

Leverage The Science Of Behavior To Improve Leadership Development

By [James Glover](#),

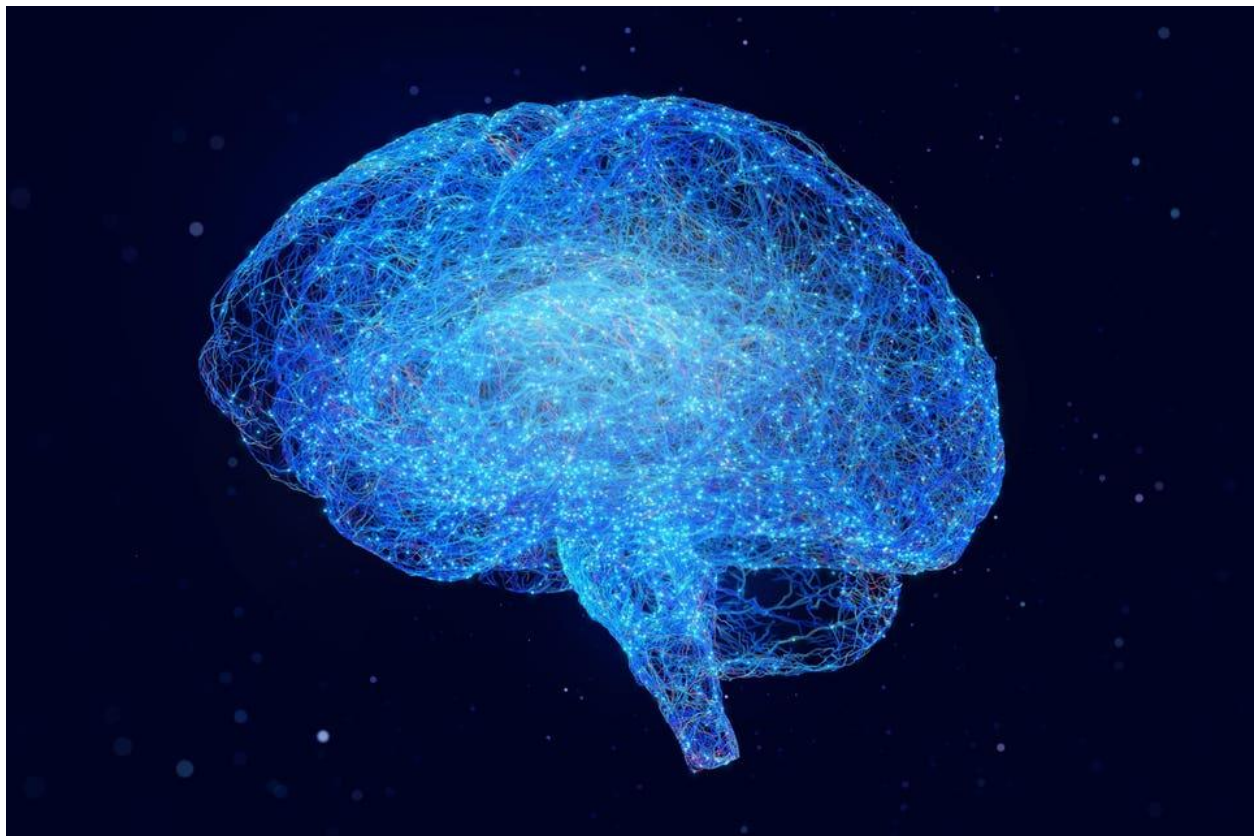
Forbes Councils Member.

for [Forbes Human Resources Council](#)

COUNCIL POST | Membership (fee-based)



James Glover (CEO of [Flint Learning Solutions](#)) helps HR professionals transform behaviors in their organizations to solve business problems.



GETTY

According to the Josh Bersin Company, [only 25% of companies](#) report that their leadership development programs significantly improve business performance. Another way to say that: three-fourths of CEOs don't believe their leadership development programs have an impact on the business.

That's tough news for talent and training professionals because it indicates that traditional leadership development programs don't create the kind of change that drives business results. The

good news is there's a scientific reason for that, and we can work with it—not against it—to start creating meaningful change.

Leadership behaviors that drive measurable results, like conducting daily safety walk-throughs or addressing performance gaps immediately, aren't knowledge gaps. They're behavior gaps. Leaders often already know what they should do, but they fail to consistently apply the behaviors in their daily work. By rewiring neural pathways through consistent practice, talent professionals can help leaders create lasting behavioral change.

We must understand how our brains form habits, then implement development approaches that support this biological reality. The payoff can be leaders who begin to demonstrate behaviors that measurably improve results like safety records, reduced turnover and improved performance metrics.

The Science Of Habit Formation

Contrary to popular belief, it doesn't take 21 days to form a habit. According to [a 2024 meta-analysis of habit formation research](#), the average time it takes for new behaviors to become automatic habits is closer to 10 weeks. As Nobel Prize-winning psychologist [Daniel Kahneman's work in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*](#) helps explain, our brains have two operating systems: System 1, which is fast, automatic and unconscious, and System 2, which is slow, deliberate and conscious. The first system relates to our instinctual responses and behaviors, while the second system is connected to active, focused decision making.

New leadership behaviors start in System 2, requiring focused attention and cognitive effort to complete. Only through consistent practice do these behaviors transfer to System 1 and become automatic responses. So the reason traditional leadership development programs typically fail is because they deliver information to System 2 without providing the repeated practice needed to transfer skills to System 1's automatic processing.

Leaders need a chance to practice and develop habits. According to [the 70-20-10 model](#), 70% of learning happens through on-the-job experiences, 20% through coaching and relationships and only 10% through formal training. Yet talent development budgets typically allocate resources weighted in reverse—most investment going to formal training that delivers short-term impact.

4 Steps For Creating Effective Leadership Development

To transform leadership behaviors into habits, these four steps are essential:

1. Begin with a measurable purpose.

Select three to five concrete, observable leadership behaviors that would have the greatest impact on your business challenges. For example, if your organization is experiencing a rise in safety violations, you may want to train leaders to conduct more site visits and thoroughly document violations. Both the behaviors and business outcome are measurable.

2. Design training that complements daily work.

Give leaders a chance to practice. Rather than adding to their workloads, design 20-30 bite-sized activities that can enhance their existing responsibilities. For example, have them conduct a focused safety check during routine floor visits or provide specific feedback during regular task completion reviews. Structure the activities so they're spread across a 10- to 12-week timeframe and increase in difficulty over time.

3. Ensure training is immediately applicable.

Ensure activities apply immediately in real work contexts. Unlike formal training, where concepts might not be applied for weeks, on-the-job activities create immediate practice opportunities during existing meetings, routine inspections or regular team interactions.

4. Measure progress, then reinforce it.

Regular measurement creates accountability while providing data to demonstrate how leadership behavior is changing. Implement a measurement framework that captures information such as:

- Before/after self-assessments of targeted behaviors
- Manager observations of behavior change
- Documented examples of applying new behaviors
- Connection to relevant business metrics like turnover rates, incident frequency or productivity measures

According to [data we've collected at Flint Learning Solutions](#), organizations implementing this approach report 50% to 75% improvements in targeted leadership behaviors within 10 to 12 weeks.

Conclusion

Lasting leadership behavior change isn't achieved through knowledge transfer alone. It takes consistent practice that transforms conscious efforts into automatic habits. The most successful organizations are shifting their development approach from episodic training to continuous practice, measuring not just what leaders know, but what they consistently do.

By structuring development initiatives around the 10-week habit formation timeframe and focusing on in-workflow practice, talent leaders can create sustainable behavior change that directly impacts measurable business outcomes. When leadership behaviors become habits through effective leadership development programs, they create the foundation for engaged teams, improved performance and quantifiable business results.