

HOW JIMMY PARKER AND THE HOME DEPOT ARE REVOLUTIONIZING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT.

By Joey Asher, President, Speechworks

Jimmy Parker

The seeds of Home Depot's revolutionary executive development programs were planted more than 20 years ago in Annapolis, MD. at the United States Naval Academy. That was when a Midshipman named Jimmy Parker was chosen to be a squad leader, a role similar to a drill instructor, for 12 incoming freshman.



"I was just a little punk, only a couple of years out of high school myself," says Parker, now a Senior Manager of Executive Development at The Home Depot. But something about the challenge of shaping those incoming midshipmen inspired Parker.

"I somehow felt more alive," he says. "The opportunity to impact their developmental trajectory was something that I did not take lightly. I was more focused and engaged than ever. I had more energy than I'd ever had. There was this deep sense of responsibility."

Since then Parker has had many roles: Captain of the Naval Academy's gymnastics team, Marine Corps helicopter pilot, Director of program management, life purpose coach, and an organizational development consultant. A few years ago, he joined The Home Depot. But through it all he has studied leadership—specifically, how organizations can grow their leaders faster and better.

That study has led to a unique six-month program aimed at developing the company's rising leaders. The program blends real-world leadership action, guided reflection, and small-group discussions to drive a simple goal: stronger thinkers.

"It's called vertical development," says Parker. "Growing bigger minds, capable of dealing with greater levels of complexity and ambiguity for solving our toughest challenges." Most programs, he says, simply emphasize what leaders should know or do—horizontal development—without addressing blind spots, inhibiting beliefs, or other mindsets that keep leaders from doing what they know they should.

Says Parker: "We're deliberately targeting leadership mindsets, values, even identity—helping leaders to view themselves, their teams and their organizations differently. To value different things. Behavior change happens as a natural byproduct of that mindset change." He adds, "And if behavior doesn't change, then you haven't done your job."

Parker agreed recently to be interviewed about the program.

What is the goal of your program?

We're ultimately trying to change behavior. And if you want behavior change that sticks, you have to change the mindsets that drive that behavior: whether those mindsets are outdated leadership paradigms, unrealistic expectations about yourself or others, or just plain false assumptions. You really have to get inside the head of the leader and understand the mindsets and then shift those mindsets. When you can do that, it tends to lead to durable behavior change.

How does Action Learning work?

It's a weekly learning cycle. We give them one or two on-the-job leadership tasks to complete each week. Our design goal is for those tasks to not take any more than an hour a week. What's unique is that these tasks are not traditional training or micro-learning like 'Read this article' or 'Watch this TED talk'. More often, the task represents a real-world leadership behavior that great leaders do but that most leaders don't. It's a challenging micro-assignment that often gets them out of their comfort zone. Then participants get

together for a 1-hour call to share insights from the tasks, discuss challenges, and capture lessons learned. All of this is tracked and streamlined with a new technology platform that supports behavior change and habit formation.

Can you give an example of a task?

Sure. One task might be to write a statement about how your team uniquely contributes to The Home Depot's strategy and financial health, then reduce that to as few words as possible and integrate that into your daily messaging with your team. If you find yourself in the elevator with Carol Tomé [The Home Depot's Chief Financial Officer] and she says, "What do you do?" this is what should pop out. It also helps associates on these leaders' teams understand how they contribute to the bigger picture.

Another task might be to pick a meeting where your only job is to pay attention to what people are likely thinking and feeling but not saying. This type of task gets leaders out of their own head, more in tune with the needs of those around them. It makes them better listeners.

They get 1-2 of these tasks every week for half a year. We call it the 'drip method,' as opposed to the firehose effect that can sometimes happen in the classroom.

Once they've done the task, then what do they do?

We facilitate change with a process we call "Do, Discuss, Document." Once they've done the task, they answer a reflection question designed to drive the learning deeper in preparation for their group call. They're placed in cross-functional groups of five or six peers. On the call, they discuss that week's task and how they've responded to the reflection questions we've asked them. The fascinating thing is that they all learn different things from the same task, depending on their role. Then they go back and document what they've learned.

Who leads the conference calls?

We have senior leaders trained as coaches to lead the calls. So for our Director-level program, we use VP-level coaches. For our VP program, we use SVPs. We tell the coaches that you're not the 'fountain of wisdom' here. Your job is to create a safe place where people can take their masks off,

talk about their struggles, and be fully transparent with one another. Studies show that 80-90% of leaders don't have a place where they can do that. Then, once the environment's established, we ask our coaches to step back and hand over facilitation duties to participants, so that the program becomes almost entirely self-directed.

How do you measure results?

We ask a very simple but demanding survey question. "Would you agree or disagree that your on-the-job leadership behavior has improved as a result of this program?" Then we ask their bosses the same question. "Would you agree or disagree that this person's on-the-job leadership behavior has improved as a result of the program?" During the program, boss ratings averaged 3.9 on a five-point scale. But here is what's fascinating. We did the same survey again nine months after the program had ended. Boss ratings had improved to 4.5. One of our goals is to strengthen participants' self-development muscles, so that the benefits of the program continue long after the program ends. So these results were pretty encouraging.

What's next?

This approach has been very well-received at Home Depot, and it has led to demand for more programs like it. But the ability to create programs like this requires a unique type of design skill that's not very abundant. So we're working hard to increase L&D's design capacity in this area so we can scale up and impact many more leaders, not just executives or high potentials.



Joey Asher is President of Speechworks, a communication and selling skills coaching company based in Atlanta. His latest book is "Riveting Data: How to Make Any Presentation Exciting Using Hollywood Storytelling Techniques." If you're interested in helping your team members speak simply about complex things, visit www.speechworks.net