

Seven Leadership Development Experiments You Should Try Right Now

INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY LEADERSHIP

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Why Leadership Development is Integral Right Now

Leadership is a critical ingredient in every company's success. Among its most discernible benefits, leadership fuels employee engagement, drives productivity and quality, enhances innovation, and facilitates customer satisfaction. However, exemplary leadership does not come easily, and even great leaders face immense, unprecedented challenges. Not surprisingly, one-third of today's leaders report feeling extremely burned out.¹

A considerable cause for leaders' frustration is that many traditional ways of working no longer apply. The business landscape has drastically changed, with the pace and degree of complexity rapidly accelerating. In the contemporary business environment, it is harder to discern cause and effect or predict outcomes, and as noted by Ram Charan, traditional enterprise operating models and ways of creating competitive advantage frequently falter and break down.²

Consequently, the practices that made leaders successful in the past have reached their sell-by-date. According to David Snowden and Mary Boone, "Business schools and organizations equip leaders to operate in ordered domains (simple and complicated)."³ Snowden and Boone aptly regard this approach as antiquated and contend that in "the complex environment of the current business world, leaders will often be called upon to act against their instincts." In this context, the development and refinement of new leadership capabilities is clearly paramount. However, those responsible for developing leaders face the same challenges as those they are meant to serve. **How do you forge a viable leadership development strategy when market dynamics and operating conditions are constantly changing?**

In turbulent, uncertain times, relying on detailed analysis or even best practices that have worked elsewhere can be a recipe for disaster. Either can fail as circumstances shift. More often, the best option is to experiment, to move toward what works and let go of what does not. In this light, we provide seven leadership development experiments that

the Institute for Contemporary Leadership has seen work well in today's disruptive, fast-paced world. Each has practical relevance, is scalable, and, in many cases, low investment. We encourage you to adopt one or more approach and in the service of collective learning, would like to hear from you about what else you have seen work.

Seven Leadership Development Experiments

1. Peer Learning Circles Experiment
2. Deep Discovery Experiment
3. Catalyst Program Experiment
4. Fast Feedback Experiment
5. Simulated Worlds Experiment
6. Leadership Network Analysis Experiment
7. Mentoring Across Differences Experiment

1. Peer Learning Circles Experiment

Peer Learning Circles (PLCs) are cross-enterprise cohorts of 5 – 12 leaders (group size depends on seniority) who meet once a month to support each other's development. Each 60 – 90-minute PLC session focuses on a specific development theme. Prior to each session, participants complete 30 minutes of pre-work. We've found that high-quality podcasts work well for pre-work, although other options include articles, videos, personal assessments, or even worksheets.

While each PLC is led by an expert facilitator, the facilitator's role is not to teach, but to encourage dialogue among the participants, so that they learn from each other's experiences. A typical agenda for a 90-minute PLC includes 15 minutes at the start for participants to reconnect and share what is top of mind, 30 minutes for participants to discuss their insights about the pre-work, and finally a 45-minute peer consulting process, in which participants raise personal, real-world opportunities or challenges related to the session topic. During this peer consulting

process, others ask open-ended questions to understand the challenge at a deeper level and generate new insights, provide alternative perspectives from which to consider the challenge, and ultimately offer a single recommendation.

In a recent leadership development program carried out with 150 directors at a Fortune 20 company, 93% of participants reported that the PLCs extended their impact as a leader. According to one director, "It was a wonderful experience that showed me that regardless of title, we all go through similar problems. Getting to see a glimpse into how each of my peers handles those problems has been a huge learning moment for me."

PLCs work because peers support and hold each other accountable for development. Additionally, PLCs tap into the existing expertise within the organization.⁴ Sometimes, it is not external best practices but internal best practices that are most relevant. When planned accordingly, PLCs can build new, cross-boundary networks that increase the effectiveness of the overall enterprise. In the above example,

PLCs increased cross-business unit collaboration by ~500%.

PLCs make a great leadership development experiment because they are not only impactful, but highly scalable. You can start a single PLC and grow from there. Jennifer Paylor, who built the world's largest internal coaching practice at IBM, found that after 6 months of participating in a PLC, 40% of participants expressed interest in starting and leading their own PLCs. This multiplication effect allowed her to use PLCs for the development of thousands of associates on a global scale. According to Jennifer, "PLCs are how modern companies easily scale and embed great leadership to organically grow the bottom line and accelerate organizational capabilities that positively impact people and customers."

2. Deep Discovery Experiment

Feedback is a critical element in leadership development. Leaders do not always understand the full impact of their behavior or how they are perceived by others. Deep Discovery is a multi-mode analysis process. It incorporates 360-feedback, psychometrics, and an in-depth behavioral event interview to uncover the drivers that underpin a leader's successes and derailers. The resulting insights address the "so what?" needed to accelerate development and improve performance in the leader's given role. Results are debriefed one-on-one with the leader to co-create a meaningful and actionable development plan.

Key to the success of the Deep Discovery is a focus on development versus evaluation. The purpose is not to render a judgement on the leader's performance but to explore what has made the leader successful, to uncover development needs, and to pinpoint specific strategies that the leader and his or her organization can leverage to accelerate growth. Along these lines, Deep Discovery must be supportive. As described by Dr. Tony Susa, Partner at Contemporary Leadership Advisors, "Leaders need to feel that it is a developmental process being carried out in partnership 'with them' rather than being done 'to them.'"

When well executed, Deep Discovery is hugely impactful. Ninety six percent of leaders indicate that the process raised their self-awareness and 90% report that their leadership improved as a result of the experience. According to one SVP of Innovation at a consumer package goods company, "The last couple of years I've actually been really happy at work. Consistently happy. And some of that is the people I get to work with every day and the interesting and creative work that we do. But most of that happiness has to do with the way you've shown me how I can be me in the workplace. How I can show up at work as myself and still have success."

Deep Discovery works because the resulting feedback reduces blind spots, pinpoints the specific development opportunities that represent the greatest leverage, and generates enthusiasm and energy for change. As Mazher Ahmad, Chief Talent Officer at Regeneron, has described it, "Highly informed, well-presented constructive feedback facilitates self-awareness, which so often unlocks the doors to leadership." In addition, leaders who undertake the process feel invested in by their organizations, which enhances their engagement and discretionary effort.

As with PLCs, Deep Discovery is highly scalable. Organizations can start with a single leader, see how it works, and grow from there. It is not uncommon for an organization to apply the process to all the leaders in a top-talent program, on a specific team, or at a given level in the hierarchy. This broader approach not only demonstrates the organization's commitment to continuous learning, but also provides meta data and insights that can be applied to inform future investments in learning and development.

3. Catalyst Program Experiment

The Catalyst Program Experiment brings leaders from across the business into a cohort that works together on a strategic project assigned by the C-suite or Board. Participating leaders dedicate 25%+ of their time to the project, which they complete in as little as 6 weeks using a sprint-based methodology. Throughout the process,

the leaders are “scaffolded” with training (e.g., Design Thinking, Digital Transformation, and customized “Learning Safaris” with external companies) as well as web-based, collaborative tools designed around the specific challenge or opportunity the cohort is addressing.

Because it takes place in the context of real work, the Catalyst Program Experiment employs action learning. The process creates the optimal conditions—challenge, feedback, and support—for development to occur. According to Tony O’Driscoll, Professor at Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business, “Leadership development can’t be separated from organizational objectives. In fact, it’s quite often the opposite. Leaders develop when they work through the organization’s messy, complicated workplaces, workforce, and work processes to affect change.”

In addition to accelerating leaders’ development, the Catalyst Program Experiment benefits the enterprise by advancing business strategy and furthering organizational goals. At one medical device company, Catalyst Program leaders were so successful at defining a future path for their organization that they displaced famed business consultants, McKinsey & Co. These leadership cohorts succeed where formal structure cannot because the cohorts create what John Kotter terms a “second operating system.”⁵ Or, what Michael Arena, VP of Talent and Development at Amazon’s Web Services describes as “adaptive space,” in which leaders from across organizational silos come together to share ideas and collaborate to generate new value in ways that formal structure does not permit.⁶

Additionally, the Catalyst Program Experiment facilitates the growth not only of participating leaders but also of key subordinates who must “step up” to help the leaders fulfill their day-to-day roles over the course of the program. In this way, the experiment produces a ripple effect that develops associates across the enterprise.

Catalyst Programs typically establish cohorts of 8 – 24 leaders from across enterprise who dedicate no less than

25% of their time to the program over 3 – 6 months. This helps make sure the cohort has adequate expertise and sufficient time to address the given business challenge. It is important to have C-level executives define the challenge or opportunity based on “what keeps them up at night” or what they’re most passionate about. This keeps C-level executives engaged in the program and ensures the experiment warrants the investment. Once the cohort’s focus is identified, consider breaking it into sprints, determining the necessary knowledge and skills for each sprint, and sourcing the learning and developmental needed to assure the cohort’s success.

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4. Fast Forward Experiment

The Fast Forward Experiment provides participants with rapid-cycle insights and forward-looking recommendations on specific behaviors that they seek to enhance, refine, or diminish. A participating leader will identify 1 – 3 behaviors that he or she wishes to change as well as 3 – 5 supporters who are well positioned to share feedback and suggestions on the leader’s progress. These supporters serve as trusted observers who share their perceptions with the leader every 3 – 6 weeks using a 2-minute, customized pulse survey.

Leadership development programs commonly conduct pre-and post-360 feedback assessments, and while these assessment reveal results at program end, they do not offer the insights leaders need to adapt in real-time. This

is because the assessments are too infrequent for leaders to try out new behaviors and get immediate feedback on their performance. Additionally, 360 assessments are often standardized and do not allow leaders to solicit feedback and recommendations on a set of behaviors that are customized to the individual leader.

The Fast Forward Experiment offers an alternative. With this approach, leaders receive regular feedback via a web-based pulse survey from a handful of trusted colleagues on the specific behaviors the leader wishes to modify (see Box A). This is in line with research indicating that optimal learning outcomes occur when professionals receive monthly feedback.⁷ And, that leaders who are willing to share their development opportunities with colleagues and regularly follow-up with coworkers to assess progress

demonstrate the greatest development.⁸ Moreover, because participating leaders themselves define the behaviors they seek to change, the resulting insights and recommendations are more relevant as well as energizing and motivating.

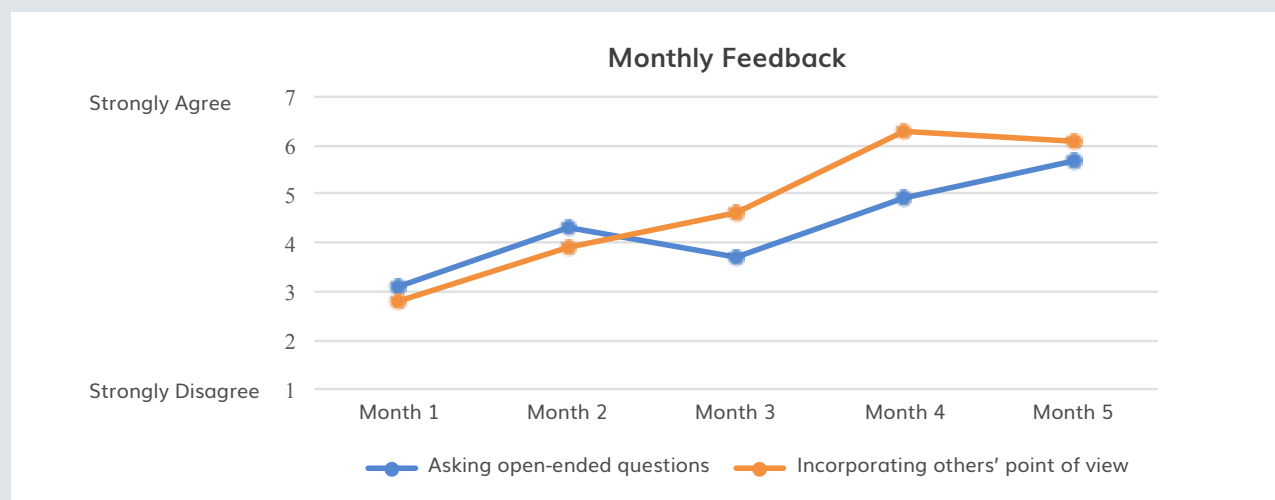
In one leadership development program in the operations division of a Fortune 500 technology company, observers shared monthly suggestions and feedback on participating leaders' behaviors related to coaching (i.e., how they used coaching skills to develop employees). Over the course of the six-month program, the observers reported that, on average, leaders' desired behaviors increased 34% and their competence improved by 47%. Even more compelling, the amount of time the leaders' teams needed to spend doing rework dropped 15% relative to a control group.

Box A: Fast Feedback Example

Al was an R&D executive at a medical device company who wanted to do a better job connecting with and influencing peers in other functions. In partnership with his manager and an executive coach, Al pinpointed two behaviors to develop:

1. Asking open-ended questions to better understand others' perspective
2. Incorporating others' point of view (e.g., goals, concerns, feedback) into his decisions

Al selected four supporters, people who were able to observe his behavior and share insights on how he was doing and suggestions for improvement. These supporters provided feedback on a monthly basis via a 3-question survey over 5 months. Al reviewed the results each month and adapted his approach accordingly. Suggestions included, "You might want to invite others to speak first at the project reviews." and "Great job illustrating how everyone's goals align."



5. Simulated Worlds Experiment

The Simulated Worlds Experiment offers a high-fidelity digital simulation specially designed to uniquely reflect a particular organization's business, cultural, and leadership dynamics. The digital simulation, typically created in partnership with an external provider, enables hundreds of leaders from around the globe to work together in real-time to navigate a series of challenges. During gameplay, leaders apply their experience and expertise to make decisions, encounter real outcomes (based on those decisions), and debrief learning with peers.

Simulated Worlds are built "from the ground up" to mirror the organization's real-world business environment and the specific patterns that drive performance. The immersive, interactive experience creates emotional stakes that drive learning and behavioral change. In a recent simulation, one decision forced leaders to select between opening their platform's application programming interfaces (APIs) to 3rd parties in the hopes of generating a steady stream of applications or alternatively working with only a few, select partners to reduce risk and ensure the successful deployment of a single suite of applications. For a Fortune-500 company struggling to harmonize their storied history of five-nines reliability with the desire to rapidly expand a business ecosystem, this decision was not an easy one. Putting leaders from around the globe through the simulation served the company especially well. It spotlighted the issue, required leaders to consider pros and cons of both sides before taking a position, and ultimately communicated the organization's "right answer."

In this way, the Simulated Worlds Experiment is more than just a way for leaders to practice and get feedback in a safe environment at scale. It's an opportunity to operationalize business strategy and organizational transformation. As stated by Darren Keegan, CEO of

Sapien, a builder of simulated worlds, "The world is rapidly changing. At its core, our immersive digital experiences are really asking the question: As leaders, are we going to change with it or fall back on what we've done in the past?"

6. Leadership Network Analysis Experiment

In this experiment, leaders use organizational network analysis to amplify leaders' impact. Each leader and their respective teams complete a web-based survey in which they identify who they work with to solve problems, make decisions, understand market dynamics, and approach and address various other issues. The resulting data is used to create personal network reports that evaluate each leader's network in seven critical areas as well as to pinpoint specific opportunities for improvement (see Box B). Leaders debrief in a virtual workshop, where they fine-tune their network and build new relationships that will help them to achieve business objectives and career goals.

Leadership is increasingly understood as a relationship between a leader and follower(s) versus a set of individual competencies.⁹ From this perspective, one's leadership is determined by who they are connected to and the degree to which those connections trust and respect them. However, leaders often do not recognize the degree to which their network affects their influence and affect change. When leaders do recognize this, they often mistakenly assume that a bigger network is always better. In truth, high-performing leaders typically maintain no more than 18 close connections—although they carefully curate their network based on what they need to achieve. Personal network reports build awareness of the importance of networks and equip leaders to fine-tune the configuration of their relationships, based on their business objectives, and career goals. This is critical, as CLA's research shows that the structure of a leader's network is five times more predictive of

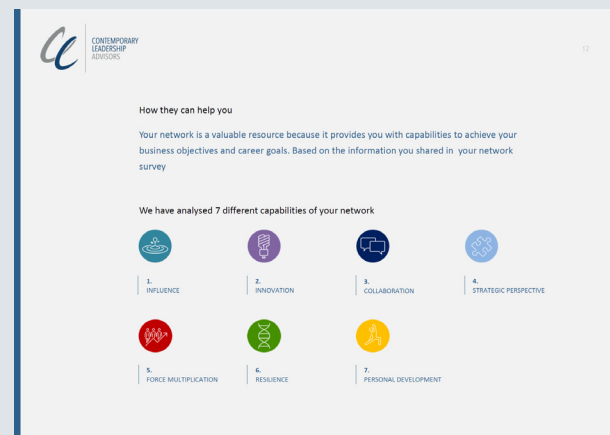
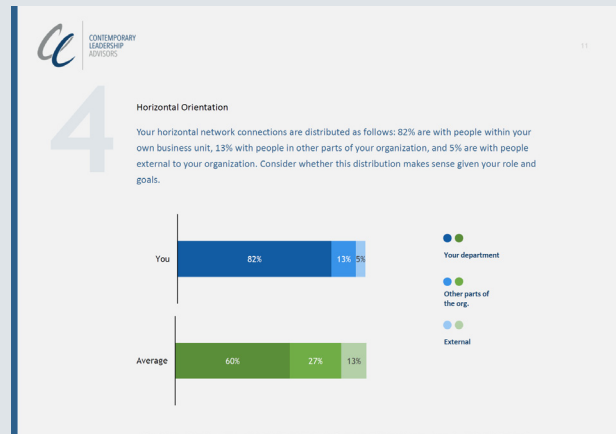
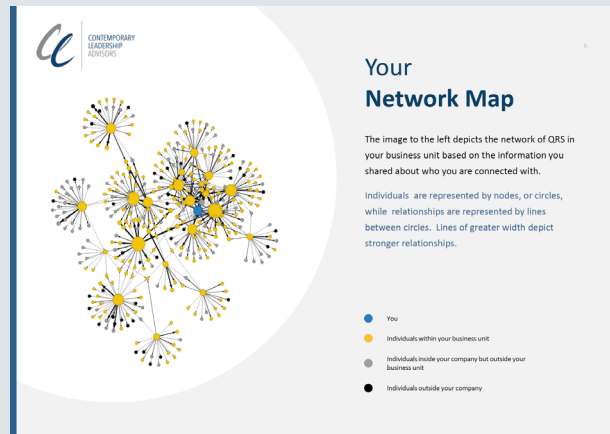
their performance than their education, experience, or cognitive abilities.¹⁰

The adage that “it is not only what you know, but who you know” is truer than ever. Increasingly, it is through leaders’ informal networks rather than

formal structures that leaders exert influence, learn and discover new ideas, and develop their colleagues’ capabilities and expertise. The Leadership Network Analysis Experiment optimizes one of leaders’ most critical assets, their network of relationships, generating increased capacity and impact.

Box B: Sample Pages from Personal Network Report

Personal Network Reports illuminate the current configuration of an individual leader’s network and its strengths and opportunities for improvement.



7. Mentoring Across Differences Experiment

The Mentoring Across Differences Experiment seizes on the power of mentoring but with a twist. Instead of matching participating leaders and mentors based solely on the leaders' development goals, matches are made across key differences such as organizational division, functional experience, and demographic traits (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender). After an orientation session in which participating leaders and mentors alike learn to efficaciously communicate across differences, each pair conducts an initial alignment meeting to discuss the leader's development goals and agree on expectations. The pair then meets for one hour each month over six months to discuss the participating leader's progress, explore challenges and opportunities, identify new resources, and co-create next steps.

Mentorship is a powerful development lever and particularly beneficial when leaders are exposed to new and diverse perspectives. In our study of ~150 director-level leaders who participated in a 6-month mentoring program, those who were mentored by executives from different parts of the enterprise reported the best outcomes. On their own however, executives too often choose to mentor those who reflect their own backgrounds.¹¹ While mentoring those like yourself can make interactions easier, it does not maximize the value of the development experience. At worst, it can create inequitable workplaces and contribute to an ongoing systemic problem. Women in large companies, for example, are three-and-a-half times less likely than men to have an inhouse champion.¹² Mentoring Across Differences can simultaneously protect against inequity while capitalizing on diversity.

Mentoring Across Differences fosters interactions in which leaders as well as their mentors must consider their own assumptions, embrace curiosity, and openly discuss differences. In addition to accelerating the

development of both parties, the experiment builds a culture of diversity and inclusion. Seventy-five percent of minorities report that mentoring has been very important to their development.¹³ According to Dr. David Thomas, President of Morehouse College, "People of color who advance the furthest all share one characteristic: a strong network of mentors and corporate sponsors who nurture their professional development." The Mentoring Across Differences Experiment does not just advance the capabilities of both mentee and mentor but specifically addresses the problem of overlooking or under-developing immensely valuable prospective leaders from traditionally disadvantaged populations.

Running Your Experiments

When selecting and implementing your leadership development experiments, adopt a growth versus fixed mindset. The purpose is not to implement a flawless pilot but rather to learn and grow. Additionally, find the right sandbox in which to play, so to speak, by locating a friendly part of the organization. This helps to ensure control of key variables such as which leaders will participate, how much time they will allocate, and key executives' exact roles.

Define the measures that you will use to assess the experiments' outcomes in advance (see Box C or a simple template). Co-creating these measures with those who will evaluate experiment results offers a great way to streamline decision-making that will follow.

Finally, it is advisable to group your experiments in "portfolios" like a venture capitalist.¹⁴ This relieves pressure for any single experiment to succeed. Consider trying multiple experiments. In the end, the benefits of leadership development can be achieved by any organization. These experiments offer a pragmatic starting point towards expanding leadership bench strength and accelerating leadership development.

Conclusion

Quality leadership is in especially high demand, as organizations around the world face an imperative to successfully devise and implement change. The COVID-19 pandemic has spotlighted these challenges, underscoring the need for existing leaders to alter their thinking, gain new capabilities, and forge a viable path forward. When conventional approaches demonstrate lacking results, it is time to experiment—to identify what

works and move towards it. Each of these seven leadership development experiments presents viable opportunities to enhance and increase the leadership needed to help organizations thrive in unprecedented times. We recommend considering these seven leadership development experiments in light of organizational needs and objectives, selecting one or more that offers unique promise, and vigorously pursuing exemplary leadership development.

Box C: Defining Measures

Measure Profile	
Measure Name:	
Owner: <i>Who is responsible for tracking the measure?</i>	Data Source: <i>Where does the data come from that will calculate the measure?</i>
Definition: <i>How is the measure defined?</i>	Frequency: <i>How often is the measure reported?</i>
Formula: <i>What specific formula will be utilized to calculate the measure?</i>	Display: <i>How are results presented (e.g. bar, pie, scatter, etc.)?</i>
Benchmark/Goal: <i>What is the ultimate target or goal?</i>	Decision: <i>What decision does the measure inform? What will we decide if the target is and is not achieved?</i>

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