#) experienced during the Southern Co.'s development program for its environmental leaders.

Enjoying the outdoor beauty of the **Alabama Wildlife Federation's** Nature Center in Millbrook, White, a civil engineer with Southern's research and environmental affairs department, studied the typical traits of leadership – dealing with team members, decision making, communication and other skills – that are most often learned inside. But along with a different setting, there was also a twist on how the lessons were conveyed.

Gone were "experts" imparting knowledge to half-attentive employees and boring PowerPoint presentations. In were interactive exercises utilizing technology that allow employees to develop leadership skills in real time and are more relevant to the learning style of a younger generation.

"Some people like myself, I need an activity very soon after I learn a skill to see how I can apply it," White said. "It gave me an example of how all these things could be used."

The approach shows a shift toward more interactive training programs that are geared toward helping existing and potential leaders learn skills like conflict resolution or leadership in times of crisis.

There's the old-fashioned method of hoping they will improve on those traits by sending them to conferences or requiring them to read the latest book on leadership by another multimillionaire.

"It's a different type of learning when you get out of the classroom," said [Cheryl Gill](#), talent management coordinator with **Southern Company** Operations. "It seems to be a little more of a relaxed environment and participants have a tendency to open up a little bit more."

Gill described White's program as a "multi-faceted learning approach."

Southern looked to TalentQuest for the coordination and planning of its program. [Kelly Schuck](#), an organizational psychologist and managing director with TalentQuest, which helps businesses with strategy and performance goals, said research indicates adults learn better when they can apply skills rather than only studying them.

"I'm trying to put together programs for people where they can actually learn a skill in the moment in real time. The learning curve between learning and practicing it back on the job is shorter than teaching them something and having to wait until that opportunity comes along to try it," Schuck said.

An employee can take a volume of notes and listen to every speaker in the world, but it's all about simulations to increase knowledge. Absent of such, she believes employees only learn skills in the abstract.

But Schuck said interactive applications often prove more effective with their participants.

"They're actually getting to apply particular skills while they're being taught," she said.

Keeping learning interactive is important, but it doesn't necessarily have to be held away from the office.

Nor do leadership programs have to involve entire work groups.

[Ann Florie](#), who heads up Leadership Birmingham, said the organization annually conducts a leadership class which is comprised of a diverse group of participants based on professional backgrounds, age and race.

Leadership Birmingham takes groups of individuals from several different industries and organizations that represent a wide swath of the region.

The classes, which are designed to help establish future leaders for the entire community, are very interactive with group projects and other initiatives that allow participants to relate to each other and learn together.

"I think it's about being able to understand different perspectives, being able to listen, being able to build consensus," she said. "Hopefully, it improves your community so that it creates a stronger business environment for your company.

"What this does is educate you on issues so that you are more informed and hopefully make better decisions," Florie added. "It teaches you how to work in a very diverse community and a very diverse work environment."

Like programs offered by Leadership Birmingham, the **Junior League of Birmingham** is also involved with leadership conferences.

President [Leigh Forstman](#) said that program features a combination of presentations and interactive skills for participants comprised of both sexes.

Building a long-term network of community leaders for sharing leadership skills is one reason she believes the program is important. Forstman also cites an advantage in bringing community leaders together for sharing leadership skills specific to this community.

"I think that there are some universal concepts that can be explained, but when you are looking specifically at what is happening in the Birmingham community it's important to understand what are the best practices that relate to our community," she said.

The bottom line? Schuck believes businesses that plan leadership programs or nominate employees to leadership institutes are making an investment.

"The one area in terms of talent development that companies fall short on – the number one area – is not selecting the right employees and it's not around retaining the right employees, it's around developing them," she said.

Arguing companies usually hire employees, offer training upfront and then hope for the best, she said interactive training brings out skills both in established and emerging leaders.

"If companies would try more of the simulated type activity, the development of their leaders would be better overall, it would be more enjoyable and the impact would be much better," Schuck said.