

Virtual Working Group: Continuous Learning - Adjusting Leadership Development Programs in the Wake of COVID-19

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Key Takeaways

1. While the current situation has created a host of challenges, it has also increased the criticality and centrality of leadership development and has created an opportunity for the field to reinvent itself.
2. Companies are stepping back to reevaluate their portfolios and determine which programs should be converted to virtual delivery, those that should be put on hold, and new offerings that need to be built. Many companies have continued to offer high potential and frontline leader programs, particularly large-scale offerings aimed at more junior leaders.
3. The crisis has led companies to adjust both the delivery and content of their leadership programs. Companies are experimenting with new methods aimed at maximizing learning in the virtual environment and have also pivoted to create resources around what leaders need right now (e.g., resilience, mindfulness, empathy, agility).

Participating Companies

Bloomberg
CDW
Cigna
Hormel Foods
HP
Johnson & Johnson
Johnson Controls
Medtronic
R1 RCM
SABIC
Terex

Although more countries are relaxing coronavirus containment-measures, it remains unclear when many employees will return to the office and restrictions on travel and in-person gatherings will be relaxed. To ensure the continuity of critical leadership development initiatives, particularly those targeting top talent, new leaders, and underrepresented populations, companies have begun to convert a number of programs from in-person to virtual delivery. To help companies think through this changing landscape and learn from one another, Brad Bell, William J. Conaty Professor in Strategic Human Resources and Academic Director, CAHRS, and Brenda Benaim, Head of Leadership and Talent Development, Americas at Bloomberg, hosted a virtual working group focused on how companies are adjusting their leadership development programs in the wake of COVID-19. Below is a summary of the key themes that emerged from the discussion.



Overall Effect of COVID-19 on Leadership Development

At the start of the working group, participants were asked to describe, in one word, the effect that the current situation is having on leadership development. The responses, which are shared in the word cloud below, illustrate the varied impact of the current crisis. On the one hand, participants noted increased disruption and challenges, including cuts to development budgets. At the same time, however, many participants believe the criticality and centrality of leadership development has increased and that there is an opportunity for reinvention and creativity. Overall, the group was optimistic that the field could emerge from the current crisis more impactful and relevant than ever before.



Which Leadership Development Programs are Companies Prioritizing for Virtual Delivery?

Rather than force-fit programs into a new mode of delivery, companies are stepping back to reevaluate their portfolios and determine programs that should be converted, those that should be put on hold, and new offerings that should be built. As an example, one company did scenario planning for their various programs to decide how they might proceed with each.

Although there was no one-size-fits-all approach, many companies have continued to offer high potential and frontline leader programs by converting them to virtual formats. This seemed particularly true for large-scale programs aimed at more junior leaders. Yet, there were companies that had put many or all of their offerings on hold. In part, this decision was guided by a view that the offerings would be less effective if offered in a virtual environment due to the loss of critical elements, such as networking. Also, some companies paused their programs because leaders were not in the right mindset.

What Adaptations Have Been Made to Leadership Development Programs in Response to the Crisis?

The crisis has led companies to adjust both the delivery and content and their leadership development programs. Given the transition to virtual delivery, companies have been experimenting with innovative ways to engage



participants and to provide opportunities for networking. For instance, there is an increased focus on facilitating discussions rather than teaching at participants. In addition, to maximize “in class” time, participants may be given prompts to think about or assignments to discuss in small groups in advance so they are primed for discussion. In-person networking has been replaced by virtual activities, such as using a meal-delivery service for a group cooking class, and there has been an increased emphasis on 1:1 learning opportunities (e.g., mentoring). Finally, creative solutions have emerged, such as having leaders record videos or starting a podcast series.

In terms of content, firms have been pivoting to create resources around what leaders need right now. In particular, there is an increased focus on resilience, mindfulness, emotional intelligence, agility/adaptability, and empathetic conversations. There has also been a realization that some skills that were previously not thought of as critical, such as leveraging technology to communicate, have become key differentiators, and there are other skills that in the past may have only been critical for some leaders, such as leading virtual teams, that are now essential for all.

The Future of Leadership Development Field

As noted earlier, the prevailing view is that the current situation represents an opportunity for the field. It is a chance to experiment with new program designs and deliveries, many of which will likely persist even after in-person once again becomes an option. At a more fundamental level, it is an opportune time to reevaluate what leadership really means and to add a more human element to work which has been lacking before now.

This Summary Report was prepared by Brad Bell for participants of the Continuous Learning - Adjusting Leadership Development Programs in the Wake of COVID -19 Working Group.

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