



The demands on Leadership Development programs and professionals today are changing as fast as the environment we're in. With organisations under pressure to rapidly adapt to technology advancements, market shifts and global shocks, we're seeing more L&D teams rethinking (even disrupting) their approach to leadership development.

FUTURE-FIT LEADERSHIP

Four Challenges to Factor into Your Leadership Development Strategy

BY JAMIE MCIVER

In this article, I summarise the top four challenges we're seeing leadership development leaders looking to solve in their organisations, both here in Australia and across our global client base.

01 GROWING ADAPTIVE LEADERS

The increasing complexity of the business environment means organisations are asking leaders at all levels to lead through new, complex challenges in often volatile conditions.

When faced with new challenges, the tempting response is to retreat to the comfort of our expertise and tried-and-true approaches; the well-worn neurological pathways that have helped us succeed in the past.

The catch is, in doing so, we narrow our view to what we already know. We reinforce silos, and close our minds to the more challenging path of curiosity, collaboration and creativity, which is key to finding new solutions.

Top Considerations for Leadership Development Teams

- **Growing adaptive leadership skills:** While Adaptive Leadership isn't a new concept, it's becoming ever more relevant today. Data insights from our digital coaching platform highlight a tendency for leaders to misdiagnose adaptive challenges (challenges with no existing solutions, requiring experimentation and collaboration) as technical problems (which can be solved using existing expertise and skills). For example, a retail company facing declining brick-and-mortar sales due to online disruption might initially treat it as a technical problem solvable by store redesigns, when it's likely an adaptive challenge requiring transformation of their business model. Leadership development must equip leaders to differentiate and lead through adaptive challenges.

- **Mindset is key:** Yesterday's thinking won't solve tomorrow's problems. Our mindsets influence how we make sense of our context, including the nuances and interdependencies we see and the range of possibilities available to us through our ability to perceive them. The more complex and multi-layered our environment, the more mental flexibility is required to process it. This is where mindset development comes in (also known as vertical development), helping grow leaders' capacity to take a broader view of challenges and have empathy for alternative ways of thinking.
- **Managing wellbeing:** With leaders shouldering more responsibility and pressure at work, and a rapidly changing world creating more stressors in day-to-day life, we need to be intentional about seeing leaders as whole people and looking for ways to support them to manage their wellbeing. With greater personal resilience, leaders are better placed to navigate the complexity around them.

02 GROWTH AT SCALE: EVERYONE MUST LEAD

Today's shift to leaner, flatter and more empowered organisations results (by design) in more decisions being made closer to the data source – the customer, the service, the process, the market. When we democratise decision-making, leadership is no longer by appointment: it's for everyone. If we want to empower our people at scale, we must also equip them.

Top Considerations

- **Leveraging AI is critical:** There's an old saying in leadership development, *What scales doesn't work and what works doesn't scale*. This myth has been broken by AI to make high quality development accessible to all. If you're not already leveraging AI and digital technology to scale leadership development, this is an important opportunity to explore.

- **Consider how you’re allocating investment:** Many organisations still default to a top-heavy approach to their leadership development spending, because that’s how it’s always been done. It’s time to reflect: does this strategy reflect the future you’re preparing for?
- **Enlist frontline leaders in cultural change:** A common issue we see is that when early and middle leadership layers feel “subject” to top-down change, they consciously or unconsciously form a permafrost layer that blocks progress. Involving leaders at all levels in the design of culture change and development initiatives ensures they feel part of the change and that their voices have been heard.

03 CONTEXT OVER CONTENT

Far too often, leadership development programs are designed by asking, *What are the 10 things we need our leaders to think, know and do?* The problem with this approach is it assumes we know what they need (we don’t) and that everyone needs the same thing (they don’t). We end up with leaders feeling we’re imposing our agenda on them through prescribed content—a *PUSH* dynamic.

By flipping this to instead focus on the context that each leader is navigating, we put the focus of development on what’s important to them. We can then support leaders to *PULL* content that’s relevant to their challenges and inspire them to experiment with new approaches, building buy-in and accountability.

Top Considerations

- **Integrate the learning process with the work context:** This is what’s meant by *learning in the flow of work*—when doing work and learning are the same activity. Forget inventing action-learning projects! Leaders already have enough complexity in their roles to reflect on and experiment with, ensuring development efforts translate to real-world learning and progress.
- **Put the focus on learning how to learn:** Content is no longer a barrier in learning. It’s abundant and people know how to access it. A more effective and sustainable focus for leadership development is to help leaders to learn *how to learn*, so they can navigate new challenges as they arise. At Adeption we use the B3 framework—*Be Conscious, Be Curious, Be Better*—as a methodology that can be applied to adaptive challenges in any context.



04 EVOLVING THE SYSTEM

W. Edwards Denning pointed out that: “Every system is perfectly designed to get exactly the results that it does”. So often we forget it’s our organisational system, cultural norms and modelled behaviour that have the greatest influence on how leaders grow, perhaps even more so than the development interventions we run for individuals.

In other words, we need to be sure we’re fixing the right problem. A common trap is to focus on “fixing” mid-level leaders to think and act in a more empowered way when the organisation system and culture is geared for autocracy, control and dependence. To build a team where people feel confident experimenting and learning from mistakes, these behaviours need to be supported at the system level.

Top Considerations

- **Create clarity and connection to purpose:** To unlock the full potential of leaders and employees throughout the organisation, it’s vital to ensure everyone is clear and aligned on the organisation’s core purpose and values. It’s this implicit emotional connection that fuels innovation, collaboration and desire to grow. It’s not about carefully crafted statements, it’s how real actions make people feel.
- **Shift systemic levers to unlock growth:** It’s vital to understand and evolve the systems that influence leader behaviour. Align reward systems, policies, and operations with desired leadership qualities. Identify and remove systemic barriers. Institutionalise practices that support mental, emotional, and physical health.
- **Build a learning culture:** Consider ways to create permission space for development and multiply individual efforts. For example, ensure participants in development programs have the support of their one-up managers to apply insights and experiment. Another effective approach is to establish peer learning forums during development initiatives that continue on after completion.

By addressing these four challenges, organisations will develop leaders who are better prepared for the complexities of the modern world. Investing in these areas will create strong leaders and resilient organisations capable of thriving in uncertainty.



JAMIE MCIVER

Jamie McIver leads Adeption’s Australia business, focusing on the design and delivery of highly innovative leadership development experiences. Adeption is among the world’s most advanced users of AI to power leadership development at scale and is working with top organisations globally to grow adaptive, future-fit leaders. For more information, visit: <https://adeption.io/>