Built to Outlast the Engagement

Capability transfer as a design principle for consulting, and what the evidence says about making change stick

POSITION Consultants
Perspective Paper

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ABSTRACT

The measure of a consulting engagement is not what changed while the consultant was present. It is what is still working a year after the consultant leaves.

Published research on training transfer, leadership development, coaching and implementation points to four conditions that help change last: **workplace conditions that support use, learning designed for practice and feedback, internal people developed as coaches and owners, and a new way of working that is expected, supported and rewarded.** This paper summarizes that evidence, sets out the design rules we take from it, and offers a reflection tool for testing whether an engagement is built to outlast outside support.

Keywords: Capability transfer; Coaching; Training transfer; Implementation; Sustaining change; Handover

KEY POINTS

1. Change often fades after the initial effort. Research suggests the environment people return to — and whether a new way is expected, supported and rewarded — matters as much as the training or advice itself.
2. Meta-analyses associate stronger leadership-learning effects with needs analysis, practice, feedback and spaced sessions, and find positive average effects of coaching — with real limits in the evidence.
3. Engagements can be designed for handover from the start: diagnose the transfer environment, build in practice, name internal owners early, create expectation and support, and plan what the consultant stops doing.

1 The problem: change that fades

Implementation researchers note that many evidence-based interventions are not sustained after initial implementation [9], and propose that leadership, policies and resource availability are key influences on whether they continue.

ABOUT THIS EVIDENCE

This comes from the background to a 2014 study protocol in public-sector services. It describes a known problem and the factors the researchers set out to investigate, not findings they had already demonstrated.

FROM CONSULTING PRACTICE

Leaders we work with often describe the same pattern in plainer terms: the workshop was good, the plan was sound, and then daily pressure returned. The underlying question is about capability — who can do this when outside support has gone?

2 What the research says

2.1 Transfer depends on the workplace, not only the training

A meta-analysis of 89 studies by Blume, Ford, Baldwin and Huang found that most predictors of transfer examined, such as motivation and work environment, had stronger relationships to transfer for open skills such as leadership development than for closed skills such as computer software [1].

POSITION'S VIEW

Leadership skills are applied in varied, changing situations, so the environment a leader returns to matters a great deal. We read this as a reason to look at the workplace before designing the learning — not as proof that any single factor causes transfer.

2.2 Design features that make leadership learning work

A meta-analysis of leadership training by Lacerenza, Reyes, Marlow, Joseph and Salas, drawing on 335 independent samples, found support for needs analysis, feedback, multiple delivery methods (especially practice), spaced training sessions, an on-site location, and face-to-face delivery that is not self-administered [2]. Design choices, not just content, are associated with results.

ABOUT THIS EVIDENCE

These are associations across many evaluations of training programs, not a test of each design feature on its own.

2.3 Coaching shows positive average effects — with caveats

Several meta-analyses support coaching as a development method:

- Jones, Woods and Guillaume (17 studies) found positive effects on organizational outcomes overall ($\delta = 0.36$) [3]. Effects were stronger for internal coaches than

external coaches, and smaller when coaching included multisource (360) feedback. They found no moderation by format (face-to-face versus blended) or by duration.

- De Haan and Nilsson, using only randomized controlled trials (37 studies, 2,528 participants), reported a moderate overall effect (g = .59), alongside indications of significant publication bias [4].
- Cannon-Bowers and colleagues, updating earlier reviews with 11 recent studies of workplace coaching, reported a medium positive aggregate effect (g = 0.44) [5] on individual work-related outcomes.
- A 2024 systematic review of leadership development programs in healthcare research found that coaching, experiential learning or project work, and mentoring were associated with increased organizational outcomes [6].

ABOUT THIS EVIDENCE

Coaching meta-analyses include relatively small numbers of studies, mixed methods and signs of publication bias, and many outcomes are self-reported. The internal-coach finding comes from a small set of studies. The smaller effect where 360 feedback was used does not mean 360 feedback is unhelpful — it may reflect how and where it was used — but it is a reason not to treat it as automatically beneficial.

POSITION'S VIEW

The finding that internal coaches showed stronger effects is the most relevant to this paper. It suggests that building coaching capability inside an organization is not simply a cost-saving compromise; it can be a sound design choice.

2.4 The new way has to be expected, supported and rewarded

Weiner, Belden, Bergmire and Johnston describe *implementation climate* as the extent to which organizational members perceive that innovation use is expected, supported, and rewarded [7], and propose that it is positively associated with implementation effectiveness.

ABOUT THIS EVIDENCE

This is a conceptual and measurement paper: the association is a proposition to test, not an established effect size.

A 2025 systematic review by Hastings, drawing on 10 papers reporting 292 transformation cases across healthcare and other industries, recommends that stakeholders contribute to decision-making during transformation and that leaders approach it with a view to establishing a learning environment [8].

3 How we apply the evidence

The research above is mostly about training, coaching and implementation in specific settings. Applying it to consulting engagements is our inference. We use it to shape five design principles:

Table 1. Evidence-informed principles and what they mean in an engagement

Principle	What the evidence suggests	What it means in practice
Fix the workplace conditions	The work environment matters for transfer, especially for open skills like leadership	Design the documentation, guides, decision rights and system of record that let the new behavior happen in daily work
Design for practice and feedback	Practice, feedback and spaced sessions are associated with stronger leadership-learning effects	Use real cases, spaced sessions and structured feedback, with tracks that differ by level
Develop internal ownership	Internal coaches showed stronger effects in one meta-analysis	Guide and train while the client's own people carry out the work
Make it expected and supported	Implementation climate is proposed to support effective implementation	Pair plans with monitoring, clear expectations and recognition, then hand over to internal owners

Principle	What the evidence suggests	What it means in practice
Simplify so it can be owned	Usable standards are easier to teach, coach and assess	Keep expectations few and clear, so the client can run them without us

FROM CONSULTING PRACTICE

Teaching only works if people have time to apply it. Where a team has no spare capacity, we sometimes add implementation capacity first, with a defined path to hand it back.

4 Five design rules for engagements

1. **Diagnose the transfer environment.** Before designing content, ask what will support or block use in the first 90 days.
2. **Build practice and feedback into the plan.** Use real cases, spaced sessions and structured input from colleagues.
3. **Name internal owners early.** Each deliverable has an internal person who will run it.
4. **Create expectation, support and reward.** Managers need time, tools and recognition for using the new approach.
5. **Plan the handoff.** Decide what outside support stops doing, when, and how the organization will know it is working.

5 A capability-transfer reflection tool

REFLECTION TOOL

Discuss these seven statements at the start of an engagement and again around day 90. They are prompts, not a scored test: there is no total or threshold that shows an engagement "passes". Look for where people disagree and what evidence each answer rests on.

1. A named internal owner exists for each major deliverable.
2. Managers have time set aside to use the new process.

3. Leaders are expected, in writing, to use the new approach.
4. People are recognized for using it.
5. The team has practiced the skill on a real case with feedback.
6. Records and tools are in the organization's hands, not the consultant's.
7. The team could explain the approach to a new hire.

6 Implications for leaders

- **Judge engagements by what lasts.** Ask at the outset what should still be working a year after outside support ends.
- **Look at the environment first.** Time, tools, expectations and recognition shape whether new skills are used.
- **Invest in internal capability.** Developing your own coaches and owners can be a strong design choice, not a fallback.
- **Plan the handoff from day one.** Agree which internal person owns each deliverable and when outside support steps back.

7 Limitations

- Coaching meta-analyses include small numbers of studies, mixed methods, self-reported outcomes and signs of publication bias.
- Training-transfer research is mostly about training, so applying it to consulting engagements is an inference.
- Several sources come from healthcare or public-sector settings, and one review draws on cases across industries to inform healthcare. They illustrate principles rather than providing direct evidence for every sector.
- This paper does not report results from our own engagements. We will describe client outcomes only when they are confirmed and the client has given permission.

8 Questions for discussion

For a leadership team conversation. There are no right answers or scores.

1. When our last consultant or program ended, what stopped?
2. Who inside owns each outcome today?
3. Do managers have time and permission to use what they learned?
4. What does our organization actually expect, support and reward?
5. Which skills are we outsourcing that we should be building?

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