Virtual Leadership Development—
A Powerful Option for Agile Organizations

The COVID-19 pandemic not only has profoundly impacted many aspects of how global organizations operate, it has disrupted leadership development programs at precisely the time when strong leadership is needed most. As a result, learning and development (L&D) leaders are quickly adapting to—and embracing—virtual programs as an effective way to proactively advance their talent and development goals and drive positive outcomes during today’s changing landscape.

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Recently, Harvard Business School convened a focus group of L&D professionals from leading global organizations. The goal was to capture their thoughts on executive development during uncertain times. Findings included the following.

- Now more than ever, L&D leaders are laser focused on the talent and development needs of their organizations.
- With business and workplace environments changing rapidly, these leaders want to ensure their organizations are keeping pace.
- Notably, they are open to virtual learning but curious as to how such programs can replicate the hallmarks of in-person, on-campus learning, namely, experiential learning and professional networking.

When it comes to leadership development, conventional wisdom once held that virtual programs are no substitute for classroom-based experiences. While virtual learning has been a part of many organizations’ L&D strategy for years, the global pandemic has accelerated its adoption, particularly among senior executives.

The Virtues of Virtual Leadership Development

“Leaders don’t sit back and wait for things to happen. Leaders go and take charge. They need skills now to keep on going and keep on innovating,” states Stefan H. Thomke, William Barclay Harding Professor of Business Administration at HBS. “We understand that virtual learning is a different kind of experience, not a better experience or a worse experience. Participants are interacting in fundamentally different ways than when they were on campus, namely more frequently and openly. It’s the world we are in now and a way to look at what the future of work is going to be like.”

The unique benefits virtual programs provide can be a complement to, rather than a long-term substitute for, residential programs. Specifically, virtual learning refers to leadership development programs that are synchronous, interactive, and collaborative online learning experiences. Delivery methods vary from web-based platforms to highly produced virtual classrooms that closely replicate an in-class experience. The programs are highly interactive and engaging, leaving no room for the kind of fatigue often associated with asynchronous learning.

Participants engage in a variety of ways with faculty and fellow participants via live discussions, simulations, web polls, live chat, break out groups, and group presentations. They hear from senior executives and learn directly from case protagonists. Virtual programs also build in opportunities for bonding, networking, and fostering lifelong connections through virtual discussion groups, receptions, and virtual social events. These are often augmented by more frequent participation by faculty, outside speakers, and guests.

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—FRANCESCA GINO, TANDON FAMILY PROFESSOR OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
A virtual learning platform puts everyone in an equally sized window. “We are all equal and need to be super-tight in the quality of ideas presented,” notes Francesca Gino, Tandon Family Professor of Business Administration. A virtual learning platform also allows for a greater level of connectivity and interaction between executives and faculty, and executives with one another. “There are huge benefits to being virtual in terms of what you can learn from the discussion,” says Professor Gino. “We bring intimacy into the virtual classroom,” adds Frances X. Frei, UPS Foundation Professor of Service Management. “Executives have access to us completely. We can meet with them more often because we are right here online.”

In addition to the interactivity and connectivity offered via virtual programs, there are myriad other benefits.

**Enhance Flexibility, Accessibility, and Scalability**
Leaders are not always able to take time from their demanding schedules to participate in in-person, classroom-based programs. By providing anywhere access and eliminating the need for travel, virtual programs are more accommodating to executives’ busy work and personal schedules. They allow organizations with distributed teams to quickly deliver programs to multiple groups of leaders, accelerating alignment. And they make it more feasible for organizations to provide more leadership training, to more people, at all levels of the organization.

**Apply Learning in Real Time**
Virtual programs allow participants to integrate their learning and skills into their daily work and apply them to address challenges in real time. Leaders are able to continually learn, reflect, and apply what they’ve learned as they work, so the knowledge is “stickier” and can deliver immediate impact to the organization.

**Leverage a Variety of Learning Styles**
Virtual programs typically combine both synchronous and asynchronous learning formats, including live online faculty-led lectures, small virtual group discussions, and action learning projects. They offer participants opportunities to learn, interact, and contribute in a variety of ways—including chat, online discussion threads, polls, and one-to-one questions to the instructor—that tap into different learning styles and allow all types of learners to engage.

**Leverage Experiential Learning and Professional Networking**
Unlike in-person, on-campus programs, which may feature extended days of learning compressed within a weeklong session, virtual programs are frequently scheduled in shorter blocks of time spread out over a greater number of days. This not only affords participants greater flexibility with their work and personal schedules, it also allows for deep reflection on the subject matter and the opportunity to apply new learnings to the workplace in real time. Virtual programs also build in essential time for professional networking and socializing in the form of small breakout groups.

**Align with the Future of Work**
Virtual programs enable L&D teams to better meet the expectations and needs of their organizations’ leaders by providing access to learning when it’s most convenient for them and enabling them to engage and collaborate in the ways they prefer online.
The global pandemic has forced organizations to adapt quickly to new ways of doing business, new ways of leading, and new ways of learning. Technological advancements have enhanced virtual leadership programs with the types of interactivity and connectivity formerly reserved for in-person engagements. There is no time to lose in taking advantage of virtual learning opportunities to help organizations navigate these unprecedented times. “Now is better than later,” confirms Professor Frei. “The notion that later is better is one of the issues that hold back executives from being able to thrive and contribute.”

Taking a longer-term view, Srikant M. Datar, Arthur Lowes Dickinson Professor of Business Administration, ultimately foresees shifting models of learning. “I strongly believe that coming out of this crisis, we will have developed a new way of engaging with executives, a new way of finding the best aspects of online education, and a new way to combine it with the model by which we are physically together. So maybe at the end of all of this, we will have learned so much about what a very good hybrid classroom might look like that we will not go back to what it was before.”

Key Takeaways

- The time is now. Virtual programs provide executives with the opportunity to learn critical leadership skills—live and in real time—when they are needed most.

- Enhanced access to programs, faculty, and global peers provides unprecedented opportunities for experiential learning and professional networking.

- Organizations that embrace virtual learning will not only help better prepare their executives to lead, they will more strongly position their companies to adapt to what the future of work is going to look like.

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