

CAREER AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

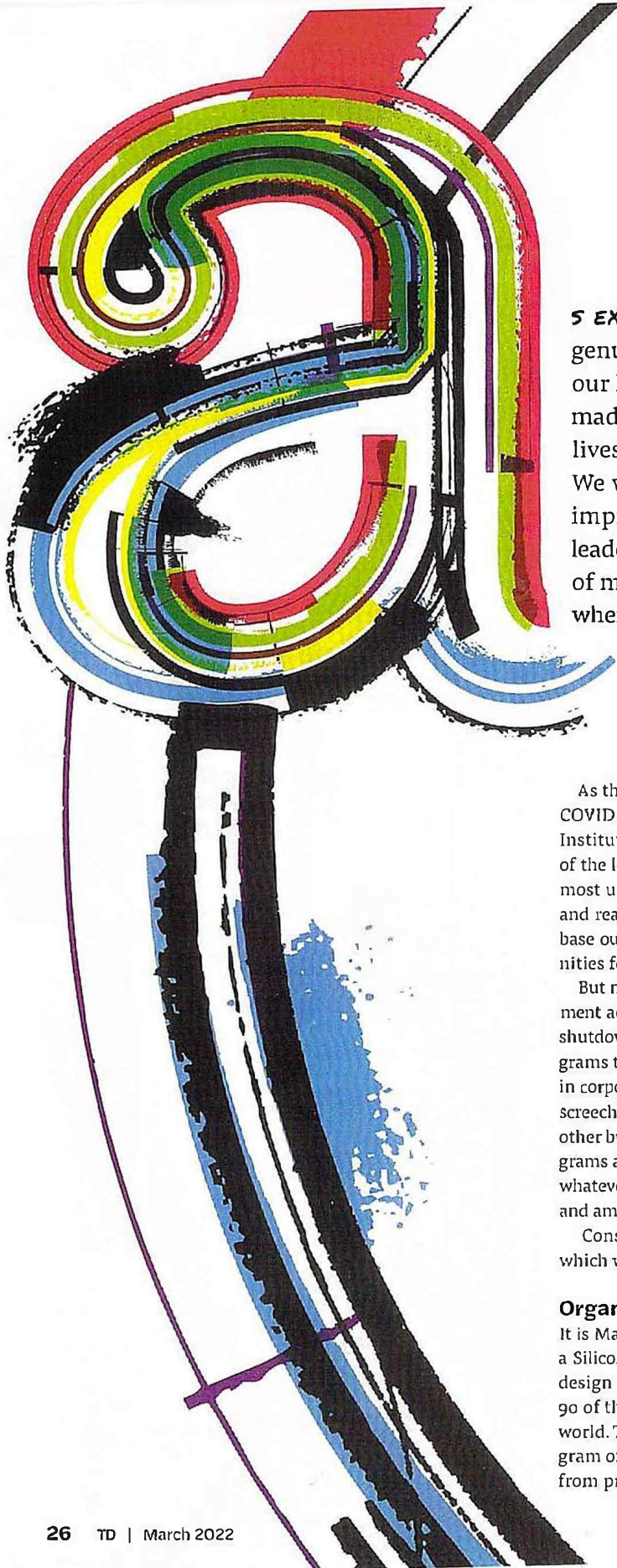
td

talent development

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT MUST-HAVES

These key
components will lead
to effective
programs.

BY JOELLE K. JAY AND
RALUCA GRAEBNER



5 EXECUTIVE COACHES AND FACILITATORS, genuine expressions of gratitude that indicate our leadership development programs have made a real and lasting difference in leaders' lives are the kind of comments we dream of. We want the organizations we work with to improve their business results through those leaders and advance diverse and talented slates of managers into senior levels of leadership where they can help shape the company's future.

As the world is getting used to a "new normal" informed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we and our team at the Leadership Research Institute (LRI) have been reflecting on the successes and failures of the leadership development programs we have seen during this most unusual of times. What we have learned has both surprised and reassured us. Ultimately, the five key principles on which we base our work have stood up to the challenge and created opportunities for leaders to emerge prepared, thoughtful, and successful.

But not all organizations have approached leadership development accordingly. The sudden shock of the pandemic, the global shutdown of office spaces, and the overnight move from live programs to virtual that have characterized the past couple of years in corporate life could have brought leadership development to a screeching halt, and indeed in some companies they did. However, other businesses have sustained robust leadership development programs and provided more support to their leaders, not less—making whatever changes necessary to pull it off, even amid the confusion and ambiguity that the past two years have brought.

Consider the contrasting experiences of two organizations with which we worked.

Organization 1: Rising to the occasion

It is March 2020. A team from the talent development function in a Silicon Valley firm has been working for two months with us to design and deliver two weeks of live, interactive programming for 90 of the firm's most promising women leaders from around the world. Those two weeks kick off Leadership Circles, a yearlong program of personal leadership that has yielded impressive results from previous cohorts:

- A total of 600 women have gone through the program globally.
- In one division alone, 40 percent of participants have been promoted compared to 17 percent of women globally.
- Seventy-six percent of participants are still with the company compared to 55 percent of women globally.

As the program's opening day comes into view, LRI coaches and facilitators are packing their bags to fly to company headquarters to deliver the program, along with participants from as far away as India and Australia.

Meanwhile, news of the pandemic is heating up. One surprising and unsettling COVID-19 death in the US becomes a rash of illness, and then a scare, and then a panic as airlines start expressing concern and as events get canceled. Clearly this virus is serious—so much so that our team hesitates as we start to set foot into airports, wondering, “Is this really a good idea?” Our partners at the firm agree—all travel for employees halts effective immediately.

We cancel our flights and get on the phone with our partners. With only a few days at our disposal, we move opening day events online; design virtual experiences; send electronic versions of program materials to participants; and with celebration and excitement, kick off another year of Leadership Circles.

We get some of the best results we have ever seen. Participants reported:

- Increased focus on delivering on strategic priorities, without getting sidetracked by the pandemic's ever-moving landscape
- Hitting and overachieving on sales quotas during an unprecedented time of uncertainty
- Stepping up as influential, caring leaders and stewards of their teams
- Less burnout, more connection, and better support from their organization

The spontaneous flexibility created a program that supported leaders through the crisis. It was a win for all of us: our client partners, LRI, and the program participants. The program continued in 2021, still virtually, welcoming a new global cohort of women.

Unfortunately, such wins weren't everywhere. In fact, we also saw the crisis of the pandemic become a crisis of leadership in other companies.

Organization 2: The doors slam shut

It is spring 2020, and plans are going into place for fall programming in a large international firm built on promoting talented leaders from within and with well-established, large-scale leadership development programs to help support its strategy.

Until the pandemic.

As uncertainty spreads, the company postpones planning meetings with LRI to discuss leadership development programming. It misses deadlines to ensure timely program rollout. It moves program dates, and then the whole initiative is threatened and eventually canceled. Communication from program organizers to LRI grinds to a halt.

Few employees received promotions that year, and staff reported having fewer opportunities for personal or professional

growth. It was as if the entire company had pushed pause on progress—which is understandable due to the pandemic. But as we've seen from other companies, it's unnecessary. The effect on the firm's leaders did not go unnoticed.

Now, individual employees in the company—the superstars whom the firm once would have invited to participate in the elite leadership development programs intended to support their success—are calling us for coaching. They're questioning their commitment to their employer, wondering where their careers are headed, and trying to find a way to get back their energy and enthusiasm for an organization that seems to have left them hanging. Some have become part of the Great Resignation.

That's not exactly a good situation for any employer.


Rethinking postpandemic leadership development

Simply put, organization 1 managed leadership development successfully; organization 2 did not. As employers navigate a new reality of hybrid work and with the pandemic still influencing decision making, we offer five must-haves for leadership development that make the difference between a transformational experience (think organization 1) and one that's “meh” (think organization 2).

1. Gain true buy-in from the top

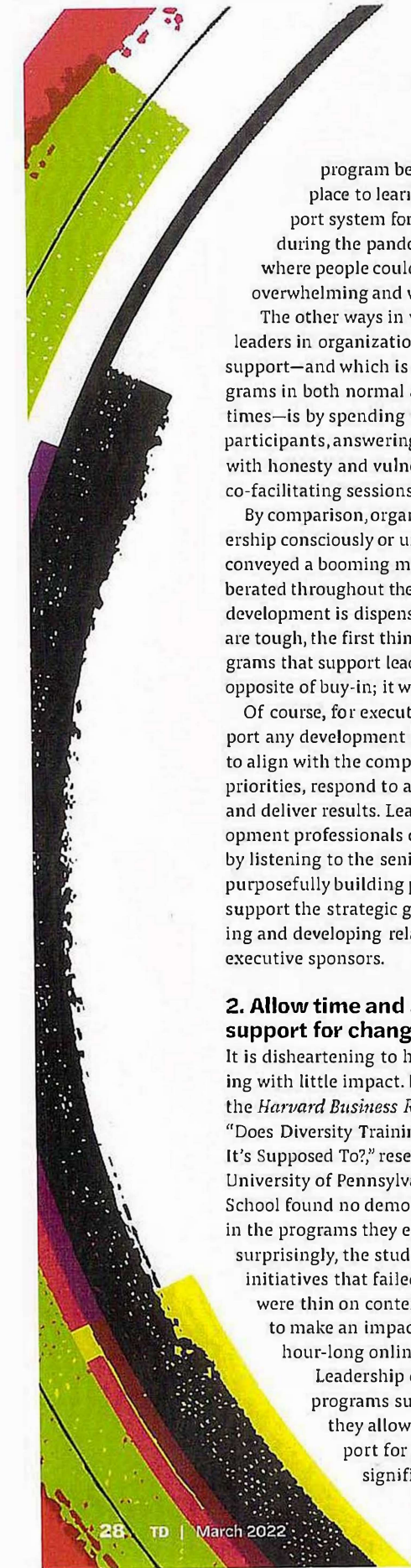
No matter how engaging a program is, if participants know that senior leaders do not endorse the experience, it will be hard to truly prioritize learning. What executives say is important (for instance, praising the program), but what they do is even more powerful.

For example, it spoke volumes when the leaders in organization 1 decided to dedicate funding in support of employee well-being and growth. The 2020 iteration of the Leadership Circles



LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT MUST-HAVES

IMAGE | ADOBE STOCK



program became not just a place to learn but also a support system for the participants during the pandemic—a safe space where people could share what was overwhelming and worrying them.

The other ways in which senior leaders in organization 1 proved their support—and which is valid for all programs in both normal and extraordinary times—is by spending time with the participants, answering their questions with honesty and vulnerability, and co-facilitating sessions.

By comparison, organization 2's leadership consciously or unconsciously conveyed a booming message that reverberated throughout the firm: Leadership development is dispensable, and if times are tough, the first things to go are programs that support leaders. That was the opposite of buy-in; it was opt-out.

Of course, for executives to fully support any development program, it needs to align with the company's strategic priorities, respond to a business need, and deliver results. Leadership development professionals can ensure that by listening to the senior leaders and purposefully building programs that support the strategic goals and by finding and developing relationships with executive sponsors.

2. Allow time and adequate support for change

It is disheartening to hear about training with little impact. For example, in the *Harvard Business Review* article "Does Diversity Training Work the Way It's Supposed To?," researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School found no demonstrable impact in the programs they examined. Not surprisingly, the study reveals that the initiatives that failed so miserably were thin on content and too brief to make an impact—such as an hour-long online course.

Leadership development programs succeed when they allow time and support for change. They are significant solutions—

either weeklong, intensive experiences or yearlong, integrative programs where stakeholders encourage participants to continuously incorporate their learning at work.

Organization 1's program included personalized coaching, interactive experiences, and peer group support. Organization 2 had already chopped away at its leadership development program, bit by bit, even before the pandemic, putting savings over value. When the pandemic began, the program became a casualty of the chaos, because it did not have the depth and breadth that would have made it essential in any era, COVID-19 or otherwise.

Providing adequate time and support for change leads to impressive results, giving companies that invest in their leaders in that way a significant return on their investment. When making financial decisions, L&D professionals should consider what brings true value and what investments are worth making.

3. Offer customized, relevant content

We have heard many horror stories of leadership development programs delivering content that is, at best, too generic and, at worst, completely mismatched to the company's culture.

Take time to diagnose the business need and customize the program content so that it matches the organization's experiences, culture, and strategic priorities. That may entail incorporating the company's vernacular, welcoming guest speakers from the organization, and developing a battery of stories relevant to each environment.

Participants of leadership development programs that are customized with specific, relevant content reflective of their company and work environment will be able to contextualize their learning immediately. Customized and relevant content derives from forming partnerships with the stakeholders. Serve as a trusted advisor and true co-creator.


In organization 1, we are trusted partners collaborating on a joint effort to customize learning that is integral to the success of the business and its leaders—an effort worth preserving on both sides. By contrast, in organization 2, we are considered vendors offering a program—something easily cut.

4. Work with the right people


The right choice of facilitators is vital for leadership development's success. Excellent facilitators can take any content, make it their own, and create extraordinary experiences for participants. Poor facilitators can deliver even rich information in such a fashion that it feels rigid and rote.

Take, for example, a discussion during one of our programs that started going haywire. A participant strongly voiced her disagreement with a point the facilitator made. Soon other participants followed suit, piling on top of each other and jeopardizing the discussion's credibility.

It was one of those moments that could make or break a program. The facilitator could have stood her ground, attempting to convince participants of her point of view and leaving them feeling lectured. Instead, she listened sincerely, acknowledged the difficulties with compassion, and then invited others to



LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS SUCCEED WHEN THEY ALLOW TIME AND SUPPORT FOR CHANGE.



share differing opinions. Her presence created a space that held the conversation lightly and guided people through a meaningful discussion.

Powerful facilitators welcome innovation and creative collaboration. They have the courage to stay open to ideas and to vulnerably allow their programs to evolve in service to the company and program participants.

5. Tell stories with numbers

Measuring a program's success works best when it entails—before the program starts—using a researcher's mindset, curiosity, and methods (such as interviews) to understand the organization and map out the situation. And then measure the program's impact.

Listen to the feedback from the business—including program sponsors, executives, and program facilitators—as well as from current and former participants. Likewise, it is essential to communicate the success to the business—to show the hard results and tell the story of why the program matters. That gets everyone excited.

For example, in organization 1, we and our in-house L&D partners created a strategic way to measure program impact and communicate it internally to relevant stakeholders and executive sponsors. As a result, before new participants even set foot in the program's opening event, they have heard about it from their managers or former participants.

Organization 2 didn't support the element of quality measurement in its program. In doing so, the firm saved money but lost the opportunity to get information about whether the initiative was indeed making an impact. Thus, leadership didn't consider a program that by informal accounts was having a significant impact to be critical because there was no data to prove the case.

Emphasize the importance of research as a way of measuring program impact. Storytelling with numbers is one way to prove that leadership development is worth the investment.

Persevere during hard times

The past two years have seen unprecedented change. However, what has not changed are the fundamental pillars of what creates a powerful leadership development experience. In-person or virtually, the principles of human learning and personal transformation remain the same. It is about creating a sustained, supportive experience in which leaders learn from each other, exchange powerful ideas, and can experiment safely as they grow into leaders who will carry their companies into the future.

Joelle K. Jay is a director and executive coach for the Leadership Research Institute; joelle.jay@lri.com.

Raluca Graebner is an executive coach and leadership facilitator affiliated with the Leadership Research Institute; raluca.graebner@lri.com.