



CRF COMMUNITY EVENT

TALENT, LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING

At a Zoom Roundtable on 3rd August, CRF's Talent, Leadership and Learning Community came together to discuss their recent experiences with leadership development diagnostics and training.

This summary shares some of the key insights from the discussion.



OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUES

CRF's Managing Director Richard Hargreaves and Research Director Gillian Pillans launched the discussion by reviewing the issues.

First, what is CRF hearing from the Community and why should we be talking about leadership development now? Several key themes emerged:

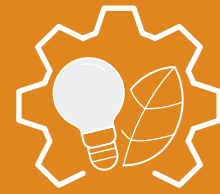
- The urgency of the pandemic meant that many leadership development programmes were put aside, to create space to deal with new challenges, but there is renewed demand for it.
- Leaders are increasingly keen to make connections and to experience closer collaboration as part of their development journey.
- That said, there needs to be a keen focus on psychological safety among those planning and delivering these schemes, to ensure that they are actually effective.

In summary, leaders want development, and it could have a huge impact on business performance, but without clear standards of practice and assessment it can be difficult for organisations to know whether their efforts are paying off.

WHAT ARE SOME RECENT INNOVATIONS IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT TRAINING?

- Only 2 out of 26 attendees indicated that they had a 'core leadership curriculum in place which addresses a progression through the leadership layers', suggesting that organisations are taking a less structured approach now than they might have five years ago.
- Yet, conversely, many organisations seem keen to rebuild a similarly structured programme, which suggests that interim priorities – like the pandemic, war in Ukraine, and inflation – have required immediate focus, but that interest in leadership development generally persists.

- Some participants felt that their leaders had "grown organically, very successfully, [even when] they haven't had the benefit of a formal structured L&D programme", but others were using this time to re-introduce that structure. Each attendee offered a slightly different version of how that would be structured: for some, it would follow a general pattern of 'Introduction to Management Experience, training for Manager[s], and then Senior Executive Development', while another outlined a 'Leading Self, Leading People, Leading the Business' format, and yet another suggested a more conceptual 'Leading Change' initial course before moving towards specific training for different levels.
- The lifting of COVID-related restrictions, as well as the increasing accessibility of new technologies, means there are more opportunities for development innovations than ever before. Several participants explored the ways that their organisations, or consultants or partners they have worked with, have used new external environments to develop and test new leadership skills. These 'immersive experiences', where groups of leaders are transplanted into unfamiliar environments, can be used as a way to encourage people to think more broadly about their leadership capacity and understanding of key behaviours.
 - » As a general prompt for these kinds of experiences, one participant asked the group: "where else in society could you take your leaders?"
 - » One participant described "a big conference where we brought together our top 400 leaders in the organisation" three years ago: "we spent a day diving into the topic of talent [and] our business strategy. We'd really like to emulate that again in the first half of next year...so they can really assess the importance of culture and building our strategy and their role in delivering the culture...it will be a key launchpad."
 - » CRF's Richard Hargreaves contributed his experience using a VR system at IMD Business School in Lausanne, exploring "the challenges that people are having in new teams: forming relationships, solving problems together in an unusual environment... we reflected a lot on how the learning comes from [discussion] and reflect[ing] on the [experience], it's not [just from] the experience of using the VR tool at the time."



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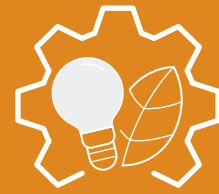
- » Another participant shared their experiences using 'learning expeditions', where employees physically visit other industry partners' sites, which have allowed them to "connect with [staff at other] companies and we allow people just to increase the network and learn from it."
- One of the attendees explained how their company has been working with an external consultant, Complete Coherence, who uses a 'scientific, data-driven approach', which encompasses elements of physiology, psychology, beliefs, mindset, and behaviours, and how they affect leadership performance. This has helped them to bring together leadership performance/effectiveness and development, and to offer individual leaders greater ownership of their journey.
- » That participant also outlined one of the most innovative tasks that the consultant set for their leaders, which was asking the group "to construct a charter that actually expressed in their own words, what they believe would be reasonable to expect from them as senior leaders, and what they would need from the experts to be able to show up in that way."

- » One participant explained how they knew that their immersion programme had helped a client company's leaders: "We did it with an executive programme, and [the leaders] would go in small groups into different companies that we thought were operating in a way that they can learn from...You're physically visiting another company, so you're on their premises, you're meeting some of their people in person and having a fairly informal but nicely facilitated discussion about how they get stuff done...It does a good job of making sure there's a really good fit between the client company and the company they're visiting. It's amazingly educational, particularly the discussion that happens afterwards when the people who are being developed reflect on what they learned from that experience and...it helps the client company realise what they're doing right, [and] what they can do to develop as well."
- One participant discussed their Employee Value Proposition (EVP) in relation to assessing the efficacy of leadership development – when leaders are responsible for "bringing the EVP to life", then their success is determined by how well the business translates that EVP into leader expectations. At the end of the day, they explained, "it's all about how [our] leaders develop our culture."
- » The participant also suggested that "the next challenge that comes up [is] how do we embed [expectations] into people processes, whether it's the way we develop, but also identify recruits, promote and so on."
- One participant suggested that retention can be an undervalued but significant indicator of leader development success: "we have four foundational factors [of leadership] that we don't expect to necessarily attract people into the business, but people might leave if [they] don't see them working well."



HOW CAN THE EFFICACY OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT BE TESTED?

- A couple of participants suggested that they are using testing (*a recognised agility routine*) to work out which programmes, or elements of programmes, are the most effective: "there's a lot of piloting, experimentation; we're starting small. We're not going for every single leader [every time]."
- Part of the challenge is establishing the difference between an ineffective programme and a non-committal training group. One participant explained that, for many of their leaders to progress, "they've got to have the time and commitment to actually want to develop themselves."
- Evaluating the efficacy of leadership development is especially important when using new methodologies, tasks, or styles of training. When using 'immersive experiences' discussed in the previous section, assessing the actual impact they have is crucial – "they have to have been impactful and not just gimmicky or something different...what you're looking for is the shift in behaviour as a consequence."



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WHAT IMPACT HAS THE PANDEMIC HAD ON LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT?

- Initially, the pandemic slowed all things leadership down, as companies pivoted towards the more urgent concerns of health and safety and remote working infrastructure. Now, as businesses adjust to life alongside COVID-19, a greater 'thirst for leadership development' is emerging.
- For some, the pandemic has brought some silver linings: in particular, the ubiquity of video conferencing and online collaboration has made it much quicker and easier to assemble nationally and internationally dispersed teams.
- At the same time, some participants acknowledged, "the breadth of network [and] community amongst newly appointed senior leaders is really lacking." This was said to be particularly true of those working at senior levels in global companies, who haven't had the same opportunities to travel and network in recent years, so some development is being focused on "those that would benefit from developing an international network."
- For several participants, hybrid and remote working had made global expansion quicker, which has had huge commercial benefits but has also stretched leaders' capacity for the practical delivery of strategy and maintenance of culture. One participant noted that "we need to make sure that we have an aligned and relatively consistent culture around the world... we're looking at leaders to develop and drive our culture so that we can deliver our strategy."
- One participant said that their company has begun offering a variety of options in response to the pandemic, including "senior mentoring, external mentoring, peer coaching, individual coaching", alongside the aforementioned "learning expeditions with the help of an external partner who is helping us to connect the key strategic capabilities required by the business with who else is doing that in the market, trying to close the gap between what we believe we know and what we don't know."
- One participant shared their goal for creating "inclusive leaders", especially at a time when hybrid working, and the barriers that that entails, have made inclusion an unavoidable concern for employers. In the participant's words: "there's real value in that kind of work – coming together and sharing and building those communities."

- However, one key message following the pandemic is that psychological safety is an irrefutably important aspect of any development scheme. In the words of one participant, "there are still base needs that are being played to, psychological needs that are playing out, and you have to give directors a safe space to explore some of the dynamics that are unique to them."



WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DIAGNOSTIC TOOLS IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT?

- Many participants described the use of diagnostic tools – including personality tests, strengths assessments, and other popular tools – as a way to initiate the process of leadership development and evaluate potential candidates.
 - » Hogan Assessments was reported as useful by a variety of attendees.
 - » Other participants described using external consultants, who either employ their own tests or existing ones like Hogan, to provide detailed diagnostics.
 - » Some participants also asked for expressions of interest from interested candidates, to ensure that people could demonstrate their commitment to the process.
- As well as providing the company with a picture of their workforce as potential leaders, diagnostics can also serve as a leadership development tool in their own right, in a number of ways:
 - » One participant suggested that diagnostic testing helped to make their people more aware of themselves and their place on their development journey: "we're trying to get different leaders at different levels to look upwards and to understand what's different, what [they] need to be successful in that next role [and] the diagnostic and the assessment is tied to that. [It starts a conversation about their] strengths in relation to upward movement or a broader role. What might be missing? Where's the strength? What are you leveraging? What might you focus your development on?"
 - » Another participant referred to the process of putting all leaders or leader candidates through a generic set of development programmes as 'sheep dipping', suggesting that learning needs to be tailored.



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In other words, “how do we create a more individual plan and individual feeling around the development?” Diagnostic testing can help to ensure that candidates are being given personalised recommendations and support.

- » According to one participant, even a simple diagnostic process can help to anticipate issues like executive derailment, helping the company to make more informed people investments. That way, “you don’t just treat assessment as a gateway into the process, [but] you use the data throughout the leadership programme.”
- » Interestingly, another participant observed that, for some clients and candidates, “there’s no appetite” for a full-blown diagnostic test and that they can be time-consuming or overly complex.
- One participant, representing a media business, suggested that the ‘talent challenge’ of building leader retention is a key concern alongside inflation and material costs. So, “a few months ago”, they began a series of diagnostic tests with all of their leaders, “developing a greater understanding of all the different parts of our business.” They then used that data to formulate some ideas about “how to lead change, create a culture of high performance and then identify strategic growth and innovation opportunities and insights into things that will be particularly disruptive to the media sector; like AI, for instance.” They are now working with an external partner, using Hogan as the main psychometric, to determine the sequencing of their module content.

HOW SHOULD DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES VARY BETWEEN DIFFERENT LEADERSHIP LEVELS?

- For several participants, the question of leadership development is just one piece of the bigger puzzle around talent management, alongside issues like succession planning and planning for future roles. As described by one participant, “how we build [...] the talent pipeline...it’s [about] identifying the right population. There’s chicken and egg in terms of building the role profiles for the future of the business and then working out which of our partners will be appropriate.”
- By starting at lower levels in the organisation, even with a simple career development conversation, some companies are hoping to make their employees more aware of their potential future path.

“[With] career development conversations [and] access to external coaching [and] strength profiling [early on], when we then have the more detailed discussions with them around succession planning, they’re already in a state where they’ve got some self-awareness of where their strengths and weaknesses are and where they might need to build on those.”

- One participant, from a major global partnership, described their highest-level programme – for leaders who represent the company at events like the World Economic Forum in Davos – as an opportunity for leaders to ask and answer some of the bigger questions about their role in the company and to the industry more generally.
 - » These questions included: “what’s your place in society? What’s your bigger contribution? How will we have a positive relationship with our regulators? How are you making strategic decisions?”
- One participant indicated that they’ve had success in delivering leadership development packages with general staff and with C-suite executives, but that “the middle manager piece...[is] a huge gap for us at the moment.”
 - » They explained that “people just didn’t have time to do [the development] stuff, because they have busy day jobs...We’ll make sure that we’ve got time baked in to do [it], rather than just have it as [an] extra additional project to do alongside your day job.”

FURTHER READING

CRF. 2015. **Organisation Agility. Research Report.** <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/1655-2>

CRF. 2022. **Making a Paradigm Shift in Leadership Development.** <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/post-meeting-notes-making-a-paradigm-shift-in-leadership-development>

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5th September

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