

# Grow Leaders With a Virtual Development Program

Lindsay Fletcher and Gerhard Redelinghuys



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Organizational Environment.....	2
Research .....	3
Content Design and Curation.....	4
Bring the Program to Life .....	6
Map and Track.....	8
Marketing .....	9
Evaluate Success.....	10
Conclusion .....	11
References .....	12

## Tools & Resources

Results-Focused Program Design Template .....	13
Course Catalog Template .....	15

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**C**onventional approaches to leadership development often emphasize the importance of the traditional classroom. They claim that the innately social nature of an in-person, face-to-face environment is essential for developing people skills around subjects such as emotional intelligence, interpersonal relationships, motivation, and engagement. Those assertions, however, ignore the fact that with globalization, remote workforces, and the rapid evolution of communication technologies, the work environment is no longer what it used to be.

Today, leaders—whether seasoned executives or first-time managers—need to be effective at guiding dispersed teams. That means applying leadership principles to what is often a virtual work environment, where tools such as email, instant messaging, and virtual meeting software have become the primary modes of communication. In this new environment, leaders require a new

set of abilities, including team building, relationship building, leading meetings, and managing a team you can't see.

That's where a carefully crafted virtual leadership program, built to match your company's typical working environment, can help. It can be not only an effective tool but a more powerful method for developing leaders than traditional face-to-face approaches. And by *leaders* we don't mean only the individuals at the top of the organizational chart. Rather, we are referring to all employees—those aspiring to be better managers, those who are currently leaders, and even individual contributors who are leading in their own ways without the title.

In this issue of *TD at Work*, we'll help you identify whether a virtual leadership program is right for your organization and, if so, enable you to design a customized program that has real business impact. We'll look at:

- Understanding your organization's environment and identifying business needs
- Designing and curating program content to bring it to life with the right modalities
- Marketing and launching the program
- Tracking and evaluating success

No matter what environment your business operates in, learning technologies are critical to your program's success. They enable you to put the ownership of leadership development in your participants' hands and help nurture a culture of continuous learning across your organization.

## Organizational Environment

Before you can even begin to put pen to paper to design a virtual leadership development program, you need to identify the environment and your audience as well as business needs. Participants' location and the type of work they perform will determine which learning modalities you select and the content you develop.

It's important to design a program that meets your organization's setup. If leadership is dispersed across multiple offices, with few opportunities to come together, a purely virtual program may be just what you need. If, however, you have a majority of leaders in one location, it may make sense to incorporate face-to-face options in a

blended approach. We will explore how to select modalities later in the issue. For now, consider these questions as a starting point:

- How many employees are in the organization?
- Who is your target leadership population: Aspiring, first-time, or senior leaders? A combination of all leaders?
- Which countries are learners based in?
- What languages do the leaders speak? Is an English-only program viable?
- How many time zones does the company operate in?
- Across how many office locations are employees located?
- Are learners deskbound or mobile?
- Do learners control their own time, or will they need scheduled training?

### Leadership Development at Ten Lifestyle Group

Ten Lifestyle Group is a global travel and lifestyle concierge company, serving millions of members worldwide from its 22 offices locations. After its initial public offering, the company launched a corporate academy with a focus on strategic capability building and leadership development.

As a company undergoing rapid growth with many managers moving into leadership roles for the first time, we identified the need to support our first-level and aspiring leaders with the tools they need to take on increasing levels of responsibility. With more than 100 managers based in offices all over the world, developing a virtual program was a must if we were to meet our objective of offering democratized leadership development to all who needed and wanted it.

By leveraging virtual classroom technology, encouraging self-directed learning, and giving learners the opportunity to experiment with their learnings on the job, we were able to develop a program that met our objectives of being “truly global,” “tailored and flexible,” and “designed for impact.” The program was split into the three subsections of “leading myself,” “leading others,” and “leading for results,” with three main topic areas identified under each (such as time and priority mastery and leader as coach).

Using a pull learning approach, participants managed their own learning journey through to graduation, attending sessions and accessing resources that most resonated with their individual needs.

In year one of the program, we had 172 unique participants from 21 of our 22 global offices, with all business departments represented. Our first batch of graduates came from Cape Town, South Africa; London, England; San Francisco, California; Bogota, Colombia; Mexico City, Mexico; and São Paulo, Brazil. Graduates were in roles as junior as team managers of our frontline customer service teams learning to lead for the first time, and as senior as global heads of departments looking to brush up on their skills and share their experiences with their colleagues.

## Research

Now consider why you need to design a leadership development program in the first place. What knowledge or skills gaps exist? Are there other gaps, such as motives, physical resources, structure and process, or information? Is there a desired performance state where you'd like all leaders?

Remember that an individual may not be performing as needed not because they lack knowledge or skills but rather because they don't have managerial support, there is an organizational culture issue, or they do not have the opportunity to practice a new skill. For example, an employee attends a training course and is excited about practicing the new skill he has learned. But when he gets into his daily workflow, he realizes that isn't the way the company operates, and he resumes his previous ways of working.

A training program can help resolve a knowledge gap, but other gaps require different solutions. Identify the desired performance state and leaders' actual performance state to understand the gap between them. Only then can you begin to identify appropriate solutions and build a program designed for business impact.

When carrying out a performance gap analysis, first completed a business analysis. Understanding the internal and external forces that affect your organization and

taking a deep dive into your company's mission, values, and goals for the upcoming quarter and year are essential. Doing so enables you to upskill leaders in the context of achieving desired business outcomes. That is what will set your program apart from off-the-shelf courses that, while valuable, provide a more generic experience.

## Stakeholders

Identify the individuals who can provide you with the data you need to understand the business goals and make informed decisions about the program's desired outcomes. That will depend on the size of your company and the seniority of the leadership population you are targeting. If you are designing a program for a relatively small organization, you may start with the C-suite to determine the goals. If you work for a larger organization, it may make more sense to start with department or functional heads.

In addition, determine the skills required to achieve the business goals or desired outcomes, and ascertain leaders' current skill level. In addition to C-suite and functional heads, speak with the direct managers of your target leaders, or if you work in a matrixed management organization, speak with the dotted-line managers.

Finally, don't overlook the program participants. To design a program that employees will find valuable and want to take part in, you must understand the challenges leaders face daily. That information will enable you to incorporate the support and development the leaders require for success in their roles and career development.

## Tools

You can choose from many tools to support your gap analysis.

**Interviews** provide the most detailed information and allow for follow-up questions. Build an interview protocol checklist to ensure a consistent data-gathering approach. Interviews provide subjective and perceptive data, so be careful to document the actual responses and not your interpretations. Interviews are essential for gaining insight from senior management.

**Focus groups** enable you to gather data similar to that from interviews but from a larger population, saving you time and increasing your diversity of participants