10 Pillars of an Effective Leadership Development Program

Effective Leadership Development in the Digital Era

Digital transformation. Remote work. Pandemic challenges. The role of leadership has drastically changed as businesses adapt to new ways of working during the COVID-19 era.

Leadership development is top of mind for businesses as they implement new digital capabilities and strategies that accelerate transformation and introduce new tools that assist employees in their remote work transitions.

Amidst this rapid change, businesses are navigating new challenges, whether that's addressing the mental health impact of isolation or trying to meet the varying needs of employees to reduce turnover rates in **an era defined as "The Great Resignation."**

With all of this happening, business leaders must try to establish a connection between the people, processes, and technology that keep all these components in working order. To make this happen, organizations are reshaping company culture and reengaging with everyone in the workforce **in a way that's meaningful and inspiring for employees, enhances flexibility, and improves trust.**

> According to research, companies with a strong sense of purpose outperform other businesses. Employees are also more productive, loyal, and less likely to leave and seek new opportunities with other employers.
>
> *Source: McKinsey & Company*

A structured and effective leadership development program gives people across your organization the tools, knowledge, and human-centered skills they need to thrive and overcome the challenges of the digital era and the pandemic.

At the same time, leadership will be equipped with the abilities that help them orchestrate complex business connections between people and technology, embrace a mindset of change that's necessary to keep up with the speed of the digital world, and be conscious of the way their interactions impact the workplace.

#1: Defining Company Goals

The first step in building an effective leadership development program is to define your plan and determine your company goals. Every organization has its own unique priorities, but there is one thing in common: your objectives should target a culture-wide approach to leadership development.
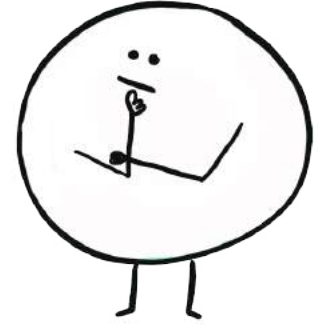
Some common goals include:

- Improving productivity for remote and hybrid remote work scenarios.

- Enhancing employee engagement strategies, such as to improve employee retention, communication, and collaboration.

- Simplifying human resources, to keep HR teams focused on driving and facilitating purpose, value, and culture for future-facing organizations, like recruitment, development, and succession planning.

- Developing a data- and technology-driven culture of learning.

- Promoting and driving diversity and inclusivity for new prospective talent.

Once your goals are defined, your company can delve deeper into the processes and capabilities that are required to achieve these goals.
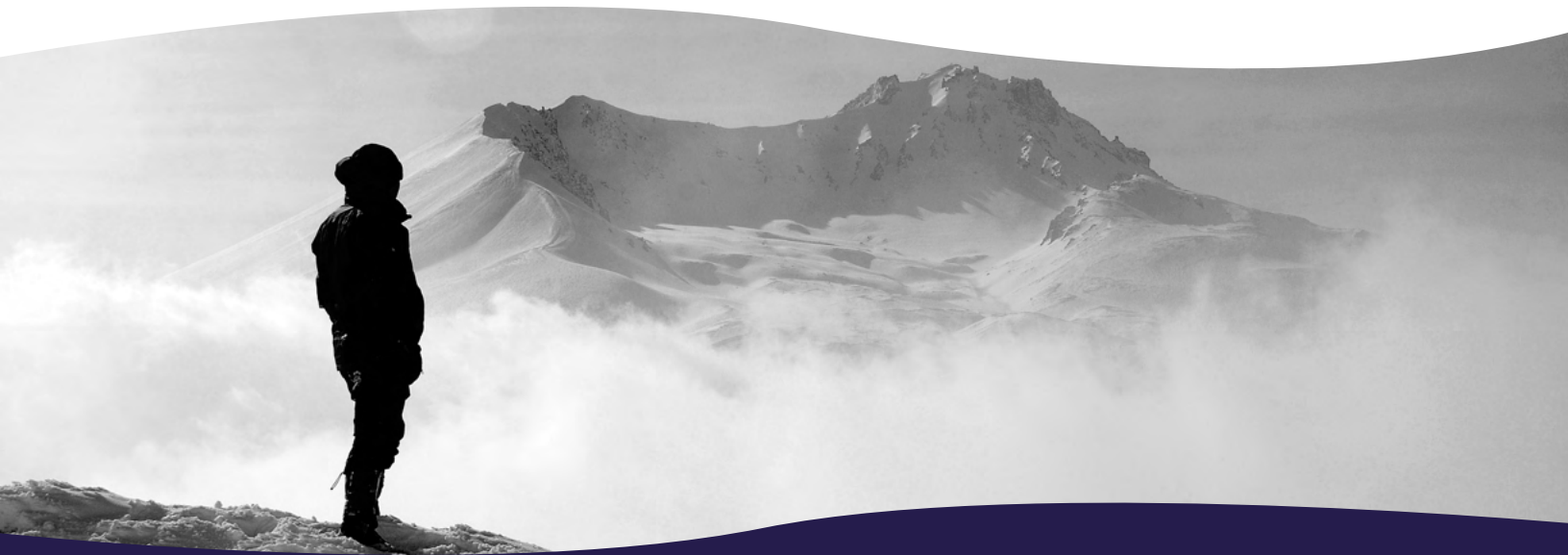
#2: Executive Buy-In

Your leadership development program is going to impact the entire organization. But it starts with executive leadership, as they are responsible for engaging with stakeholders, management, departments, and teams to reinforce the value of your leadership program.

Executive leadership needs to communicate the purpose of your leadership development program to people across the organization who have different responsibilities, perspectives, and skills.

For example, stakeholders and executive management can determine how to implement and define your company's leadership goals in relation to its impact on larger business objectives:

- How will leadership goals impact consumers?
- How will leadership goals reduce costs?
- Will leadership goals improve supply chain challenges?
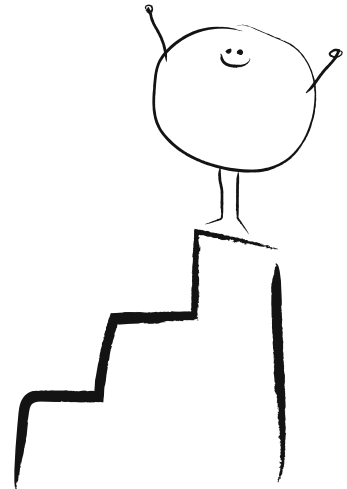
Modern leadership is becoming increasingly complex. An effective leadership development program considers the business and technology connections and inner workings of the entire organization. It's integral that executives think about discussing how their leadership development program impacts the entire workforce and business.

Bridging the Gap: Leadership Development and Departmental Objectives

Engaging with stakeholders is only one part of communicating the value of your leadership development program. How do executives discuss the value of leadership development to IT departments, for example?

Business leaders in this instance will need to determine how improving leadership will enhance technology-based outcomes, building and bridging a necessary connection between business and IT teams to support business goals and deliver value.

#3: Multiple Ways to Learn

Most modern learners prefer a combination of learning content types to help them retain information and enjoy the learning experience. An effective leadership development program provides activities that are relevant to a modern workplace and fit the unique individual learning needs of different people.

As we are online more than ever before, your people are used to consuming a variety of content. This may include video, audio, case studies, reflection prompts, text, or interactive quizzes.

But today's workforce is busy. Employees have to do their jobs while learning to adapt to new ways of working, including using new technologies that help assist them in their remote work. On top of it all, the pandemic has led to further challenges, where people might also be caretakers for their family members, or teachers for the kids at home while trying to balance their work life with their responsibilities at home.

Your people may not have the time or motivation to look for useful leadership development content themselves. **That's why it's important to use microlearning activities as part of your leadership development program.** These can be completed in minutes, so learners can consume the content they want on their own schedule. Microlearning supports the needs of the modern workforce because learners have the flexibility to make progress over time.

> 29% of organizations are investing in microlearning via personalized management systems and content libraries for their employees. Also, more than 60% of organizations saw the adoption of existing learning platforms increase more than 1.2x after COVID-19.
>
> *Source: Deloitte*

Organizations are taking the leap to invest in new learning opportunities for employees that fit within their busy schedules. Traditional biannual leadership sessions might reinforce company-wide leadership expectations and align manager priorities, but organizations really need to go one step further to engage people with new tools and strategies that help them learn on a regular schedule, reflect on their experience, and take action. This is what it takes to change employee behaviors, by giving them a safe place to learn, grow, practice, and reflect.

#4: Manager and Team Involvment

Manager responsibilities have changed since the pandemic. The emphasis is on building new leadership skills that help them to better listen and communicate, especially in an age of remote work.

LET'S PUT THINGS INTO PERSPECTIVE
Bad working relationships between management and employees cost the economy $360 billion each year from productivity loss. Managers have to adapt and drive value through new leadership styles.

Source: Online MBA

Managers are discovering that they can't use transactional leadership styles when engaging with employees remotely. They have to move from a process and resource-focused leading style to one that is transformational, inspires change, and fosters communication and collaboration.

People working remotely need to establish a connection to their organization, leadership, and other team members, and a transformational leadership style makes people feel connected to the business.

Successful organizations work together with people to create motivating, authentic, and personalized experiences that enhance individuals and teams, and management plays a critical role in forming the employee experience.

Organizations need to support the evolution of management and help strengthen the capabilities that help management effectively target improving the employee experience.

This includes providing them with the coaching and technology they need to measure and understand that experience. This includes team-based learning, establishing a learning community, and creating a formal plan that aligns with business goals via human-centered skills.

#5: Defining Goals for Individuals

To make a leadership development program stick, organizations should develop a framework that helps leaders understand their learning goals, the direction they should take, and how it connects to their individual career path and growth.

People who have specific plans for their future behavior are 2 to 3 times more likely to achieve their goals. This type of behavior creates and reinforces habits and routines that help individuals achieve outcomes.

People need opportunities to learn and grow. In order to form the habits that it takes to succeed, people need to make the right choices. On-demand learning prompts people to develop learning strategies that help them make the right choices. This could be by using visual cues or eliminating options that narrow down their focus and drive their attention on specific learning material and goals.
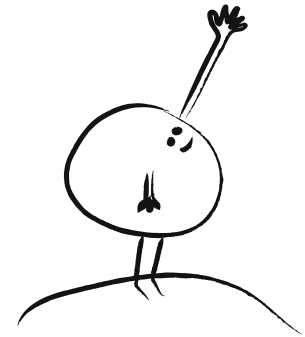
It's also integral to make goals manageable by setting minimum thresholds and measuring progress. For example, creating a content calendar that addresses company needs, using a spreadsheet, using an app, or pairing people in groups helps people stay on track and spend their time on what's most important.

But we get it. Job roles and activities vary greatly between individuals as they work in different teams and departments. It's important to think about how to assign leadership development activities that are specific to job roles and responsibilities.

Ultimately, if you have the right plan, the means and systems to learn, take small steps, and measure your progress, you can define and achieve your leadership development goals.

#6: Human Centered Leadership Development

Human-centered leadership helps leaders develop the mindsets and capabilities that enable them to put people first and build trust.
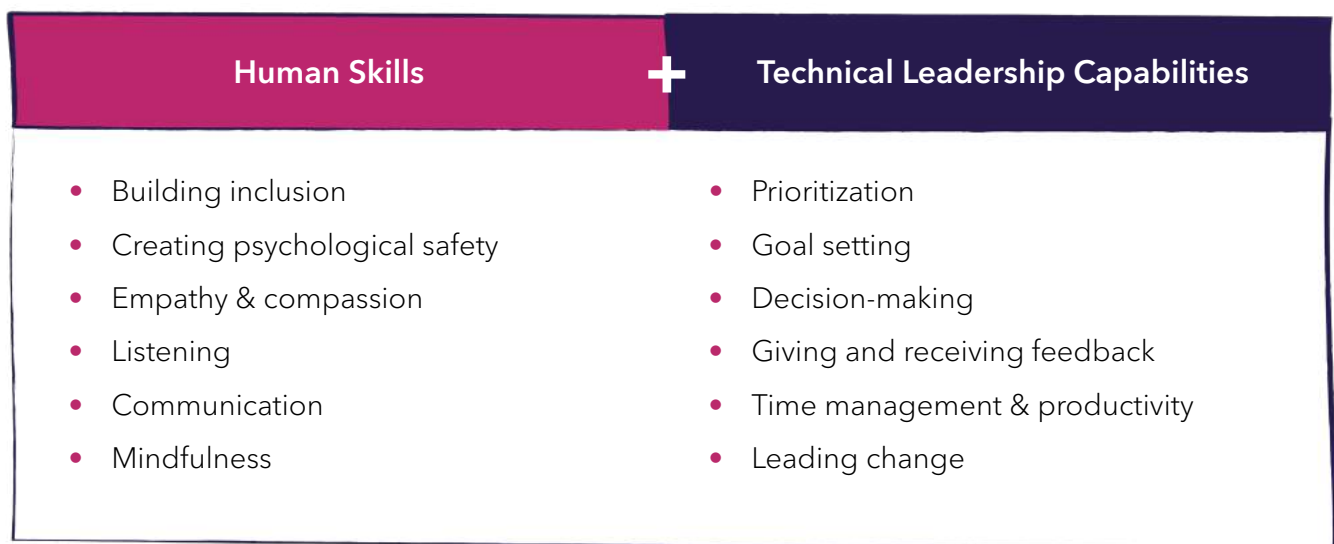
Becoming human-centered means that leaders need to learn how to give feedback, to demonstrate empathy in any situation, to manage stress with compassion, to improve emotional and social intelligence, and take care of others.
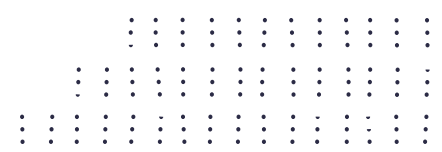
Also, a little self-awareness goes a long way in creating strong relationships, achieving higher performance, and becoming a more effective leader. Being aware of your feelings, emotions, and state of being helps leaders better understand the effect their feelings and behaviors have on others, which makes an impact on the organization at large.

This is why mindfulness practices improve people's ability to see clearly, helping them notice how their reactions are impacting their environment so that they can respond effectively to challenges, conflicts, or new work situations. Being mindful also impacts your ability to deal with stress.

Taking a human-centered approach to leadership development helps to catalyze change, helping people adapt to new ways of working and lead others through change. It enhances people's adaptability to change, so that people can learn to accept change and embrace a growth mindset.

Human-Centered Leadership Development

Human Skills	+	Technical Leadership Capabilities
• Building inclusion		• Prioritization
• Creating psychological safety		• Goal setting
• Empathy & compassion		• Decision-making
• Listening		• Giving and receiving feedback
• Communication		• Time management & productivity
• Mindfulness		• Leading change

#7: From Learning to Practice

Practice-based learning helps learners take action in the real world and reflect on their growth. Learners need a safe place to practice new leadership skills so they can better understand how to apply what they've learned in real world scenarios.

Leaders also need the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned and how it has impacted their daily work life and interactions within the company. That's how learning sticks.

A leadership development program ultimately encourages leaders to change or rethink their behaviors. This change requires leaders to reflect on their experiences. But people aren't always comfortable adapting their routine, behaviors, and learning to apply new skills in the real world.

That's why providing leaders with a safe space where their learning experience remains confidential can help improve leadership confidence and promote growth. Creating a learning environment that promotes psychological safety helps employees feel comfortable taking risks, without fear of negative consequences to their career.

Organizations can build and cultivate psychological safety by creating the right climate, promoting and reinforcing behaviors, and changing mindsets.

Leaders have the opportunity to learn in a place that encourages psychological safety; in turn, they can pass these important concepts down to their teams. This will create a positive team climate, which is one of the most integral drivers for psychological safety.

The Effect of Psychological Safety

Employees that feel comfortable asking for help, sharing suggestions informally, or challenging the status quo without fear of negative social consequences are more likely to innovate quickly, unlock the benefits of diversity, and adapt well to change.

#8: Diversity and Inclusion

Organizations are adopting business approaches to creating a long lasting, inclusive, and diverse cultural environment. Building this culture requires a systematic and bold approach to inclusion and leadership accountability.

> Studies show that hiring diverse talent isn't enough; organizations must positively shape the workforce experience so that people stay and thrive.
>
> *Soruce: McKinsey & Company*

Companies have to create environments that are defined by inclusive leadership, including equal and fair opportunities, and freedom from bias, discrimination, and microaggressions in the workplace. **In order to create a more diverse company, a leadership development program needs to:**

- Have a diverse range of talent
- Strengthen leadership accountability
- Enable equal opportunity through fairness and transparency
- Foster belonging
- Provide educational opportunities to see what inclusion and belonging looks like in the workplace

Developing an effective leadership program puts leaders at the center of the effort to enhance diversity and inclusivity across the organization. Regular revisiting of what inclusivity and belonging looks like helps employees assess how they are living up to these standards and supporting team members in any way possible.

Leaders have the responsibility to shape a workforce community that connects people and makes a commitment to establishing a diverse and inclusive work environment. An effective leadership development program puts diversity and inclusion first and foremost.

#9: Identifying High Potential Leaders

Top organizations are using leadership competency and capability models to identify a short list of essential leadership characteristics. These models help to:

- Ground leaders in the constructs they should know that helps them to become effective leaders.
- Encourage leaders to start using proven leadership skills.
- Drive an outcome-focused approach to leadership.
- Adapt to evolving work environments quickly

Organizations can look to existing competency models for inspiration when building their own. Here is an example of a universal framework for a capability model that helps to define the best leaders based on their capabilities:

Strong leaders	Corresponding capability
Inspire others to take action	*Inspirational leadership*
Get teams to achieve results	*Execution*
Persuade and influence in all directions	*Influence*
Collaborate with others	*Collaboration*
Set vision, direction, and a compelling course of action	*Direction*
Make business decisions that drive positive bottom-line performance	*Business Judgment*
Know their markets and innovate to stay ahead	*Competitive edge*
Develop people for competitive advantage	*Building talent*

Source: Leadership Competency Modeling from Deloitte

When creating a leadership development plan, it's necessary to reinforce the capabilities that strong leaders possess. The diagram above is just an example, and it's important to remember that competency models are evolving by becoming much more concise and human centered.

#10: The Right Tech

Organizations are in the middle of continuous digital transformation. Chances are your organization is already exploring different technologies, whether that's cloud-based applications that aid employees who are working remotely, or investigating and harnessing the power of data and analytics to support a variety of functions, capabilities, operations, and processes.

When developing an effective leadership development program, it's integral to consider using technology to guide leaders on their new journey, such as with on-demand learning resources that employees can access anywhere, on any device. Sure, it's possible for people to watch webinars or YouTube on their own time, for example, but these methods aren't interactive and don't give people the ability to test their knowledge or put it into practice.

Your leadership development program should allow you to track metrics, so that you can follow employee progress as they clear milestones or complete certain content.

Look for technology that's easily integrated with existing systems, and if your company is data driven, be sure to use leadership-based data to support your business objectives, utilize intelligent dashboards, or analytics tools.

Start Building Your Leadership Program Today

The world is changing so fast that there is no time to wait. Help your people thrive in the digital age and overcome the challenges that they face managing an evolving workforce.

With the right tools, capabilities, and processes, you'll be able to create an effective future facing leadership development program that helps leaders grasp the core concepts and skills necessary to guide the workforce, embrace change head on, and establish a modern human-centered business environment.

About Verb

Verb is the leadership development platform that prepares your people to adapt to the challenges of today's rapidly changing workplace. Engaging and relevant topics help managers develop the leadership capabilities needed most in the modern workplace, enabling them to support the growth of everyone they lead. Microlearning activities prompt learners to practice skills in a safe space, take action in the real world, and reflect on their growth—leading to real skill development and behavior change.

Schedule a Demo Today

See how the Verb platform can change the course of your leadership development program at GoVerb.com.

develop@goverb.com