Virtual Leadership Development

Best Practices, Tools and Methods

A Dale Carnegie® White Paper

Organizations regularly rate leadership development as a top training priority. Top executives see a direct link between leadership capabilities and an organization’s competitive advantage.

In recent years many have found it necessary to postpone or compromise leadership development efforts. Leaders face logistical challenges associated with a geographically dispersed workforce and are often unable to leave or send others from the office for extended periods of time to attend training. A lack-luster economy and more scrutiny on budgets and accountability add to the challenge. Leaders need a new level of resilience.

Respected global leaders recently interviewed by McKinsey’s research team offer organizations insights into what it will take to be an effective leader in the digital age—an age of uncertainty.* Leaders will need to:

- **See with both a microscope and a telescope** – rapid changes in the business climate will require resilient leaders to look at both long-term opportunities as well as the complex issues of the moment and their associated short-term impacts.
- **Compete as tri-sector athletes** – that is, be flexible to collaborate and partner with private, public and social sectors equally. Isolation in one sector, once the norm, will now have negative consequences on an organization’s bottom line.
- **Stay grounded during a crisis** – physical and emotional demands on leaders loom larger than ever. Resilient leaders will need to excel during times of chaos, and effectively create “reserve energy” for critically important decision making tasks.

Each of these present new challenges for organizations that need leadership development solutions.

Forward thinking executives need effective alternatives...and fast! They are aware of the economic constraints and need capable leaders today, not six months from now, as well as a means to satisfy obligations to all of their constituents and customers. They are looking for better ways to develop leaders anywhere, virtually any time, without the associated travel, or site rental costs.
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Virtual Leadership Development as a Solution

Virtual leadership development is an efficient, effective and many times preferred method for developing specific leadership competencies. Managers attend short, convenient sessions usually lasting between 90 minutes and three hours enabling them to apply what they learn right away and avoid leaving the office.

Synchronous sessions are live, web-based, and facilitated by an experienced leadership development coach. Leaders log in through a URL link from anywhere in the world at a designated time and can instantly collaborate with peers. Leaders report that they find collaboration during these sessions to be powerful in strengthening relationships and expanding their ability to influence. Multiple session programs provide ample time for leaders to reflect, take action and receive coaching from instructors as they apply new concepts at work during the space between virtual sessions.

Asynchronous activities such as self-paced courses or dialogue on social networking or learning sites allow leaders to learn on their own (self-paced), or interact with colleagues on specific projects or course assignments. Leaders, and their coach or instructor create a cohort “network” as a place to share insights, questions and progress toward their development goals.

The Smart Virtual Choice: A Blended Approach

An effective leadership development strategy uses a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous development activities. When it comes to virtual choices the options are endless! A blended approach combines the best live online sessions, face-to-face instruction, projects and/or application assignments, and cohort collaboration activities to engage every leader where he or she is currently in the development cycle.

Research conducted by the Aberdeen Group* suggests that leading organizations favor a “new blend” to ensure leaders take advantage of all of the tools available to them for a well-rounded learning experience. The study points to these tools in particular:

1. Synchronous online training – 66%
2. Online learning portals – 63%
3. Off-the-shelf learning content – 52%
4. Learning management systems – 50%
5. Learning content development services – 46%
6. Virtual classroom technology – 39%
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Best Practices

Based on our experience and some of the leading authorities in the industry, there are several key practices at the top of the list when it comes to designing and delivering a virtual leadership development program that will yield the results you expect. Carefully consider these components.

Conduct and Interpret Assessments

To determine the baseline leadership competencies in an organization, many assessment tools can be administered online. Select the right mix of tools that fit for your organization and the goals you want to achieve regarding leadership. Use a 360-degree leadership evaluation, customer survey, employee survey, personality inventory or other tool to help individual managers become more aware of their natural strengths, potentially derailing behaviors, and development opportunities.

There is value to the organization in completing a comparative analysis of individual leader assessments. A culture is defined by its leadership strengths and development areas. Assessments provide a solid foundation for and the clues to designing other leadership development program elements. A comparative analysis of leadership gaps enables the organization to leverage specific virtual learning activities that are critical to leader and organizational success.

Individual Leadership Development Plans

Written leadership development plans identify common skill strengths and skill gaps among leaders across the organization. Require your leaders to create an Individual Development Plan (IDP). This facilitates discussion and decision making so that appropriate development activities can be leveraged, regardless of where leaders are located.

Individual Development Plans can be easily updated electronically, managed through an LMS or intranet. Peers can discuss and refine potential development activities as part of a virtual session. Development activities should include a blend of on-the-job activities, coaching, collaboration and education.

Purpose-driven Design Elements

There are limitless options here and you may have a broad variety of modules to choose from. Look for modules that map, or show a clear link to the leadership skills you are trying to enhance. For example, combine several two- or three-hour virtual sessions that target specific skills for leaders that have an immediate need or challenging issue.

Based on assessment results and cost parameters, identify which elements of your leadership program would be best suited for virtual delivery, and which if any should be delivered live in person.

Essential virtual leadership
development components:

- Conduct Assessments
- Individual Development Plans
- Purposeful Design Elements
- Timing for Impact
- Connect to Business Reality
- Measure Impact
- Find the Right Supplier
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Timing for Maximum Impact
Timing seems like a small point but it can cause either powerfully positive or disastrous results. When sessions are held as close as possible to when managers need them most, the organization yields its greatest ROI. In planning, consider: time-spaced sessions, time in role, and transition time.

Time-spaced: Virtual learning allows organizations to schedule leadership development sessions one to four weeks apart. In this way participants get to apply what they learn, practice new skills at work (not in a simulated environment) and receive coaching and feedback during the “space.” When they attend the next learning event, the application and new skills are reinforced. Live online sessions provide the flexibility of planning and scheduling to meet business demands.

Time in Role or Assignment: The development activities that you select will likely differ based on the time a leader has been in his or her current role. At times there may be benefit for junior and more senior leaders to attend together. Are you expecting leaders to perform a more entry-level or advanced leadership skill? Weigh these options in your design.

Time in Transition: Whether a leader is transitioning to a new role, or the organization itself is in transition virtual training can help accelerate effectiveness by acclimating leaders to the necessary changes throughout the change process. Cohort groups can explore organizational issues and new methods of thinking, policy development, and decision making that will be required to successfully move forward.

Connect it to Business Reality
Leadership development programs fail for many reasons. One is that the activities or learning experiences were not representative enough of the real issues faced by an organization.

As Gina Hernez-Broom and Richard Hughes from the Center for Creative Leadership suggest, leadership development should “provide people opportunities to learn from their work rather than take them away from their work to learn.”

Use stretch assignments or capstone projects throughout the program that represent likely issues your leader will face in the real world. These will tie individual goals and group development goals to those of the organization. Participants can work with their managers to complete assignments that require the synthesis of newly acquired skills. For example, ask leaders to apply new ideas and concepts from training to streamline a process, or increase sales in their division. Have participants select a key performance indicator in the business that they can positively impact.

Rotational assignments can serve as stretch assignments for even seasoned leaders to gain well-rounded business experience handling functionally-specific issues they might not normally consider. Virtual “cohort collaboration sessions” facilitated by an experienced leadership coach make these
application assignments much easier to complete. Participants report that these sessions enhance relationships beyond the immediate team, to customers and other partners who are interested in the organization’s success.

A reoccurring theme among developing leaders is their desire to gain exposure to an organization’s senior executives. By having leaders complete a stretch assignment that includes making a recommendation or demonstrating process improvement results to senior staff, leaders build confidence and the ability to influence others at any level.

**Measure the Impact**

Use the organization’s key performance indicators (KPIs) in conjunction with training and development activities. Take a baseline assessment before conducting any leadership-related training. By using important business metrics such as increased revenue, decreased costs, increased client retention or decreased employee turnover, the organization can observe changes in ROI that are directly related to leadership development efforts.

**Find the Right Supplier**

When exploring virtual training suppliers, look for experience and accreditation to minimize the risks that come from courses that may over-promise and under-deliver. A company with a history of certifying trainers to a consistent performance standard and that has been recognized by accrediting or quality organizations for design and delivery are your safest options.

Investigate whether or not the supplier offers public leadership training delivered entirely through a virtual platform. Expect and ask for a sample. Know just how much flexibility there is in program offerings and schedules before you choose.

**Conclusions**

Organizations in the digital age need a high level of consistency when it comes to leadership performance and resilience. The challenge is to balance the need to build consistency with the reality that it takes time and resources for leaders to develop the essential skills that prepare the organization for the future.

Virtual Leadership Development proves a credible alternative to other types of leadership training. It can accelerate the process of building consistent performance in leaders. Individuals and organizations benefit. Opportunities for true collaboration are no longer restricted to face-to-face encounters. By using a blended approach, purposely crafted design elements, and ongoing coaching and support systems, leaders can become more resilient. They can conveniently enhance skills from their home or office. They can cultivate a stronger support network of influential colleagues and most importantly focus on the essentials of running and growing their businesses.
References

In the Milieu of Human Relations Management, Blended Learning is becoming more blended and Recruiting is becoming more “Social.” HR & Talent Technology Trends 2012, Elearning! Magazine, 8/06/2012.

