



#### DEVELOPING EMPLOYEES

## Debate Training Helps People Become Leaders

Companies spend millions on development programs that often have mixed results when it comes to producing the next generation of leaders. New research found one intervention that may help: debate training.

In one experiment 471 U.S. employees at a *Fortune* 100 company were randomly assigned to either participate in a nine-week debate course, or not. A year and a half later people who'd taken the training were significantly more likely to have stepped into a leadership

position than those who'd not undergone it.

In another experiment 975 participants recruited in the United States were sorted into three-person teams for a 60-minute session. One member from each team was randomly assigned to spend the first 30 minutes in debate training, in cultural training, or enjoying free time, while the two remaining team members also had free time. After the 30 minutes the teams convened and were tasked with creating an itinerary for a college student orientation. The participants who'd had the debate training were significantly more likely to be rated as assertive and leaderlike by their teammates than the participants who'd been given cultural training or had free time.

The researchers say that debate training helped employees learn to articulate their views with confidence and respect, defend their positions diplomatically, and advocate for their ideas—key qualities in a good leader in U.S. culture. They note that their study suggests a low-cost, scalable way to improve the skills necessary for reaching leadership positions.



**ABOUT THE RESEARCH** *"Breaking Ceilings: Debate Training Promotes Leadership Emergence by Increasing Assertiveness," by Jackson G. Lu et al. (Journal of Applied Psychology, 2025)*