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## ***Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Development Programs in Mid-Level Managers***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Leadership development programs (LDPs) have become a strategic investment for organizations seeking to strengthen managerial capacity and ensure leadership continuity. Mid-level managers occupy a critical organizational layer, translating strategic goals into operational execution while simultaneously leading teams. Despite increasing adoption of LDPs, questions remain regarding their actual effectiveness in enhancing leadership competencies and organizational outcomes. This paper reviews theoretical foundations, program components, evaluation frameworks, and empirical evidence related to leadership development for mid-level managers. The review synthesizes findings from organizational psychology, human resource development, and management literature to assess whether such programs improve managerial performance, decision-making, team engagement, and career progression. Evidence suggests that experiential learning, coaching, and feedback-based interventions significantly enhance leadership behaviors, though program relevance and contextualization remain challenges. The paper also presents a conceptual evaluation model integrating competency, behavioral, and organizational outcomes. Overall, leadership development initiatives are found effective when aligned with organizational strategy, tailored to managerial needs, and evaluated through multi-level metrics.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Leadership development, mid-level managers, managerial effectiveness, training evaluation, organizational performance*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Organizations increasingly operate in complex and rapidly changing environments, requiring capable leaders at multiple hierarchical levels. Among them, mid-level managers play a unique bridging role: they translate strategic direction from senior leadership into operational action and maintain daily team performance. Because of this dual responsibility, their leadership competence directly affects employee engagement, productivity, and organizational adaptability.

Leadership development programs (LDPs) are widely used interventions designed to enhance leadership skills, knowledge, and attitudes. These programs often include training workshops, coaching, mentoring, experiential projects, and feedback mechanisms. However, despite their widespread use, organizations frequently question whether these initiatives produce measurable improvements in managerial effectiveness or organizational performance.

Research shows that organizations implementing leadership development programs are significantly more likely to demonstrate effective leadership compared to those without such programs. Yet many programs still fail to align with business needs or deliver meaningful behavioral change, particularly among middle managers.

Therefore, assessing the effectiveness of leadership development programs in mid-level managers is an important research and practical concern. This paper aims to review theoretical perspectives, program components, evaluation approaches, and empirical findings to determine how and when such programs contribute to managerial effectiveness.

## **CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND**

### **1. Mid-Level Managers and Leadership Role**

Mid-level managers occupy a central and often complex position within organizational hierarchies, situated between senior leadership responsible for strategy formulation and frontline employees engaged in operational execution. They are expected to interpret strategic objectives, translate them into actionable plans, and ensure their effective implementation through teams and departments. This intermediary position makes their leadership role multidimensional, combining administrative coordination with people-oriented leadership responsibilities.

Unlike senior leaders who focus mainly on long-term direction, mid-level managers operate closer to day-to-day realities of work. They supervise employees, allocate resources, monitor performance, and resolve operational issues. At the same time, they communicate organizational goals downward and provide feedback upward. Because of this dual reporting and accountability structure, they often function as “linking pins” connecting different organizational layers.

Their proximity to employees gives them substantial influence on workplace climate, job satisfaction, and team motivation. Employees interact more frequently with immediate supervisors than with top management, so perceptions of leadership quality are largely shaped by mid-level managerial behavior. Supportive leadership from these managers can foster trust, collaboration, and commitment, whereas ineffective leadership may result in disengagement, conflict, and reduced productivity.

Another important dimension of mid-level leadership is sense-making. Organizational strategies and policies are often abstract, and employees rely on managers to interpret them in practical terms. Mid-level managers therefore play a critical role in explaining change initiatives, aligning team efforts with strategic priorities, and ensuring consistency between organizational intent and operational action.

Scholars of management effectiveness emphasize that managerial success should be evaluated in relation to role outputs rather than hierarchical status or authority. In this view, managerial effectiveness refers to the extent to which a manager achieves performance expectations associated with their role. For mid-level managers, these outputs include team productivity, coordination across functions, employee development, and successful execution of organizational initiatives.

This perspective suggests that leadership development for mid-level managers should prioritize practical performance capabilities—such as communication, conflict resolution, delegation, and decision-making—rather than purely conceptual leadership theories. Programs focusing only on abstract leadership models may fail to address the real challenges managers face in balancing operational demands with leadership responsibilities.

Furthermore, mid-level managers often experience role conflict arising from competing expectations from senior leadership and subordinates. They must enforce policies while also advocating for employee needs, which requires strong interpersonal and negotiation skills. Effective leadership development can help them manage such tensions and maintain credibility with both organizational levels.

Overall, the leadership role of mid-level managers is operational, relational, and integrative. Their effectiveness depends not only on technical competence but also on behavioral and interpersonal leadership capabilities, making them a crucial target group for leadership development interventions.

## **2. Leadership Development Programs**

Leadership development programs (LDPs) are structured and systematic initiatives aimed at enhancing leadership-related knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors among managers. Unlike traditional management training that focuses mainly on administrative procedures or technical tasks, leadership development emphasizes interpersonal influence, strategic thinking, and behavioral effectiveness.

Such programs are typically designed around competency frameworks that define key leadership capabilities required at specific organizational levels. For mid-level managers, competencies often include communication effectiveness, emotional intelligence, team facilitation, problem-solving, adaptability, and change management. By strengthening these competencies, leadership programs seek to improve both individual managerial performance and overall organizational functioning.

Leadership development initiatives generally include multiple integrated learning methods rather than a single training activity. Formal workshops provide conceptual understanding and introduce leadership models or tools. Coaching and mentoring offer individualized guidance, reflection, and behavioral feedback tailored to each participant's context. Action learning projects enable managers to apply leadership skills to real organizational challenges, promoting experiential learning and transfer of training.

360-degree feedback is another widely used component, allowing managers to receive

structured input from supervisors, peers, and subordinates. This multi-source feedback helps participants identify strengths and developmental areas, increasing self-awareness and motivating behavioral change. Experiential learning activities such as simulations, role plays, and case discussions further enhance learning by allowing participants to practice leadership behaviors in realistic scenarios.

An important objective of leadership development programs is preparation for future leadership roles. Mid-level managers represent the primary pool for senior leadership succession, and organizations rely on development initiatives to build leadership pipelines. Programs therefore often include strategic thinking and cross-functional exposure to broaden managerial perspective beyond immediate operational concerns.

Another goal is strengthening organizational culture and alignment. Leadership behaviors at middle levels strongly influence how organizational values are enacted in daily work. Development programs communicate desired leadership norms and encourage consistency across managerial practices, thereby reinforcing organizational culture.

However, the effectiveness of leadership development programs depends greatly on design quality and contextual relevance. Programs disconnected from actual managerial challenges or lacking organizational support may fail to produce lasting change. Consequently, contemporary leadership development emphasizes continuous learning processes integrated with workplace experience rather than isolated classroom events.

### **2.3 Need for Leadership Development in Mid-Level Managers**

Mid-level managers face a unique set of pressures that make leadership development particularly necessary for this group. One major challenge is role overload. They are responsible for operational performance, administrative reporting, employee supervision, and coordination across departments simultaneously. Balancing these multiple demands often leaves limited time for reflective leadership practice or skill development.

Resource constraints further complicate their role. Unlike senior leaders who have greater authority and access to resources, mid-level managers must achieve objectives within fixed budgets, limited staff, and organizational policies set by higher management. This constraint

requires strong problem-solving, prioritization, and negotiation skills that may not develop without targeted training.

Another difficulty is ambiguous authority. Mid-level managers are expected to lead teams but may lack full decision-making autonomy. They must implement directives from senior leadership while also responding to employee concerns, creating tension between compliance and advocacy. Without leadership development support, managers may struggle to maintain credibility and influence.

Leadership development also becomes essential because mid-level managers are key drivers of organizational change. Most change initiatives—such as restructuring, technology adoption, or process improvement—are implemented at the middle level. Employees look to their immediate managers for interpretation, reassurance, and guidance during change. Managers lacking leadership competence may unintentionally resist or miscommunicate change, reducing adoption and effectiveness.

Moreover, mid-level leadership significantly affects employee engagement and retention. Research consistently shows that employees' immediate supervisors are primary determinants of job satisfaction and commitment. Supportive leadership behaviors such as recognition, feedback, and empowerment foster motivation and trust, whereas ineffective leadership contributes to turnover intentions and disengagement. Developing leadership capability in middle management therefore has direct implications for workforce stability.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

Leadership development programs are grounded in several theoretical perspectives from adult learning, psychology, and management. These theories explain how leadership capabilities are acquired, practiced, and evaluated in organizational contexts. For mid-level managers in particular, theoretical foundations help explain why certain development methods—such as experiential learning or coaching—are more effective than traditional classroom instruction.

### **1. Experiential Learning Theory**

Experiential learning theory proposes that individuals learn most effectively through direct experience combined with reflection and application. Rather than passively receiving

knowledge, learners actively engage in tasks, observe outcomes, reflect on experiences, and adjust behavior accordingly. This cyclical learning process is especially relevant for leadership development, which involves behavioral and interpersonal competencies rather than purely cognitive knowledge.

Leadership programs grounded in experiential learning incorporate simulations, role plays, case analyses, and real-life organizational projects. These activities allow participants to practice leadership behaviors in realistic settings, encounter challenges similar to workplace situations, and receive feedback on their actions. For mid-level managers, such experiential methods are particularly valuable because their learning needs are closely tied to daily managerial responsibilities.

Unlike senior executives who may focus more on strategic abstraction, mid-level managers operate in action-oriented environments requiring immediate problem solving and people management. Experiential learning aligns with this context by connecting training content directly with practical work challenges. For example, a simulation on conflict resolution enables managers to practice handling employee disputes in a controlled environment before applying skills in real teams.

Action learning projects represent one of the most powerful experiential approaches. In these projects, managers work collaboratively to address real organizational issues such as process improvement, employee engagement, or customer service challenges. Through this process, they apply leadership skills, analyze outcomes, and reflect on their effectiveness. Because learning occurs within actual work contexts, transfer of training into practice becomes stronger and more sustainable.

Reflection is another critical element of experiential learning. Leadership effectiveness depends not only on action but also on self-awareness. Structured reflection sessions—through journals, group discussions, or coaching conversations—help managers interpret experiences, understand behavioral patterns, and refine leadership approaches. Without reflection, experiences may not translate into learning.

Research on leadership development consistently indicates that experiential learning integrated

with workplace application produces higher behavioral change compared to lecture-based training alone. Participants exposed to experiential methods demonstrate improved communication, decision-making, and team leadership practices. This is because experiential learning engages cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions simultaneously, which is essential for leadership capability development.

Overall, experiential learning theory supports the design of leadership programs that emphasize doing, reflecting, and applying rather than only listening or memorizing. For mid-level managers facing complex interpersonal and operational challenges, this approach ensures that leadership development remains relevant, practical, and transferable to workplace performance.

## **2. Social Learning and Coaching**

Social learning theory emphasizes that individuals acquire behaviors through observation, interaction, and feedback within social contexts. Leadership, being inherently relational, is strongly influenced by social learning processes. Managers observe role models, receive feedback from others, and adapt their behavior through interaction with colleagues, mentors, and subordinates.

Leadership coaching is a practical application of social learning principles. Coaching involves structured one-to-one interaction between a coach and a manager, focusing on self-awareness, goal setting, behavioral experimentation, and feedback. Through coaching conversations, managers reflect on their leadership challenges, explore alternative behaviors, and receive guidance tailored to their specific context.

Research has shown that leadership coaching enhances leader role efficacy—the confidence in one’s ability to perform leadership tasks effectively. When managers feel more capable and supported, they are more likely to adopt proactive leadership behaviors, communicate effectively, and build trust with team members. Coaching also improves relational aspects of leadership such as empathy, listening, and constructive feedback, which are essential for team functioning.

For mid-level managers, coaching is particularly beneficial because their challenges are often

situational and interpersonal rather than purely technical. Issues such as handling difficult employees, managing cross-functional conflict, or balancing authority with approachability require personalized guidance. Standardized training cannot fully address such nuanced situations, whereas coaching allows contextualized learning.

Mentoring relationships also contribute to social learning in leadership development. Experienced leaders provide guidance, share organizational knowledge, and model leadership behaviors. Through observation and interaction, mentees internalize leadership norms and practices. Mentoring also helps mid-level managers understand organizational culture and political dynamics, enhancing their effectiveness.

Another social learning mechanism in leadership programs is peer learning. Group discussions, collaborative projects, and shared reflection enable managers to learn from each other's experiences. Exposure to diverse perspectives broadens understanding and encourages adaptive leadership approaches. Peer interaction also builds leadership networks, which are valuable for collaboration and knowledge exchange across departments.

Feedback is central to social learning processes. Multi-source or 360-degree feedback provides managers with perspectives from supervisors, peers, and subordinates. Such feedback highlights behavioral patterns and interpersonal impact, enabling managers to adjust leadership style. Continuous feedback combined with coaching strengthens behavioral change and self-regulation.

In summary, social learning theory explains why leadership development must involve interaction, observation, and feedback rather than isolated instruction. Coaching and mentoring operationalize these principles by providing individualized and relational learning experiences. For mid-level managers navigating complex organizational relationships, social learning-based development methods significantly enhance leadership effectiveness.

### **3. Competency-Based Leadership Models**

Competency-based leadership models provide structured frameworks defining the knowledge, skills, and behaviors required for effective leadership. These models guide the design and evaluation of leadership development programs by specifying what capabilities managers

should develop.

Most competency frameworks categorize leadership competencies into cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal domains. Cognitive competencies include strategic thinking, problem solving, and decision-making. Interpersonal competencies involve communication, conflict management, collaboration, and influence. Intrapersonal competencies encompass self-awareness, adaptability, and emotional regulation. Together, these competencies describe comprehensive leadership capability.

For mid-level managers, competency models often emphasize operational leadership skills such as team facilitation, performance management, and coordination across functions. Because they work closely with employees, interpersonal competencies become particularly critical. Effective communication and relationship management directly affect team motivation and productivity.

Emotional intelligence has emerged as a central competency in leadership models. It refers to the ability to recognize and manage one's own emotions and those of others. Leaders with high emotional intelligence demonstrate empathy, self-control, and social awareness, enabling them to build trust and positive relationships. Research consistently links emotional intelligence with leadership effectiveness, employee satisfaction, and team cohesion.

In leadership development programs, competency frameworks are used to assess participants' current capabilities and identify development needs. Assessment tools such as behavioral interviews, simulations, or feedback surveys measure competency levels. Based on assessment results, individualized development plans are created targeting specific competencies. This systematic approach increases relevance and effectiveness of training.

Competency-based models also support evaluation of leadership development outcomes. Instead of relying only on subjective impressions, organizations can measure improvement in defined competencies before and after programs. Behavioral indicators such as improved communication clarity, delegation effectiveness, or conflict resolution skills provide observable evidence of leadership growth.

Another advantage of competency models is alignment with organizational strategy. Organizations define leadership competencies consistent with their culture and strategic priorities. For example, innovative organizations may emphasize creativity and risk-taking, while service-oriented organizations emphasize empathy and customer focus. Leadership development programs then reinforce these strategic behaviors at managerial levels.

Overall, competency-based leadership models provide clarity regarding what effective leadership entails and how it can be developed. For mid-level managers, competency frameworks ensure that development focuses on practical and behaviorally relevant capabilities directly linked to managerial performance and team outcomes.

#### **4. Evaluation Theory (Kirkpatrick Model)**

Assessing the effectiveness of leadership development programs requires systematic evaluation frameworks. One of the most widely used approaches is the four-level evaluation model, which conceptualizes training outcomes across progressive levels of impact. This model provides a structured method to determine whether leadership programs produce meaningful learning and organizational benefits.

The first level, reaction, measures participants' immediate perceptions of the program, including satisfaction, perceived relevance, and engagement. Positive reactions indicate that participants found the program useful and well designed. However, reaction alone does not guarantee learning or behavioral change. Many programs receive favorable feedback but fail to improve leadership performance.

The second level, learning, assesses acquisition of knowledge, skills, or attitudes. In leadership development, this may include understanding leadership concepts, communication techniques, or emotional intelligence principles. Learning can be measured through tests, simulations, or self-assessment. While important, learning still does not confirm application in workplace behavior.

The third level, behavior, examines whether participants actually apply learned skills in their job roles. This level is particularly critical for leadership development because the ultimate goal is behavioral change. Assessment methods include supervisor evaluations, 360-degree

feedback, or observation of leadership practices. Evidence of improved communication, delegation, or team management indicates successful transfer of learning.

The fourth level, results, evaluates organizational outcomes resulting from leadership development. These outcomes may include improved team performance, employee engagement, productivity, or reduced turnover. Measuring results is challenging because organizational performance is influenced by multiple factors. Nevertheless, demonstrating positive organizational impact provides the strongest evidence of program effectiveness.

Leadership development evaluation studies increasingly emphasize higher-level outcomes (behavior and results) rather than only participant satisfaction. For mid-level managers, behavioral changes such as improved team coordination or conflict resolution are especially relevant indicators. Because they directly influence operational processes and employee experience, behavioral improvements at this level often translate into measurable organizational outcomes.

Another strength of the evaluation framework is its sequential logic. Positive reaction facilitates learning, learning enables behavioral change, and behavior contributes to organizational results. This progression helps organizations design evaluation systems that capture different dimensions of leadership development impact.

However, applying evaluation theory in leadership development also presents challenges. Behavioral and organizational outcomes may take time to emerge and may be affected by contextual factors such as organizational culture or support from senior leadership. Therefore, comprehensive evaluation requires longitudinal measurement and multiple data sources.

Despite these challenges, evaluation frameworks provide essential guidance for assessing leadership development effectiveness. For mid-level manager programs, using multi-level evaluation ensures that development initiatives are not judged solely by participant satisfaction but by actual improvement in leadership behavior and organizational performance.

**COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS**

**1. Training and Workshops**

Formal training sessions provide theoretical frameworks and skill instruction. Topics often include communication, conflict resolution, and decision-making. While necessary, training alone rarely produces lasting behavioral change unless supported by experiential elements.

**2. Coaching and Mentoring**

Coaching supports personalized development and reflection. Studies show that coaching-based leadership programs significantly improve managerial effectiveness and leadership behaviors. Mentoring relationships also provide career guidance and organizational insight.

**3. 360-Degree Feedback**

Feedback from subordinates, peers, and supervisors helps managers identify strengths and weaknesses. A controlled study on leadership development using 360-degree feedback found significant improvements in leadership knowledge and practices after intervention.

**4. Action Learning Projects**

Participants work on real organizational challenges, applying leadership skills in practice. These projects demonstrate measurable business impact and enhance transfer of learning.

**5. Experiential and Collaborative Learning**

Group discussions, case studies, and team exercises build shared learning and cross-functional understanding. Programs encouraging collaboration across departments enhance leadership networks.

**MEASURING EFFECTIVENESS OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

Evaluating leadership programs requires multi-dimensional metrics combining individual and organizational outcomes.

*Table 1: Levels of Leadership Development Effectiveness*

<b>Level</b>	<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Measurement Methods</b>
Reaction	Satisfaction, perceived relevance	Surveys
Learning	Knowledge, competencies	Tests, assessments
Behavior	Leadership practices, communication	360-feedback
Results	Team performance, engagement	KPIs, productivity

(Adapted from leadership evaluation frameworks)

Programs focusing only on reaction or learning provide incomplete evaluation. Behavioral and organizational outcomes provide stronger evidence of effectiveness.

## **EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT EFFECTIVENESS**

### **1. Improvement in Leadership Competencies**

Research across industries shows leadership development significantly enhances managerial competencies such as decision-making, team management, and communication.

Similarly, survey-based research in corporate organizations found a strong statistical association between leadership development programs and leadership effectiveness.

### **2. Behavioral Change and Leadership Practices**

Experimental evidence from healthcare institutions demonstrated that participants in leadership development programs showed major improvements in leadership practices and knowledge compared to control groups.

This indicates that structured programs can produce measurable behavioral changes.

### **3. Career Advancement and Leadership Pipeline**

Case research on mid-level managers in a large petroleum organization found that participants in leadership programs were more likely to apply for and assume leadership roles after completion.

Such findings suggest leadership development contributes to succession planning and leadership pipeline creation.

### **4. Organizational Outcomes**

Leadership development also impacts organizational performance indirectly through improved team functioning.

Key outcomes reported in literature include:

- Higher employee engagement
- Improved team coordination
- Better decision quality
- Increased productivity

These outcomes arise because mid-level managers directly influence daily operations and employee experience.

## CHALLENGES IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FOR MID-LEVEL MANAGERS

Despite evidence of effectiveness, several challenges limit impact.

### 1. Lack of Contextual Relevance

Many leadership programs fail to address real managerial challenges or organizational context. Only about half of managers consider programs relevant to business needs.

### 2. Limited Resources and Support

Leadership training for mid-level leaders is often underfunded and neglected compared to senior leadership development.

### 3. Transfer of Learning Gap

Participants may acquire knowledge but fail to apply it at workplace due to lack of support or reinforcement.

### 4. Evaluation Difficulties

Measuring leadership outcomes is complex because behavior change and organizational impact occur gradually and involve multiple factors.

## CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR ASSESSING EFFECTIVENESS

Based on literature review, the effectiveness of leadership development programs for mid-level managers can be conceptualized as follows:



*Figure 1: Leadership Development Effectiveness Model*

**Program Inputs**

- Training
- Coaching
- Feedback
- Experiential learning

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**Individual Outcomes**

- Leadership competencies
- Self-efficacy
- Emotional intelligence

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**Behavioral Outcomes**

- Team leadership practices
- Communication
- Decision-making

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**Organizational Outcomes**

- Team performance
- Engagement
- Productivity

This model integrates competency development with behavioral and organizational results, providing a comprehensive evaluation framework.

**DISCUSSION**

The literature indicates that leadership development programs generally produce positive outcomes for mid-level managers. Evidence across sectors demonstrates improvements in leadership competencies, behavior, and career advancement.

However, effectiveness varies widely depending on program design and implementation. Programs incorporating experiential learning, coaching, and feedback show stronger impact than classroom-only training.

Another important insight is alignment with organizational strategy. Programs that connect learning with real business challenges and projects generate measurable results and higher participant engagement.

The role of organizational support is also critical. Managers require reinforcement from senior leaders, opportunities to apply learning, and a culture encouraging leadership growth. Without these conditions, training benefits may fade.

Overall, leadership development should be viewed not as isolated training events but as continuous developmental processes integrated with organizational systems.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Based on review findings, organizations can enhance leadership development effectiveness by:

1. Aligning programs with strategic goals and managerial roles
2. Integrating coaching and feedback mechanisms
3. Using real work-based learning projects
4. Evaluating outcomes at behavioral and organizational levels
5. Providing ongoing support and reinforcement

Such practices increase the likelihood that leadership development investments translate into improved managerial effectiveness.

### **CONCLUSION**

Leadership development programs play a vital role in strengthening the capabilities of mid-level managers who serve as the operational backbone of organizations. This review demonstrates that such programs generally improve leadership competencies, behaviors, and career progression, ultimately contributing to organizational performance.

Empirical evidence indicates that experiential learning, coaching, and feedback-based interventions are particularly effective in producing measurable leadership improvements. However, many programs still suffer from lack of contextual relevance, insufficient organizational support, and weak evaluation practices.

Therefore, assessing effectiveness requires a comprehensive approach considering individual learning, behavioral change, and organizational outcomes. When leadership development initiatives are aligned with organizational strategy and tailored to managerial needs, they significantly enhance mid-level managerial effectiveness and leadership pipelines.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs and multi-source data to better understand long-term impact of leadership development in middle management.

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