Introduction

Leadership development is more necessary today than ever before. Employees at all levels face more and more moments that require leadership, with more and more frequency than in the past. Research shows several significant changes in internal organizational structures are the reason why:

- Hierarchies have flattened.
- Decision-making has diffused.
- Business models have been upended.
- Heuristics have been shattered.

These forces have led to a need for distributed leadership responsibility that effectively adapts to the immediate environment. Unfortunately, most leadership models currently in use are dated and poorly suited to the demands of the modern workplace.

Even the new age-sounding “transformational leadership” model predates the use of e-mail and the internet at work. The leadership models we use are based on empirical studies and mindsets from a time when more than 70% of the workforce was male¹ and Kodak was in the top 10 companies of the S&P 500². The environment has shifted significantly, but the methods we use to develop leaders have not kept pace.

AchieveForum sees this as an opportunity—a chance for us to help create the next generation of leadership development methodologies. To that end, we are launching new research initiatives to explore leadership development in the modern age.

The research process ultimately will be a dialogue—an ongoing conversation among the various communities that make up the leadership space. We invite you to join us in that dialogue. A living research process provides four ways for you to participate:

- Participate in and receive analysis from topical research surveys.
- Participate in interviews to share your experiences around a particular research topic.
- Provide feedback on our research insights and deliverables.
- Suggest areas for future research investigations.

We are excited to give our partners and friends a strong voice in driving the direction and shape of leadership research as the process unfolds.
Research Series: Major Topics

We see two major trends shaping leadership in the modern world. While our research will investigate diverse topics, these two key themes are felt in most areas of leadership today:

**Technology has fundamentally altered what it means to be an effective leader.** Traditional leadership models are simply not designed to handle disruptive technological innovation. Our vision for the future includes updating the leadership requirements to meet the challenges of the digital era.

**The stability of the industrial era was an anomaly, rather than the norm that we assumed it to be.** In fact, much of the world has never experienced such a period of stability and prosperity. The increase in volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) being experienced in the West is really a return to “normal.” Part of developing a coherent vision for the future means accepting that VUCA is the new normal.

We have broken our research into five key topic areas, each of which is explored in further depth below:

- The Future of Leadership Development
- Leadership for All
- Leveling the Playing Field
- Transforming the Leadership Development Experience
- The HR Business Partnership

**The Future of Leadership Development**

Despite billions of dollars invested annually in corporate leadership development⁵, senior executives report abysmally low success rates for key projects and new executives⁴. To make matters worse, there is little confidence in rising leaders’ ability to meet today’s challenges.

The fact of the matter is that many of our leadership models and methods were developed in and for a completely different era⁶. The modern era is more turbulent and uncertain, requiring a frame shift in how we think about and teach leadership.
### Mega Trends in Leadership Development

- Mega trends are global, sustained macroeconomic forces that reshape the world on a massive scale—good examples include the Internet of Things or artificial intelligence. We will investigate the potential impact these trends have on leadership.

### Key Leadership Skills for the Digital Age

- We teach too many skills, rather than focus on the mastery of a critical few. Our research has revealed the three most important leadership behaviors in the leadership age are **influence**, **collaboration**, and **discovery**.

### Reversion to Human-Centric Instruction and Coaching

- The head-first plunge into fully digital learning platforms and delivery has resulted in spectacularly mediocre results, largely because of the failure of the “one-size-fits-all” approach.

- The key takeaway is that learning technologies serve us best when used to enhance individually focused learning experiences.

### Why the Modern Manager Can't Succeed – and What to Do About It

- Our current leadership models expect executives and managers to be superheroes. Not only is the list of “required” leadership skills overwhelming, it is often self-contradictory.

- We measure leadership development rather than leadership success and, when we do measure success, we measure the wrong things.

### Integrating Leadership Development into Workflow

- Significant advances in neuroscience suggest we should shift many of our approaches to learning and development, but our methods have not changed accordingly.

- Creating lasting leadership behavior change will involve learning experiences that are tightly integrated with the job environment.

### Why Resilience Beats Agility in the Modern Workplace

- Much emphasis has been given to agile approaches popularized by tech innovators; however, managers should consider placing higher priority on resilience behaviors in environments where employees have to overcome significant resistance.

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**Table 1.** Outline of the major topics planned for our “Future of Leadership” series.
Leadership for All

We’ve seen the work environment become increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). In a world where flexibility and agility are required on a daily basis, flatter organizations provide the distributed decision-making prowess required.

The implication for the field of leadership development is that more people are required to act as leaders, with more frequency. We believe this requires a shift from focusing only on high potentials to democratizing leadership training and development throughout the organization.

Democratizing Access to the Best Leadership Resources

- Top-level leaders and executives often have access to a completely different tier of leadership development training and resources.
- If we want to enable leaders at all levels to succeed, we need to open up access to the best content we have available.

EveryDay Leadership

- The environment has changed in such a way that decisions made on Monday might be irrelevant by Wednesday. Leadership decisions are required daily, and our support for leaders must reflect that.

The Superiority of Peer Design and Reinforcement

- Research shows that organizational structures designed and reinforced by peers can be more effective than those imposed from above.
- Our research on collaboration shows that with the right environment, groups can be given the freedom to self-organize and self-govern.

Leaders Hidden in Plain View

- Given the increased frequency and distribution of organization-wide leadership moments, we need to expand our notion of who a leader is.
- Executive assistants and other administrative professionals will play an even greater leadership role in the digital age.

Coaching Democratization

- Professional coaching is often the best resource for changing individual leadership behavior. Unfortunately, it also is usually the most expensive.
- We can utilize digital-age tools to build expansive, mutually-reinforcing peer coaching networks for leaders.

Table 2. Outline of the major topics planned for our “Leadership for All” series.
Leveling the Playing Field

While we strongly believe in our vision of “Leadership for All,” there are two groups in particular we plan to investigate deeper: women and millennials.

Although we’ve seen a growing effort to increase the number of women in leadership roles, they are still encountering significant challenges. We have a responsibility to understand and remove those barriers. Not only is it ethical to do so, but it also makes our teams significantly more effective.

Then there are the millennials, who have reached critical mass in the workforce. As boomers begin to retire, millennials are poised to move into leadership positions. Yet despite much digital ink being poured in pursuit of understanding our first “digital native” cohort, we are still unable to answer basic questions about them.

Why Leadership Development Undermines Women, and How to Fix It

• Today’s leadership models have an inherent bias toward male traits. We have extrapolated leadership lessons from male-dominated environments, leading to conclusions about leadership that perpetuate male advantages.
• Our HR, management, and leadership practices unwittingly create environments tuned for “male leadership,” which inhibits many women’s performance. We must develop our understanding of what effective female leadership looks like and create environments of success that are more gender neutral.

Millennials Aren’t Different, the World Is

• On most dimensions, millennials aren’t much different at this point in their lives than any other generation. The ways they do differ (e.g., higher social consciousness) are generally viewed as strengths.
• That said, the nature of work changed radically as millennials entered the workforce. Much of what we view as different about millennials is really their adaptation to a fundamentally different work environment.

Table 3. Our “Leveling the Playing Field” series will focus on specific groups primed for leadership development opportunities in the digital age.
Transforming the Leadership Development Experience

By most measures, leadership development fails more often than not, yet it still ranks high in terms of both organizational need and organizational investment dollars\(^\text{10}\). Imagine the impact if leadership development actually worked.

We believe the lack of impact can be traced to a number of factors, including:

- Outdated leadership development experiences
- Failed implementation of digital leadership development experiences
- A need to reimagine the transfer of leadership experience throughout the organization

### Leadership Development That Lasts

- Most learners revert to their former leadership behaviors within months of completing a development program. There is a large gap between the learning events and sustainment of behaviors.
- The leadership development metrics we track are largely related to participation in programs rather than successful change of leadership behaviors.

### Better Than E-mail—Transforming Digital Experiences

- The revolution that e-learning was meant to bring never showed up. This is largely because we’ve taken the same content delivered in the classroom and merely changed it into a digital format.
- There is significant opportunity to deliver digital experiences that are unique and functionally different from in-person experiences.

### Reinventing Coaching

- Coaching puts too much of a burden on managers. Coaching well—as currently designed for managers in a hierarchical setting—is hard, intimating, and not done much even after development.
- Coaching focuses on one-on-one rather than one-to-many or many-to-many, which better reflects how work is done today in a knowledge environment.

Table 4. Our “Experience Transformation” series will focus on developing new and unique leadership experiences—designed and tuned for the modern era.
CATALYST MEMBERS ONLY—The HR Business Partnership

Our HR Business Partnership Series is a Catalyst Member-only research project highly tailored to Chief Human Resource Officers. Catalyst members collectively set our rolling research agenda based on shared challenges.

Our inaugural research series focuses on HR Business Partnerships, both how HRBPs should refocus their efforts to drive business results, and how HR and talent professionals should dramatically reorganize their mission and activities to maintain relevance in the 21st century.

**HR Business Partnership for the Digital Age**

- HR focuses on making compliance activities more efficient, but HR remains “the police” in the eyes of the business. This undermines trust between business partners and HR and makes it impossible for HR to succeed in a major portion of core functions.

- Additionally, HR attempts to shape decisions where their business partners have much deeper knowledge, experience, and capacity to stay abreast of the changing business landscape. Instead, HR should drive a few key leadership behaviors where our business partners aren’t strong and lack capacity to actively practice them day to day.

**Transforming HR and Talent Management for the Digital Age**

- HR departments that thrive—indeed, survive—in the digital age will dramatically shift how they support their organizations, including shifts from:
  - Performance management to performance enablement
  - Recruiting to network building
  - Leadership development to actively managing leadership success
  - Employee engagement that fosters retention and effort to employee engagement that drives collaboration, quality, and business outcomes

**What Skills Does HR Really Need in the Digital Age?**

- Our call for a reimagining of HR’s core functions in the business means that we also must reconsider the key skills HR will need to excel. This research endeavor is a deep dive into what that skill set will look like.

Table 5. Our “Business Partnership” series will be a highly tailored research endeavor for top HR professionals.
References


5. Most leadership theories being applied today are extensions of older theories, the most modern of which was developed in the late 1980’s (visionary leadership). For more on the history of leadership theories, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leadership#Leader%E2%80%93member_exchange_theory


