

# The New Edge of Leadership Development

by Lucy Ball and Eve Poole

In this article on the future of leadership development, Eve Poole and Lucy Ball ask “What would genuinely leading-edge leadership development look like?” What if we designed development that took into account the best predictions about the future of leadership and everything we now know from neuroscience about how leaders learn? What if we ditched the dogma and started with the truth about modern leadership, and about what works when it comes to development? What if in just one article we could provide time-starved executives with all the information they needed to define their approach to next generation leadership development?

While in writing this article we have gone back to first principles as well as looking at the very latest research, we don't expect

you'll find that what we say is rocket science. In fact, it probably chimes with your existing experience of what really does and doesn't work. But we hope that this will give you the evidence base to back your hunches to help you develop a really fit-for-purpose approach.

## THE FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP

Our starting point is the future of leadership itself. As the complexity theorist Ralph Stacey says, ‘the future is unknowable...any widely held vision of the future must therefore be a delusion.’ That said, we see some clear themes emerging. Let's imagine the world for leaders in 2030.

First, **wisdom and resilience.**

By 2030, information will be even cheaper and quicker, but wisdom will be harder to come by. Even experience will date much

more quickly than it does now, so the emphasis on the quality of a leader's character will come back into fashion. It is not access to information, it is what you do with information that will make the difference in the future. So future leaders will need turbo-charged Google-brains, able to surf extraordinary amounts of data – management information, news, trends – and convert it to practical wisdom and decisions in the blink of an eye. Given the pace of change, the ability to stand back and make simple sense of complexity whilst holding one's nerve will be paramount. Like the Red Queen in Alice Through the Looking Glass, leaders will be running to stay in the same place and sprinting to lead the field. They won't be able to sustain this without an Olympic Gold ability to stay fit and healthy, mentally and physically, and extraordinary commitment to health and wellbeing, both for themselves and for those around them. The ability to slow down time in the midst of an action sequence – martial-arts film style – might also come in handy.

Second, **charm and global presence.**

While the cult of the charismatic leader may currently be out of vogue, the war for talent will mean

### Drunk in charge?

The Romans had a term for it: **mens sana in corpore sano** – a healthy mind in a healthy body. We have noticed that leaders are so busy tackling the intellectual challenges of their roles that many of them have neglected their ability to cope with the physical challenges of their roles. For example, at Ashridge we carried out a study about executive sleep habits. Given that sleep is vital not only for the physical repair of the body but also for the formation and consolidation of memory, poor sleep habits dramatically erode performance and the quality of decision-making over time. For instance, the Ashridge study found that managers spend fewer than seven hours asleep at night, and that this decreases with job seniority. This becomes an alarming statistic when you match this up with a long-day, no-lunch culture. Seventeen hours of sustained wakefulness has been shown to result in changes in behaviour equivalent to drinking two glasses of wine. In the UK such people would not be allowed to drive or operate machinery. So if you are not sleeping well, Ashridge's sleep expert Dr Vicki Culpin has this advice for you. Try to avoid alcohol, caffeine, heavy, spicy or sugary foods 4-6 hours before bedtime, and exercise regularly but not directly before you go to sleep. Keep your bedroom well ventilated, temperate, dark and quiet. Reserve it for sleeping, and try a light snack like a banana or warm milk before turning in. And our own favourite piece of advice about insomnia: just try to keep your eyes open.



that leaders in 2030 will need to be highly charismatic, to attract flighty global talent of the Generation Y variety. Evidence suggests that the new followers are loyal to their personal vocation and only to an organisation while its goals align with their own. This is easier for leaders in values or mission-based organisations than for those leaders who must make a profit motive emotionally engaging. As more industries migrate up the value curve and more work is automated, technical skills will be less distinctive than beautiful manners and skilful conversation, at ease in a variety of global settings and through diverse media. Leaders already need to be good at reading cultures locally and globally, and adjusting their style, messages and business models to suit. As the world shrinks, so future leaders need to get extremely comfortable with virtual tools. While regulation and legislation may standardise globally, local operating conditions will still vary enormously as communities get more particular in the face of growing global homogenisation. Future leaders will have to be manifestly better global citizens and at ease with 24/7 transparency. Data will be better, so their performance will be more exactly managed, communicated and rewarded/punished. Character and the virtues will be of more importance than current transaction-based analysis, tested by the use of story on the international, socially networked grapevine.

### Third, **leadership from in front, behind and throughout.**

We agree with the growing consensus that the era of the 'great man' leader is over and that leadership as a process at

all levels in an organisation or within and through a system is the future. The power of a single, authentic, compelling voice with a clear vision is not to be underestimated but where and when that voice rises up is no longer a question of position or grade or title. That a positional or 'official' leader's job is increasingly to facilitate leadership at all levels is beyond doubt – agility, innovation, emergent strategy all seem impossible without this. The notion that leadership development professionals are no longer there to develop individual leaders but to support systems in which leadership emerges is a huge shift and very exciting.

## THE FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

**G**iven this view of the future, and our past experience, we hold a number of tenets about leadership development.

### **1 Relating is still the primary skillset**

You are not leading if no one is following you. The interpersonal skills that leaders need to attract and retain followers and to develop leadership in others remains primary. And our view of the future suggests that authentic charm and flexibility in interpersonal style as well as a belief in the power and potential of others are key to this. We advocate live, direct and honest feedback within teams as the purest route to this self-awareness. Does a leader encourage, embolden, inspire peers, stakeholders and followers? Let the answer to this come from the horse's mouth. The art and practice of feedback must be an essential part of any development intervention. In a group development setting such as a programme, every participant needs to be able to hold the mirror up in a timely way to their peers, and facilitators must feel safe enough to

risk a bad happy sheet in favour of a difficult conversation. All of this, however, lacks teeth if there is no motivation to lead.

### **2 Leadership starts with a choice**

The act of leading means that the leader has already taken the initiative and stepped out, such that there is someone to follow, going somewhere. Sometimes, we hear leaders describe this less as a choice and more as a calling or a moment of inspiration – the idea found me not the other way round. However that moment occurs, leadership starts as mental activity, the act of deciding to do something, before it becomes an interpersonal one in implementation. While leadership development has increasingly focused on the primary interpersonal skillset, the prior mental skillset has tended to be covered by 'strategy' and not much else. The future of leadership suggests that a stronger link needs to be forged between business strategy – where are we going? and personal mission – where am I going?

### **3 Leaders must be extraordinary learners**

Following in the footsteps of Phil Hodgson, Ralph Stacey and others, we believe that leaders can only future-proof themselves by becoming extraordinary learners. The world is changing so quickly and is so complex that only those leaders with brilliant mental agility will be able to navigate the unknown without feeling panicky or physically exhausted by constant newness. And mental agility needs to be firmly supported by emotional stability, physical stamina and the self-confidence to be resourceful in new situations. Leadership development needs to shift its focus upstream, from providing tools that may become quickly outmoded to helping leaders learn to feel confident about inventing new tools in new situations. The more we

teach business school style tools and models, the more we communicate our lack of confidence in the ingenuity of tomorrow's leaders and perpetuate old paradigms. Tools need to know their place as useful transitional objects, not golden bullets.

## HOW DO LEADERS REALLY LEARN?

**W**e can't accurately predict the future of leadership but we do have plenty of data that we can draw upon to answer the question: *What are the conditions under which leaders best learn?*

### 1 Gripping relevance

The first thing we need to get clear about learning is why leaders learn. In terms of evolutionary biology, it is logical to assume that learning and the memory of it enhances our ability to survive and thrive. So it's also logical to suppose that we will always find it easier to learn and remember things that we know will be useful to us in future. In school, we can learn lists of boring dates and formula because doing so helps us to ace our exams, even if we forget them all afterwards. As adults, and as busy leaders in particular, it is likely that anything that does not appear relevant or useful is immediately filtered out, in favour of things whose immediate application seems evident. We see this more and more in practice, as participants on leadership programmes challenge relevance before being willing to engage. This has major implications for leadership development: what would a leadership development programme look like that seemed *grippingly relevant* to a leader's future flourishing? How might leadership development professionals design motivation in? We are fascinated by the notion of self-directed leadership development that puts the ownership and

resources firmly with the learner. We love to hear how those inspirational leaders outside of corporations who have never had a line manager

#### Gripping relevance

*So what do leading companies do that's gripping? High potentials at M&G apply strategy tools to a real corporate issue, sponsored by the Board, so that the answers they come up with really matter. New Ambassadors in the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office end their development programme by practising the introductory speech they intend to make when they arrive at post. Senior Post Office executives learn about customer service by working on the counter, supervised by junior staff. Call centre managers at Sky learn about developing their people for better customer service just in time to lead high energy events for frontline staff. PepsiCo High Potentials events are heavily sponsored by and attended by the President and senior VPs – nothing seems more relevant to the ambitious leader than how they are seen in the eyes of the top banana. More and more organisations are choosing the critical moment of Leadership Transition to use a development intervention so that participants are highly sensitive to what they need to learn to be successful in their next post. Pre-qualifying participants for a programme is useful here – no more should leaders be able to bumble into leadership development without the fire in the belly they need to pay attention.*

or a learning and development department, construct their own mix of developmental experiences and developmental relationships. If your leaders could learn only by choosing who to spend their time with over the next year, who would they choose?

### 2 Going through the emotions

Most leadership development seems to assume that leadership is a very rational activity. Learning takes place in civilised surroundings, with the assumption that the learner will be in a similar state of physiological calm when they need to access their learning at work. But what we know is that leadership is often stressful, and human bodies behave differently under stress. While the field is moving so fast that things might have changed by the time you read this, the latest research suggests that there are stages in this process, as the body moves from calm, through challenge, to threat. In the challenge state the body optimises to meet the danger ('good stress'), while in the threat state the body gets ready for exit ('bad stress'), and cognitive functioning is sacrificed in favour of resources for retreat. The research suggests that the trigger moving a person from challenge to threat seems to be the extent to which they feel resourced to cope. This is exciting for two reasons. First, because it is crucial for our survival, our brains work best while we are in a challenge state. Second, 'feeling resourced' is a psychological phenomenon, so we might be able to fool ourselves into feeling more resourced by bolstering confidence, through simulation and practice, and by encouraging an optimistic frame. And provided we make time for recovery, we should be able to enter the challenge state and increasingly extend our ability to operate there over time. So we do leaders a disservice if leadership development programmes stay too calm and rational. It's about 'going through the emotions' of genuine challenge in a developmental setting, so that leaders have the chance to develop the muscle memory they need to face real life as a leader. At



Ashridge, we have tried to do this by developing The Leadership Experience, which takes leaders through a series of critical incidents so that when they encounter them for real, they seem familiar, and the leader knows that they are resourced to cope with them. At Ideas Unlimited our programmes have included many 'live challenges' that ask leaders to perform real tasks for real people, with real consequences. These may be work based challenges such as designing and delivering engagement events for staff who are being bussed in the next day or community-based challenges such as cleaning up a flood-damaged community in Prague or bringing solar panels to the Maasai.

### 3 Brain surgery

Mark Twain said that "a habit cannot be tossed out the window; it must be coaxed down the stairs a step at a time." But we're too busy to spend time changing minds in the hope that they change habits further down the line, we want to change your habits now, and your mind can catch up with you later. But we know from neuroscience that habit change is a physiological process in the brain which is

#### The 3Rs

Here are Eve's 3Rs for adult learning: **receptiveness, retention and retrieval.** First, **receptiveness.** We know that learning and memory are intertwined, and a memory cannot be formed unless the person involved is paying attention in the first place. Jet lag, introvert versus extravert energy, bio-rhythms, alcohol, poor sleep habits conspire to wear people out. Use of walk-and-talks, frequent breaks, water, changes in approach, use of the gym, and many other small practices can help maintain wakefulness so that leaders are in a position to learn. Next, **retention.** For a memory to transfer from short to long-term, it needs to be made meaningful. Because we already have established neural pathways in our brains, the quickest way to cement a memory is to link it to an existing one. Helping participants to take the time to make connections creates the necessary synaptic firing, and

the more this is reinforced, the stronger the memory becomes. And while many of us in leadership development think that it is our job to help learners by making concepts easy for participants to grasp, we may need to be less kind in future, as the learning needs to be chewed not swallowed whole if it is to be retained. For this reason dissent, argument, questioning and struggling are positive signs. Finally, **retrieval,** or the ability for a participant to use their learning when they need it. This is a mixture of skill and will. If they do not feel confident that they can apply the learning skilfully, they won't risk it, so they need to do all of their risky practising while they are in a safe and supervised environment with the opportunity for feedback and repetition. Will-power is rather complex, but building in discussion about hopes, fears, barriers and threats helps stiffen resolve to apply learning, as does coaching, action-learning and peer support.

difficult. Why? Because our brain is brilliant at "routinising" our behaviour and resists disruption to hard-wired behavioural habits. The 'teach and persuade' style of training, as any parent knows, tends to lead to resistance. On the other hand, self-

generated insight on the part of a learner in an 'experience and coach' style can cause a chemical change in the brain, opening up new neural pathways, which, if supported by sustained attention, can eventually become new habits. This is not new research, but it does seem worth repeating until the organisational world finally gets it. There are two key implications for leadership development here. One is that development experiences should be absolutely that: experiences. Another is that a coaching style is most likely to be successful to support the introduction of new habits, particularly supported by a level of coaching support that helps sustain these freshly formed and tender new neural pathways back in the workplace so that they are not beaten into retreat by business as usual.



## Aspects of an emotionally engaging development experience

### Innovation

*Something that seems new compared with previous development experiences, heightens emotional engagement and attention.*

### Purpose

*Compelling reasons to engage and join in that link organisational and personal values and goals.*

### Setting

*Environments that cause the professional mask to drop away but are also closely linked to the learning objectives.*

### Ideas Unlimited development programmes have taken place:

In art galleries and shipyards  
In nightclubs and theme parks  
Round the campfire in the African Bush  
On the deck of a ship and on the beach  
In university gymnasiums and kids' playgrounds  
In churches and community centres  
In holiday cottages, ramblers' hostels and retreat centres  
On the shopfloor or in marquees.

### Real Challenge

*Appropriately difficult and stressful challenges.*

### Real Support

*Personal coaching and support on tap.*

### Honest, Edgy Conversation

*Authentic, accomplished development professionals who are willing to engage in live and often difficult conversations with learners.*

## THE PERFECT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS

At the beginning of this piece we set ourselves an examination question. We asked “**What would genuinely leading-edge leadership development look like?**” Here are our criteria for worldclass design.

### What?

- Does it embolden leaders to choose leadership?
- Does it build ‘flexible charisma’?
- Does it build learning muscles and stamina?

### How?

- Is it grippingly relevant?
- Does it go through the emotions – is it a genuine life experience moving through appropriate phases of calm, challenge and stress?
- Is it supportive of real habit change back in the real world?

### Applied Leadership Development

We are starting to design our programmes according to these criteria with some willing clients. And we are finding relationships between them. Each criterion builds on the others. Highlighting a leader's choice to lead connects to their motivation both to lead and to learn. A genuine emotion-engaging experience is more likely to lead to the mini physiological explosions in the brain needed to kick start habit change. Direct feedback about how a leader relates to others in the moment is more likely to motivate genuine shifts in interpersonal behaviour as the impact on others is no longer ignorable.

It seems to us that the era of Executive Development is giving way to the era of Applied Leadership Development. We favour interventions that:

- Are tailor made for an organisation's context
- Are linked strongly to live and real work
- Involve up close and personal coaching by psychologically aware professionals
- Build relational skills through practice and feedback
- Build confidence, resourcefulness and self belief
  
- Pay attention to and coach the performance of teams and systems not just individuals.

### Implications of our criteria for organisations and development professionals

No article can answer all questions and cover all possibilities and in many ways the hours we have spent writing, researching and talking about this subject has created more questions. Some that we are left with are as follows:

- How many organisations will be brave enough to start with a blank sheet of paper and design their leadership development interventions for genuine behaviour change in their own context?
- How willing are we to address the integrated person at work – body, mind, soul, family, values, dreams as opposed to staying in the safer territory of skills, competencies and career ladders?
- How does leadership development become genuinely more boundary-less both within organisations and across

organisations?

- How far can organisations really take self-directed leadership development?
- How creative can we be about learning on real work – not just on projects half-heartedly created by the CEO for the sake

of a programme?

- Are leadership development professionals brave enough to go with their hunches, challenge convention, and design the new world of leadership development with gusto?

We welcome your thoughts:

[lucy@ideasunlimited.com](mailto:lucy@ideasunlimited.com)

## WORLD CLASS DESIGN

### What

Does it embolden leaders to choose leadership?

Does it build 'flexible charisma'?

Does it build learning muscles and stamina?

### How

Is it grippingly relevant?

Does it go through the emotions?

Does it support habit change?



*Eve Poole is an Associate of Ashridge Business School, following earlier careers with the Church of England and Deloitte Consulting. She has a BA,*

*MBA and a PhD, and teaches leadership to clients in the private, public and voluntary sectors. Her passion is how leaders learn, and she was the architect of The Ashridge Leadership Experience, a brain-friendly simulation designed to accelerate the development of future leaders. Eve has written two books: Ethical Leadership (with Carla Millar), and The Church on Capitalism (both Palgrave, 2010). Eve keeps a blog at : <http://evepoole.livejournal.com>*



*Lucy Ball is Director at Ideas Unlimited, a Leadership and Organisation Development company which has been designing and delivering innovative and engaging development programmes for*

*12 years with clients such as PepsiCo, Unilever, BSkyB, Royal Bank of Scotland and Npower. Lucy's background is in change management at Beaufort and Deloitte Consulting, after a brief dalliance with the world of industrial relations in the motor industry. She is passionate about designing development programmes that are live, emotional and engaging experiences. You can find out more at :*

*[www.ideasunlimited.com](http://www.ideasunlimited.com)*