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9 Design Principles for Agile (Adaptive) Leadership Development Experiences



Executive leaders need to understand the shift in their contribution from driving results by hands-on influence to becoming architects of change, developers of systems and organizations, business strategists, and value creators—and more. These specific leadership competencies require and assume one has good judgment, sophisticated and courageous people skills, strategic thinking abilities, and a host of other valuable and rare assets.

The capacity to perform these leadership responsibilities effectively at scale in large, complex systems requires mature cognitive and emotional capabilities beyond what it takes to deliver results as a functional leader. I call these meta-skills for agile leadership.

A crucial cognitive meta-skill is the ability to see complex systems, to recognize the non-linear interplay of priorities, functions, politics, and people, and to be able to influence those dynamics in effective ways.

One of the central emotional meta-skills is the ability to tolerate ambiguity, and not act or react instantly—especially challenging for leaders with trained expectations for instant results. To resist action and instead, continue to learn enough about the problem and its context, requires the ability to manage one's own and others' anxiety and withstand the pressure to react.

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I do not think we can teach these competencies per se, but as development professionals, we can create processes and structures in which people can learn them. As the executive's understanding of leadership expands, our leadership development practices must expand to more substantive approaches as well.

Effective leadership development that helps people build these new capacities should include the following 9 principles of leadership design, appropriate for a temporary assignment or a week-long learning event:

1. **Share leadership with participants, including peer-to-peer learning.**

This ranges from using participants as coaches and consultants for each other; to giving one another feedback; to giving responsibility to others to design and deliver approaches that meet learning objectives; and further, to deciding what the learning objectives themselves should be.

2. **Work on real business issues.**

Simulations and case studies provide insights, but nothing can replace learning and making progress on real issues of concern. Structure the experience so that you can apply learning techniques immediately to things that matter.

3. **Involve senior executives through mentoring and sponsorship.**

Involve the most senior executives in the participants' key business challenges, and engage their sponsorship throughout the learning process. When you can engage senior executives credibly, they provide motivation, clarity, and resources; additionally, they sincerely consider recommendations the participants bring to the fore. Remember what motivates learners the most—working on something everyone honestly cares about and sincerely intends to address.



4. Use immediacy and “case-in-point” teaching.

Draw participants’ attention to the development experience itself to provide an unusually rich possibility for learning and heighten the intensity. Participants learn how to see themselves in action and potentially make new choices in the moment.

5. Make it personal—get them out of the intellectual and emotional comfort zone.

When people recall powerful learning experiences, they remember feeling jolted out of their assumptions and routines: emotionally moved; in the grip of a startling insight; and in the midst of a big risk, failure, or success. Emotional and cognitive risks and stretch opportunities inspire people to learn the most.

6. Build in time and structure for reflection and mindfulness.

Adult learning connects theory and ideas to actions to results. It means digesting the experiences one has and consciously connecting the dots so the lessons live on past one moment in time. This takes time and thoughtful attention—quietly alone—or in conversation with a mentor, peer, or coach.

7. Take it out of the office.

Get away from the routine and allow for a truly immersive experience that can inspire a focus on learning. Get the very real point that a major aspect of any job, learning, takes time and real focus. This is next to impossible when fighting fires with a colleague over a break, or attempting to fit in regular work responsibilities simultaneously.

8. Follow up and follow through on plans and commitments.

It’s old news that good intentions and “a-ha” moments fade once routines set back in. As development professionals, we can influence the whole process of development by structuring 1:1 follow-up meetings, peer consultations, executive mentoring, resource centers, coaching, webinars, etc., to promote knowledge retention by keeping what people learn alive and expanding.



9. The development experience should mirror the complexity and ambiguity of the leaders' roles and of their real context.

Be clear about the learning objectives and desired outcomes, and have activities, tools, and guides ready. But do away with the extensive facilitator notes, agendas, slide presentations, and timetables. John Runyan's (from Leadership Everywhere LLC) rule of thumb applies here:

"Provide just enough structure so people can take initiative."

This last principle may well be the most difficult to design, but I believe it launches leadership development out of the traditional zone of learning experiences and into one of transformation. Complications and risk sometimes fill an undertaking like this, but it can also inspire tremendous gains.

About The Author



As the leader of Waldron's organization and leadership development practices, Nancy oversees the design of programs, as well as Waldron's community of executive coaches and consultants. For 30 years, Nancy has been helping clients achieve their full potential—coaching, facilitating, and speaking on leadership and development issues in complex and rapidly changing environments. Prior to Waldron, Nancy had the privilege of coaching executives at Microsoft, Amazon, and PATH, and developed client leadership programs for Tom Peters Company and Zenger-Miller, Inc.

Nancy Winship
Vice President, Organization and
Leadership Development
nancy@waldronhr.com