


# LEADERSHIP SHOULD NOT BE A LUXURY GOOD: SCALING LEADER DEVELOPMENT FOR THE FORGOTTEN MAJORITY

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**It is time for a paradigm shift in leader development toward an approach that emphasizes inclusivity and scalability. We flip the current script that organizations use to develop leaders (which focuses on a small portion of the workforce that has been identified as “high potential”) by highlighting the untapped potential of teaching *all* organizational members how to use their experiences to grow their capacity for leading, and by identifying the essential systems and practices that can support them in doing so. Extending and integrating insights from theories of leader development, personal growth, and learning at scale, we first outline the practices that promote leader development as part of this flipped script, and then explain how organizational stakeholders can trigger and support that growth at scale by leveraging recent technological advances to help employees draw leadership lessons from their everyday work experiences. Our scalable, flipped-script approach enhances the leader development of the many, thereby enlarging the pool of leadership talent in the organization as a whole. In proposing it, we challenge organizations and educators to take bold steps toward a more democratic, dynamic approach to leader development.**

Leader development is clearly the “luxury handbag” on organizations’ training and development shopping list. It is expensive: organizations worldwide spent almost \$60 billion on leader development last year, which works out to approximately 17% of their overall training expenditures, between 1% and 5% of their total revenue, and an average of \$444 per employee (Ismail-Wey, 2023; Know Your Talents, 2024; Yemiscigil, Born & Ling, 2023). It is often useful for those who get it: a meta-analytic review suggested leader development programs are generally effective in accomplishing their goals (Lacerenza, Reyes, Marlow, Joseph & Salas, 2017). And it can be a smart investment for the future: organizations realize, on average, a \$7 return for every \$1 they devote to leader development (Crist, 2023).

Like the buyers of some luxury handbags though, top executives, who have their eyes on the health of the overall organization, are finding their leader

development investments unfulfilling (Leroy et al., 2022; Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019). Only a third of HR executives feel their current leader development programming is effective in preparing leaders for the future, and only 18% of organizational leaders feel their organization’s leadership pipeline is sufficient to meet future needs (Curphy, Hogan & Kaiser, 2025; Jackson, 2024). Current economic conditions are causing purchases of luxury goods to slow (Randi, 2024). Might leader development suffer a similar fate?

We suggest that the answer to this question is bound to be “yes,” unless organizations make significant changes to the way they develop leaders<sup>1</sup> and do so in a way that creates the potential for greater leadership capacity. To put things more bluntly, organizations’ current, misguided approach shortchanges their true potential to develop leaders. Our argument’s foundation lies in another parallel between leader development offerings and luxury handbags:

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The first author thanks Michael and Susan Jandernoa for their support of her research since 1998. We used generative AI (Chat GPT-5.2) for grammar and proofreading.

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<sup>1</sup> We adopt Day’s (2000) distinction between “leader development”—the personal development of an individual leader—and “leadership development”—the development of an organization’s collective leadership capacity.

both are only accessible to elites. The current script for leader development in most organizations is clear: hive off the top 10% to 15% of “high potential” employees and enroll them in expensive training programs (Kruse, 2024) to prepare them for even bigger roles (Church, Rotolo, Ginther & Levine, 2015). This approach mirrors (and has likely been informed by) the longstanding scholarly tendency to view leaders as heroic figures and equate leadership with occupying a position of formal authority (Ashford & Sitkin, 2019; Day, 2024).

Although the current script has proved valuable for the subset of organizational members who are invited to participate, it is fundamentally flawed. By investing in the development of a selected few elites, organizations miss the chance to tap into the latent leadership potential possessed by the remainder of their workforce (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019). The current script essentially sends a message to most organizational members along the lines of “not you, no need for you to worry about leading or developing as a leader” (Kwok & Shen, 2022). In this way, it fails to recognize and reward the leadership efforts and potential of rank-and-file employees (Haslam, Alvesson & Reicher, 2024). The current script is also at odds with organizations’ stated desire to have more leadership happening at more places, as well as with research findings on shared and informal leadership, which have clearly established that “other” organizational members can contribute in vital ways to the development of systems of distributed leadership, for the betterment of everyone involved (Carson, Tesluk & Marrone, 2007; Wang, Waldman & Zhang, 2014; Wellman, Newton, Wang, Wei, Waldman & LePine, 2019). These “other members” are also likely more diverse than organizational elites, which may further enhance their ability to contribute creative leadership approaches that increase profitability and effectiveness (Dixon-Fyle, Huber, del Mar Martínez Márquez, Prince & Thomas, 2023).

Moreover, while we may believe that we know a great leader when we see one (Haslam et al., 2024), some research hints that organizations do a poor job of identifying their “high potential” employees (Intagliata, Sturman & Kincaid, 2022; Zenger & Folkman, 2017), suggesting that many individuals who could offer valuable leadership contributions are being overlooked. Given that “leader” is a valued social identity in many settings (Day, Harrison & Halpin, 2008; DeRue & Ashford, 2010a) and that individuals today often yearn for the sense of meaning that such roles provide (Gast, Probst, Schaninger & Simpson, 2020), the current script may be underestimating individuals’ desire for growth in the personal and

interpersonal effectiveness arenas so essential to leading well. With some encouragement, more individuals can come to see themselves as leaders, and with a different approach, they might learn how to grow their own leadership abilities, thereby gaining a sense of valued meaningfulness in their work (Christensen, 2010; Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010).

Put differently: while top managers claim that they need more and better leaders at all levels to cope with the dynamism in today’s business environment and promote the success they need to survive (Conger & Fulmer, 2003), the way that they are currently approaching leader development leaves them almost certain to fail at accomplishing those objectives. Could we flip this flawed but common script and make both organizations and their members better off? Is it possible to articulate a “flipped-script” leader development methodology that both addresses the problems organizations face (the need for more leaders at more levels) and capitalizes on individuals’ desire to develop as leaders?

Fortunately, the conceptual groundwork for a flipped-script methodology has already been laid, beginning with Morgan W. McCall’s proposal that leader development occurs primarily through everyday work experiences, relationships, and challenges, rather than formal programs (McCall, 2004; McCauley & McCall, 2014). Subsequent research on leader development (e.g., Day, 2024; Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm & McKee, 2014; DeRue & Ashford, 2010a; DeRue & Wellman, 2009; Nesbit, 2012) and personal growth in organizations (Ashford, 2021; Boyatzis, 2006; Ganti, Ashford & Cormier, 2025) highlights the role of individual learning rather than experiences alone as critical to the journeys individuals undertake as they develop as leaders. It is time to put this learning journey at the center of leader development efforts. If organizational stakeholders<sup>2</sup> better understood how employees pursue leader growth and some of the barriers to and amplifiers of this process, they could marry that understanding with supportive HR practices and recent technological advances to create systems and structures that support and encourage all

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<sup>2</sup> We use the term “organizational stakeholders” to refer to any organizational member seeking to advance a flipped-script leader development program. The specific roles held by these members may vary from organization to organization. However, initially, they are likely to include top managers, formal leaders, and members of human resource (HR) and information technology (IT) departments. As we explain, over time, participants in the program will also become important stakeholders.

their members to engage in the practices necessary to acquire relevant leader competencies. Essentially, we are arguing that organizations must flip the script of leader development, moving from enhancing the skills of the few identified as having potential to enhancing the leadership of “the many” by teaching them how to learn better from their experiences, and then scaling that leader development effort by supporting them in doing so.

The “flipped-script” approach we outline here opens the doors to a leader development methodology that is highly personalized, fluid, yet broadly accessible. To return to our earlier metaphor, instead of providing a small percentage of their workforce with identical luxury handbags, organizations could equip their entire workforce with customizable backpacks, containing the most personally relevant and important features. Enabling employees to cocreate their own developmental experiences in this way both builds bench strength across the organization and provides the organization with important feedback on employees’ leader development-related needs and preferences that could be used to refine program elements over time. Although our primary focus is on leader development, we propose that greater leader development at the individual level, if supported by specific scaling practices, can facilitate (but not guarantee) greater leadership development and organizational learning at the collective level (Day, 2024). As emerging leaders share their challenges, learning, and growth, they build not only their own capacity but also the capacity of others around them.

The remainder of our essay unfolds as follows. First, we briefly explain the historical antecedents of the current leader development script and illuminate its implicit assumptions. We then synthesize existing literature addressing how leaders grow to identify the critical individual-level practices with which a more universal leader development program should engage. Next, we briefly review the literature on learning at scale to identify design principles that enable organizations to deliver content to large numbers of people effectively. Building on and integrating these insights, we propose an approach to leader development that is both personalized *and* scalable. We conclude by considering the organizational implications of our proposed approach.

### HOW DID WE GET HERE? ORIGINS OF THE CURRENT SCRIPT

Clarifying how we arrived at the current leader development script helps unearth assumptions that

need to change to move to a new model. Indeed, the current script is buttressed by some longstanding and often implicit beliefs about leadership. First, it assumes “leader” is inherently tied to positions of formal authority (Ashford & Sitkin, 2019; Day, 2024). Under the current script, those picked for investment either have recently been promoted into such positions, have risen through the ranks of such positions, or are being readied for them. The “formal manager = leader” assumption blinds organizations to the potential for informal, emergent leadership. Such leadership is becoming increasingly important both for organizations that need to cope with a dynamic environment and for individuals who hope to advance their careers (Carson et al., 2007; Wellman, Ashford, Sanchez-Burks & DeRue, 2022; Wellman et al., 2019).

Second, the current script is based on a heroic model of leadership (Haslam et al., 2024; Sims & Manz, 1991), grounded in Weber’s (1968) conceptualization of “charismatic authority.” Such authority entails:

[A] certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he [*sic*] is set apart from other men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers and qualities. These as such are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as divine in origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader. (Weber, 1968: 241)

Consistent with Weber’s thinking, heroic models conceptualize leadership as a special skill limited to special people who are readily identifiable (Haslam et al., 2024). These models are reinforced by an industry of consulting firms, corporate trainers, university faculty, authors of books featured in airports, and motivational speakers, all offering high-priced services to train the chosen few (Petriglieri, 2016; Wellman et al., 2022). Heroic models of leadership have proven resilient, despite studies consistently failing to identify any one single personality template that consistently predicts leader effectiveness (DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman & Humphrey, 2011) and instead revealing that anyone can lead effectively if they are self-aware and willing to grow (George, Sims, McLean & Mayer, 2007).

Indeed, the field’s current fixation on heroic models of leadership may cause us to miss leadership models that point to quite different sets of behaviors, such as humble- or servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 1998; Owens & Hekman, 2012). In fact, heroic leadership models do not reflect the highly personal and idiosyncratic nature of leadership as individuals

discern exactly where and how they need to grow to lead well in their specific setting, an assessment critical in our flipped-script model.

Third, not only does the current script align with inaccurate but commonly held assumptions about the nature of leadership, but recent research suggests that such luxury offerings may simply be for show or a gratuitous pat on the back for elite employees, rather than optimally developmental (Vongswasdi, Leroy, Claeys, Anisman-Razin & van Dierendonck, 2023). Disturbingly, a panel of academic directors of leadership centers at leading business schools recently noted that, “They did not expect these programs to actually develop leadership skills” (Vongswasdi et al., 2023: 6), and others argue that their benefits may be overclaimed (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Fischer, Dietz & Antonakis, 2024). Unfortunately, it appears that the current leader development script may have devolved into no more than a symbolic rite of passage in many organizations.

Initially, the conventional script for leader development involved enrolling a selected group of individuals holding formal leader roles in classroom-based workshops and training programs (DeRue & Wellman, 2009), which were, “by their nature episodic rather than continuous and ongoing” (Nesbit, 2012: 204). This approach changed with McCall and colleagues’ insights on the learning potential of developmental work assignments (McCall, 2004; McCauley & McCall, 2014; McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott & Morrow, 1994). In addition to sending high-potential employees off to a class or giving them books on leadership, which has been criticized for its ineffectiveness at developing leaders (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019), organizational stakeholders now put their high-potential employees into experiences that researchers identified as particularly important to growth (McCauley et al., 1994). However, under this conventional script, these stretch experiences were still only made available to a select few and the lessons learned were often not capitalized upon (McCall, 2010).

### PERSONALIZING LEADER DEVELOPMENT: A NEW METHODOLOGY

The flipped-script leader development program we are proposing offers a bold departure from traditional approaches. At its core lies an individualized growth process through which any organizational member can grow in their leadership skills and attributes. This process is depicted in Figure 1 as Individuals’ Action Learning Cycle. Our focus on individual

learning extends McCall and colleagues’ work on developmental experiences by proposing that experiences do not teach if individuals are not ready and able to learn (Ashford, 2021; Ashford & DeRue, 2012). Drawing from the literatures on leader development (e.g., Boyce, Zaccaro & Wisecarver, 2010; Day, 2024; Nesbit, 2012; Orvis & Ratwani, 2010; Reichard & Johnson, 2011) and personal growth (e.g., Ashford, 2021; Boyatzis, 2006; Ganti et al., 2025), we identify several states and practices that enable such learning.

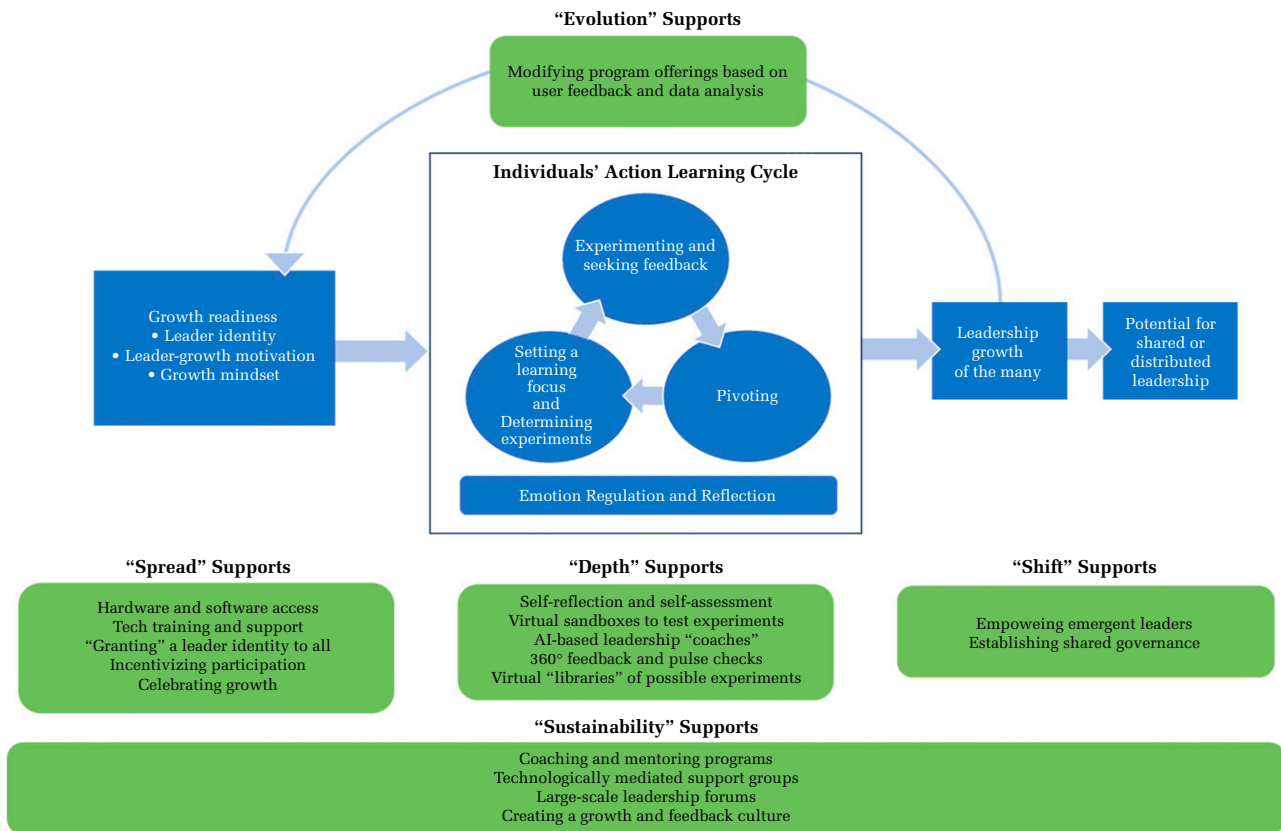
### Attaining Developmental Readiness

Developing as a leader is, in part, a matter of being ready to grow. Individuals with higher levels of what Hannah and Avolio (2010) label “developmental readiness” are “better able to reflect upon and make meaning out of events, challenges, and/or opportunities that can stimulate and accelerate positive leader development” (Hannah & Avolio, 2010: 332). Three specific elements of developmental readiness are particularly critical for flipped-script programs, given these programs’ need to touch all members of the organization, not just formal leaders: (1) encouraging the adoption of a leader identity, (2) increasing leader-growth motivation, and (3) helping people to internalize a growth mindset.

**Adopting a leader identity.** Employees will be more developmentally ready for a flipped-script leader development program if the identity of “leader” is a part of their self-concept (Day, 2024; Sluss, van Dick & Thompson, 2011). Individuals who consider “leader” an important part of who they are invest more time, energy, and effort into their leader development (Day & Harrison, 2007; Lord & Hall, 2005) and have more self-efficacy about leading (Lee Cunningham, Sunday & Ashford, 2023; Reichard, Walker, Putter, Middleton & Johnson, 2017). They also tend to lead more while holding positions of formal authority (Quinn, 2005), do more informal leadership (Day & Sin, 2011), experience greater meaning and purpose in their lives (Lanaj, Foulk & Erez, 2019), and take more risks in experimenting with leadership (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Ibarra, 2015). In this way, a leader identity is an important precursor to the leadership experimentation that is at the heart of our proposed approach.

**Increasing leader-growth motivation.** Anyone working in organizations knows that not all individuals want to grow as leaders or even to lead at all (Day, 2024). Rather, individuals differ in their motivation to develop as leaders. Regardless of their motivation levels, increasing leader-growth motivation is

**FIGURE 1**  
**A Blueprint for a Flipped-Script Leader Development Program**



crucial because it influences how actively individuals engage in self-development behaviors (Reichard & Johnson, 2011). While coming to identify as a leader will go some way toward motivating individuals to engage with leadership-specific growth opportunities (Chan & Drasgow, 2001), other aspects of individuals' lived experiences can intensify this motivation. In particular, growth motivation is often driven by a combination of dissatisfaction with the present or a vision of a better future self (Ganti et al., 2025). Individuals may also want to grow as leaders to gain the positive outcomes associated with leading (Vongsawasdi et al., 2023) or because they think it is consistent with being a good organizational member (Chan & Drasgow, 2001).

**Internalizing a growth mindset.** Scholars examining the ways people can learn from their experiences suggest that an essential precursor for personal development is the ability to adopt and maintain a growth mindset regarding the self and leadership (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Ganti et al., 2025; Heslin & Keating, 2017). Leadership offers ongoing challenges (Lanaj,

Jennings, Ashford & Krishnan, 2022). It is a bit of an art form, involving the need to change to fit various circumstances (Day et al., 2008; Gurdjian, Halbeisen & Lane, 2014). A growth mindset shifts individuals' focus from a desire to prove their ability to a desire to grow their ability. If individuals feel they always need to prove that their current level of leadership is adequate or exemplary, they resist messages suggesting needed growth, are reluctant to engage in new experiments, and, as a result, do not grow their leader capabilities over time.

### Engaging in a Learning Cycle

Once individuals are ready to grow, they accomplish it best through their experiences (McCall, Lombardo & Morrison, 1988), but only if they actively engage in a learning cycle (Ashford & DeRue, 2012). This cycle involves several interrelated practices that enable leader growth.

**Setting a learning focus.** People learn from experience best when they have an explicit focus for their

growth as a leader. It is not enough to want to grow generally or to want to be a better leader. Rather, the focus needs to be more on “Where do I need to grow now to be the best leader for my current circumstances?” This learning focus might stem from constructive feedback received that helps the would-be leader identify areas for improvement, or from observing exemplary behaviors in others and striving to emulate them (Ashford, 2021). Individuals’ initial learning focus might be maintained for a long time as growth is achieved in small increments or might be swapped for a more appropriate learning focus in a matter of weeks or months (Ganti, et al., 2025). Perhaps most importantly, this focus must tap into individuals’ intrinsic interests and goals to sustain motivation for development (Hannah & Avolio, 2010; Walker & Reichard, 2020).

**Engaging in productive experimentation.** Once they have adopted a learning focus, individuals can take proactive steps to learn from their experiences by experimenting with small, manageable changes to improve in their chosen growth area (Ashford, 2021). These experiments can range from fully independent efforts to optional, organization-provided activities (Orvis & Ratwani, 2010; Walker & Reichard, 2020). An individual interested in being more approachable, for example, might experiment with smiling more or asking others about themselves. Experimentation involves a series of small, low-risk actions that allow individuals to act their way into improvement (Ashford, 2021; Ibarra, 2015).

**Seeking feedback and pivoting.** Growth in something as personal as leadership requires feedback, especially given that leader effectiveness is subjectively evaluated. Is the would-be leader becoming more approachable or making progress in their listening ability? These questions can only be answered by others. Consequently, would-be leaders need to either learn to observe the cues around them and interpret a feedback message accurately or directly ask others for feedback (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Finally, growing involves the ability to pivot to a new experiment if the feedback suggests that the first is not bringing about the desired improvement (Ganti et al., 2025). Pivoting is not always easy as individuals quickly become entrenched in even a new way of doing things such that it forms a comfort zone (DeRue, Ashford & Myers, 2012; Weick, 1996), but it is essential as would-be leaders pivot their way to effectiveness based on feedback.

**Augmenting processes.** This learning cycle (i.e., setting a learning focus, experimenting, seeking feedback and pivoting) is augmented by two additional

processes: (1) regulating the emotions that accompany leader growth and (2) finding ways to reflect (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Nesbit, 2012). As individuals grow their leadership skills, they may find themselves in uncharted territory (Ibarra, 2015), leading to emotions ranging from excitement and optimism to fear, frustration, and even shame as they try new things and fail (Ganti et al., 2025; Zhang, Nahrgang, Ashford & DeRue, 2020). Emotion regulation involves an ability to up-regulate positive emotions that sustain the would-be leader’s actions and to down-regulate negative emotions that detract from perceiving progress and taking the ongoing risks associated with growth (Ashford, 2021; Nesbit, 2012). Such proactive emotional management helps the developing leader to stay in a growth mindset, maintain a learning focus, and engage in experimentation.

Reflection, whether it is on the entire learning process or micro-moments within it (e.g., the experiments they undertook, the feedback they received, and the pivots they did or did not take) also helps generate meaning and lessons from leadership experiences (Kross, Ong & Ayduk, 2023; Nesbit, 2012;). Particularly when combined with a growth mindset (Heslin & Keating, 2017), reflection helps would-be leaders develop a better sense of group needs, make more leadership contributions, and lead more effectively (DeRue, Nahrgang, Hollenbeck & Workman, 2012; Ong, Ashford & Bindl, 2023). Empirical evidence also shows that leaders who reflect on their challenges with compassion (as opposed to simply reflecting on their challenges generally) are better able to maintain a leader identity and are engaged in more leadership (Lanaj et al., 2022).

## DELIVERING SCALABLE GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

The framework for personalized leader development outlined above holds the potential to unlock profound growth in every member of an organization. The challenge for stakeholders seeking to flip their organization’s leader development script is to support individually-tailored leader growth among a huge pool of potential leaders and encourage sustained engagement with their growth. In other words, they need to shift from a “program approach” to a “systems approach” for developing leaders (Day, 2024). Fortunately, rapidly emerging technological innovations have enabled educators in other domains to make important strides in addressing similar challenges. Building on the burgeoning literature on learning at scale (e.g., Clarke & Dede, 2009; Coburn, 2003;

Joksimović et al., 2018; Li, Craig & Schroeder, 2023), we provide a roadmap for how organizational stakeholders can encourage large numbers of employees to move ahead in their personal leadership journeys. That roadmap begins with understanding scalability and then using that understanding to identify the necessary organizational supports for individuals' leadership growth journeys. The dimensions of scale we discuss here are certainly relevant to upscaling other leadership development efforts, but the most effective actions for each of the five dimensions would likely vary depending on the underlying model of how leaders develop.

### Dimensions of Scale

“Learning at scale” refers to the tools that facilitate the “learning and teaching that take place with high numbers of learners and a high ratio of learners to facilitators” (Roll, Russell & Gašević, 2018: 473). Truly scaling the proposed flipped-script leader development approach involves more than simply making it available to as many people as possible, or the program's “spread” (Coburn, 2003). While important, spread is just one of five dimensions of scale (Clarke & Dede, 2009; Coburn, 2003) that must be considered to ensure a flipped-script leader development program has the desired impact. We discuss these elements below and summarize them in Table 1.

A second relevant dimension of scale is the depth of a flipped-script leader development program.

“Depth” can be defined as the extent to which the program influences the deeper, more personal aspects of leading (e.g., their identity, their personal leadership philosophy, their authenticity, etc.). Without depth, a leader development program might enroll a very large number of participants, but it will not truly flip the script as these highly significant underpinnings of leader growth are left unexplored. To achieve depth, organizations must ensure that individuals who engage with the program come away having changed as leaders in a profound way (Petriglieri, Wood & Petriglieri, 2011).

Additionally, truly scaling a flipped-script model of leader development requires the transition of ownership over leadership growth from top managers to participants themselves, which we refer to as “shift.” The shift of a flipped-script program is closely tied to the program's perceived legitimacy and long-term viability. Participant “buy-in” alone is insufficient; rather, participants need a deep understanding of the program, its aims, and its value to them. The goal is for them to ultimately take full responsibility for maintaining their ongoing growth once external pressures subside (Coburn, 2003; Simkins, 2012).

Shifting ownership of the program to participants opens the door for the fourth dimension of scale, “evolution,” defined as learning from users' overtime adaptations of the program to rethink its design and priorities (Clarke & Dede, 2009). Evolution allows the flipped-script program to morph and improve

**TABLE 1**  
**The Five Dimensions of Scale in a Flipped-Script Leader Development Program**

| Scale Dimension | Description   | Key Questions   |
|-----------------|---|---|
| Spread          | Expanding the reach of the program by increasing the number of participants and ensuring access to necessary resources                      | How many employees are participating?<br>Are resources available to support broad engagement?   |
| Depth           | Enhancing the quality and impact of the program, fostering deep, meaningful changes in beliefs and practices                                | Does the program lead to significant changes in employee practices?<br>Does it foster leader identity, authenticity, and personalization? |
| Shift           | Transitioning ownership from external leaders to internal stakeholders, empowering them to maintain and advocate for the program internally | Does the program invite employees to take ownership of it?<br>Do employees deeply understand and participate in the program?              |
| Evolution       | Adapting the program based on user feedback, enabling continuous improvement that reflects current needs and insights from participants     | Does the program allow for ongoing adaptation?<br>Does feedback inform changes to the program?  |
| Sustainability  | Ensuring the program endures over time, becoming a stable part of the organization rather than a temporary initiative                       | Is leadership growth embedded in the organizational culture? Is there long-term program commitment?                                       |

Note: Adapted from Coburn (2003) and Clarke and Dede (2009).

in the hands of its stakeholders, even sometimes to the point that it reshapes the original designers' perspectives. For instance, an employee participating in the scaled development program may discover an innovative way to incorporate generative AI into her personal leader development that she then shares with others in the organization until it becomes widely adopted. In this way, a program that allows for evolution can create a cycle of continuous improvement between the designers and the adopters of the program.

Finally, a flipped-script leader development program must be "sustainable," meaning it must have the ability to endure. Implementing a sustainable leader development program requires organizational stakeholders to commit to it, not as a temporary initiative but rather a long-term strategy. Without this enduring commitment, the program risks being perceived as a passing fad, which undermines its credibility and effectiveness.

### TOWARD A PERSONALIZED, SCALABLE, FLIPPED-SCRIPT MODEL OF LEADER DEVELOPMENT

This section outlines a blueprint for a comprehensive, scalable, flipped-script leader development program. The program (depicted in Figure 1) foregrounds individuals' personal involvement in their own growth and describes how organizations can support this involvement in ways that are broad, deep, learner-owned, capable of evolving with organizational needs, and sustainable, thereby achieving scale (Clarke & Dede, 2009).

#### Supporting Spread: Fostering Widespread Technological and Developmental Readiness

An important first step in implementing a flipped-script leader development program is supporting the program's spread by encouraging as many organizational members as possible to participate in its early stages. Although recent technological innovations can make the action learning content at the core of the program widely accessible, potential participants may be unwilling or unable to engage with this content if they do not feel comfortable using the technological tools through which it is delivered or if they do not see the content as personally relevant or beneficial (Parasuraman, 2000). To overcome these obstacles and support spread, organizational stakeholders can take two steps early in the program's life, as follows.

**Enhancing technological readiness.** Laying the groundwork for a flipped-script leader development

approach involves empowering employees to engage with the rapidly emerging technologies essential to achieving each of the five dimensions of scale (Li et al., 2023). Individuals' readiness for technologies such as AI-based chatbots, virtual sandboxes, and knowledge repositories—technologies they may initially distrust (Chakravorti, 2024)—must be built. As an example, an AI-based leadership coach will be of little value to an employee who does not know how to use the chosen interface and does not trust the input they receive from their virtual coach. To combat distrust of and discomfort with adopting new technologies, organizational stakeholders can provide employees with the training and support necessary to be curious about, early to adopt, and eager to explore new tools (Blut & Wang, 2020; Parasuraman, 2000). Advocates of a flipped-script program can further ignite the program's spread by ensuring that all employees have Internet access, the necessary hardware (wireless routers, laptops, headphones), and a single cohesive and easy-to-use leadership-development "portal" through which they can access all the resources and tools used in the program.

**Enhancing developmental readiness.** Organizational stakeholders can also support the spread of a flipped-script leader development program by enhancing employees' developmental readiness (Hannah & Avolio, 2010) through targeted initiatives that promote a widespread leader identity, growth motivation, and growth mindset. First, employees take their cues from the top (Liu, Rattan & Savani, 2023; Podolny, Khurana & Hill-Popper, 2005). As such, it is critical that top managers take significant steps in the initial stages of a flipped-script leader development program to shift the understanding of leadership within their organization from one primarily reliant on a heroic, individual model (Haslam et al., 2024) to one that recognizes that leadership can come from many places (Ashford & Sitkin, 2019). Together with this shift, top managers and mentors throughout the organization should encourage employees who may view themselves as followers or simply team members to adopt a *leader identity*—to see themselves as leaders. Such encouragement represents a leadership identity "grant" thought to be helpful in instantiating a leader identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010b). Steps here could involve acknowledging informal leadership contributions and referring to all employees as leaders in organizational communications. Top managers could also share blog posts and other leadership resources that describe and promote shared, distributed models of leadership (Wellman et al. 2022), which further challenge ingrained heroic perspectives.

Second, beyond helping organizational employees to adopt a leader identity, organizational stakeholders can foster the *motivation to grow as a leader* in as many employees as possible. Leader-growth motivation is often driven by a combination of dissatisfaction with the present or a vision of the leader they could be (Ashford, 2021; Ganti et al., 2025). Stakeholders can foster this motivation by creating videos, blog posts, and other communications that explain how broad participation in leadership development programming will advance the organization's overall vision and improve employees' enjoyment of their daily work activities. Using vivid, image-laden rhetoric that explains the connection between the individual elements of the program and its larger vision (Carton, Murphy & Clark, 2014; Carton, 2018) and providing personalized stories about how growing as a leader benefitted specific organizational members (Wald, Johnston, Wellman & Harlow, 2021) will be particularly helpful in such communications. Program offerings could also be "gamified" by creating levels, awards, challenges, and badges to help increase employees' intrinsic motivation to engage with programming (Camilleri & Neelim, 2024). The goal is to invite all employees to voluntarily take actions in the pursuit of leadership growth.

An additional key to supporting spread is fostering employees' *growth mindset* as described above (Dweck, 2006). Top managers can help spur employees' growth mindset by sharing their own "bumps in the road," mistakes, and tensions, and celebrating their growth as leaders as well as their leadership successes (Owens & Hekman, 2012). To unlock the full benefits of a growth mindset, individuals must not only believe that they can grow but also believe that their jobs are malleable, a combination referred to as a "dual-growth mindset" (Berg, Wrzesniewski, Grant, Kurkoski & Welle, 2023). High-level leaders who actively frame job roles as adaptable can help cultivate a dual-growth mindset.

To sum up, spread is supported through groundwork. This groundwork involves actions on the part of organizational leaders to set a culture, reinforcement by direct supervisors, and programmatic interventions from HR and IT departments.

### **Supporting Depth: Intensifying the Ongoing Learning Cycle**

Once as many employees as possible have been equipped and motivated to engage in the action learning process at the heart of the flipped-script program, organizational stakeholders can support the program's

depth by helping participants change as leaders in profound ways. Achieving these changes involves engaging in the learning cycle depicted in Figure 1, so that leader growth is achieved in areas that are personally relevant and critical to their teams.

**Supporting employees in setting a learning focus.** Because growth works best when development is focused and targeted, organizational stakeholders should help flipped-script program participants in two ways. First, they should help them with feedback mechanisms to target and refine their developmental focus over time (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). Second, they should involve them in stretch assignments that come with unfamiliar responsibilities, high levels of leadership responsibility, and the need to create change, work across organizational boundaries, or manage diversity (Ohlott, 2004; Orvis & Ratwani, 2010). Organizational stakeholders can aid in this stage of the process by clearly articulating the leadership skills they consider to be especially relevant, providing access to self-reflection exercises or self-assessments that provide employees with insights into their leadership-related strengths and growth opportunities, and encouraging participants to articulate their leadership-specific motivations and goals (Day et al., 2014; London, 2001). If the organization utilizes a performance management system or conducts annual reviews, it would be helpful to encourage all employees to generate and document leader development goals as part of this process. Finally, organizational stakeholders can invest in an AI-based leadership coaching tool to include in the program's web portal that can help employees chart a course for their development (Mollick & Mollick, 2023).

**Enabling active experimentation.** Organizational stakeholders can support the active experimentation of aspiring leaders by, for instance, establishing a virtual "library" to serve as a centralized repository for training materials, case studies, and interactive tools that offer ideas of improvement strategies in particular areas (Day et al., 2014). AI-based leadership coaches can assist would-be leaders to move beyond simply identifying potential techniques by helping individuals analyze their upcoming work schedules and identify or create opportunities to practice new skills in relatively safe environments (Ashford, 2021; DeRue & Wellman, 2009). Alternatively, in well-designed virtual "sandboxes," participants can "play" with different approaches to leadership in ways that encourage deep learning (Wieman, Adams & Perkins, 2008).

**Facilitating feedback seeking and pivoting.** Organizational stakeholders can also enhance the

depth of flipped-script programming by supporting participants in seeking feedback on the effectiveness of their experiments and pivoting to different experiments as needed. Offering employees 360-degrees feedback evaluations (that allow for anonymous feedback) at regular intervals would be valuable (Brett & Atwater, 2001). The web is replete with feedback tools (e.g., 15Five, TINYpulse, Culture Amp, Qualtrics) that could provide employees with more immediate and diverse perspectives on how others have been affected by their leadership experiments. Organizational stakeholders can also leverage tools such as LinkedIn's "Employee Voices" that enable individuals to get quick "pulse checks"—anonymous feedback tied to a specific event.

Coaching is another great way for participants in flipped-script leader development programs to receive feedback on their leadership experiments (Ely, Boyce, Nelson, Zaccaro, Hernez-Broome & Whyman, 2010; Theeboom, Beersma & van Vianen, 2014) and identify potential pivots. Programs here might include pairing employees up with a peer coach who could observe the employees' interactions (in a meeting, for instance) and generate an independent assessment of the employees' leadership effectiveness. Alternatively, generative AI possesses an extraordinary ability to provide personalized advice and feedback while reducing the image risk associated with seeking feedback (Ashford, De Stobbeleir & Nujella, 2016). For instance, an AI-based leadership coach could give feedback on experiments and strategies to create maximal alignment with an individual's identified learning focus, helping them pivot to experiments that might be more effective in addressing developmental needs.

#### ***Deepening emotion regulation and reflection.***

Organizational stakeholders can help foster participants' ability to regulate the emotions necessary for success in a flipped-script leader development program that involves managing challenges, supporting others, and growing through experience (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2005; Boyatzis, Stubbs & Taylor, 2002; Lindbaum & Cartwright, 2010). They might develop short online classes on important emotion regulation skills to give employees the tools they need to handle their emotional responses constructively. Additionally, formal leaders can openly demonstrate their emotional resilience by discussing their own struggles to normalize help to create a culture that accepts the emotional ups and downs of development as normal (Côté, 2014; Lilius, Worline, Dutton, Kanov & Maitlis, 2011; Owens, Wallace & Waldman, 2015). Sharing such as this gives employees greater permission to

explore their own emotions more deeply and to develop more personalized and authentic strategies for coping with them, thereby enhancing the depth dimension of scaling.

Organizational stakeholders can promote the intentional reflection that enhances the learning cycle by institutionalizing after-action reviews that give participants the opportunity to reflect in a structured way on their leadership experiments (DeRue et al., 2012). Generative AI can also provide systematic prompts for reflection and then personalized insights based on data collected during earlier stages, helping individuals and teams track their progress and set new goals. Additionally, organizational stakeholders could prompt the use of digital whiteboards such as Miro, Mural, or Stormboard that collate and then distribute observations from diverse stakeholders. These joint reflection boards can scale individual efforts by building a collective understanding of what has happened during participants' leadership experiments and what it means.

#### **Supporting Shift: Transitioning Ownership from the Few to the Many**

Up until now, we have emphasized the role of top managers and formal leaders in supporting the spread and depth scaling of a flipped-script leader development program. However, as the program gains momentum, these formal leaders should take intentional steps to transition ownership of the program to participants by empowering emergent leaders and setting up a system for them to share in the governance of the program.

Employees must be empowered to take ownership of their own development for the flipped-script leader development program to achieve shift (Coburn, 2003). Simply passing on responsibility without additional support will likely end poorly, leaving both management and employees frustrated. Rather, empowerment efforts are needed to offer employees clear access to resources, visible feedback mechanisms, and opportunities to make consequential decisions pertaining to the future of the program (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Lee, Willis & Tian, 2018; Spreitzer, 1995). They should focus not just on content, but also on enhancing individuals' self-regulation and autonomy to facilitate self-directed growth (Walker & Reichard, 2020). Employees should also be given visibility for their contributions, such as through publicly sharing stories of effort and success, which can promote motivation and meaning at work (Brun & Dugas, 2008).

Achieving shift also happens when organizations take steps to establish a system of shared governance over the flipped-script program. These efforts could include defining the program's critical roles and forming peer-led governance councils or worker groups responsible for these roles (Lee, 2024) with rotated membership to increase ownership and participation (Rothschild-Whitt, 1976). At the same time, shared governance should intentionally guard against re-centralization of authority in the hands of the original stakeholders, which can demotivate employees and discourage meaningful participation (Foss, 2003; Foss & Klein, 2022; Lee, 2024). When participants hold both concrete responsibilities and a meaningful voice in shaping the system, the flipped-script program becomes more scalable, adaptive, and resilient.

### **Supporting Evolution: Fostering a Positive Spiral of Leadership Development**

One of the strengths of the flipped-script approach to leader development we are proposing is the feedback loop embedded in its design. As shown in Figure 1, as participants engage in intentional and relevant leadership experiments, seek feedback, and pivot as needed, they will grow as leaders. This growth will be reflected in a stronger leader identity and a greater motivation to further develop (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). In this way, the proposed flipped-script program sets the stage for positive developmental spirals: deviation amplifying loops in which individuals' initial growth-oriented activities prompt and enable further growth (Lindsley, Brass & Thomas, 1995; Weick, 1995). As individuals move through these spirals, their developmental needs may change. The emergent leaders of flipped-script programs can ensure participants do not outgrow the programs by taking intentional steps to support the programs' evolution.

***Refining program offerings based on user feedback and data analysis.*** Many of the emerging technologies we are suggesting organizational stakeholders utilize to help scale the program also generate data (e.g., transcripts of participants' virtual chats with their AI leadership coaches, or clicks on the program's virtual library). As aspiring leaders customize their backpacks by using one program element and avoiding another, their usage data can prompt program evolution. It gives program designers the data they need to better tailor resources to meet employees' specific developmental needs (Basten & Haamann, 2018). Additionally, organizational stakeholders could seek feedback on participants' experience in the program and desired changes through

short surveys, focus groups, and virtual suggestion boxes. When implemented, the modifications suggested by such feedback and data analysis will help flipped-script leader development programs evolve to best meet participants' developmental needs. Luxury handbags, once made, remain the same, but customizable backpacks offered by flipped-script programs offer the additional benefit of allowing for evolution over time.

### **Supporting Sustainability: Toward an Enduring Flipped-Script Program**

Two activities are likely to be particularly important for supporting a flipped-script program's sustainability (Ganti et al., 2025): (1) establishing robust structures for social support, accountability, and alignment, and (2) creating a growth and feedback culture.

The flipped-script leadership development approach we are advocating is a personal journey. However, individuals are better able to undertake and stay invested in this journey in the presence of ample social support (Boyce et al., 2010; Orvis & Ratwani, 2010; Reichard et al., 2017). Given that many employees today are geographically and temporally dispersed, flipped-script leadership development programs need to be particularly intentional about providing participants with access to social support and structures that build in accountability, virtual or otherwise. One idea here is for organizational stakeholders to implement a program of technologically facilitated peer coaching groups in which individuals share their learning journey and receive support and ideas. A Michigan company created such coaching groups and used the software application Trello to help participating leaders design experiments and maintain accountability as they returned to the "Trello board" to report on their progress and coach each other through any challenges, dilemmas, or setbacks that occurred (Ashford, 2021).

Organizations could also implement large-scale leadership forums (either in-person or virtual) designed to help sizable groups of participants align their interpretations of their ongoing experiences. These forums should legitimize disagreement and discussion among participants as part of the personal growth process. As participants share with each other about their personal journeys, they may learn new tools they can experiment with moving forward (Wellman et al., 2025) and thereby help each other grow. In addition to supporting participants' individual leader development, such forums are also likely to foster the development of collective leadership capacity by helping individuals coordinate their

activities and fostering the emergence of shared mental models of leadership (Cannon-Bowers, Salas & Converse, 1993; Wellman, 2017). Comparing notes about individual growth experiences may ignite a process of collective sensemaking that enables participants to converge on a shared understanding of key leadership challenges and the appropriate behaviors to overcome them (Weick, 1995).

The program elements we described will be more sustainable if they are embedded in and supported by an organizational culture that promotes growth and learning. For example, when Satya Nadella took over as CEO of Microsoft in 2014, he was intent on shifting that culture from a “know it all” culture to a “learn it all” culture (Ibarra, Rattan & Johnston, 2016). He hit the message hard, was consistent, and articulated it often. Microsoft also institutionalized asking employees about their growth in quarterly feedback meetings (Ashford, 2021). As a result of these actions, learning and growth became increasingly embedded in Microsoft’s organizational culture. Similarly, scholars have documented how top management can assist in shifting the culture of an organization from one where individuals felt the need to constantly prove their ability (what the authors labeled a “genius culture”; Canning, Murphy, Emerson, Chatman, Dweck & Kray, 2020; Murphy & Dweck, 2009) to one that promotes more learning and growth. This cultural shift can be achieved in part by supervisors simply asking in quarterly, one-on-one meetings, “How have you grown since we last met?” (Ashford, 2021). Such questioning prompts employees to attend more carefully to their growth and participate in it more fully and growth becomes both more normative and more of a priority.

## ORGANIZATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Organizational stakeholders claim they want and need many leaders at many levels, yet have been relying for decades on a common script for leader development that focuses on a small group of elites. We have explained how organizations can flip this script by offering an approach to leader development that is both deeply personalized and powerfully scalable. Besides wresting access to leader development out of the grasp of organizational elites, the flipped script, along with initiatives that support that new script for each of the five dimensions of scale, offer organizations several additional benefits.

First, as shown in Figure 1, the flipped-script approach offers the potential for the development of distributed forms of leadership. If individuals become

motivated to engage in a personal journey that enhances their leader effectiveness through this flipped-script leader development program, the results should be more leaders available to the organization—more bench strength (Day, 2000; Reichard & Johnson, 2011). Given informal leaders’ emergence has been shown to have positive associations with individual and organizational outcomes, this emergence in and of itself should be beneficial (Wellman et al., 2022; Wellman et al., 2019; Zhang, Waldman & Wang, 2012). A script approach may also reach a more diverse pool of leader talent within organizations, which may increase their capacity to contribute novel and useful leadership approaches that improve organizational effectiveness and profitability (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2023). Additionally, the emergent leaders produced by a flipped-script leader development program have the potential to serve as the building blocks for a system of shared or distributed leadership that stretches throughout the organization and could yield additional benefits (Carson et al., 2007; D’Innocenzo, Mathieu & Kukenberger, 2016; Nicolaides et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2014). Although, in this essay, we focus on scaling a particular approach to leader development based on stimulating and enhancing leaders’ own growth journeys based on learning from their everyday experiences, organizations might also apply the five dimensions we have identified to scale up other approaches to leader development or organizational learning.

Second, implementing a flipped-script leader development program facilitates a shift from rigid to fluid learning. Rather than short periods of intense learning decoupled from life, flipped-script methods support leader development embedded in actual practice, thereby addressing a lingering critique of current script approaches (Nesbit, 2012; Petriglieri et al., 2011). The prevalence today of “smart” devices connected to the Internet lets organizational members access and engage with learning materials, structured development opportunities, and supportive communities while fully immersed in their current jobs (Hosain et al., 2018; Joksimović et al., 2018; Morel, Coburn, Catterson & Higgs, 2019). In this way, leader learning and growth becomes an ongoing activity that is intimately tied to employees’ work contexts, enabling the development of tools that are immediately relevant to participants’ current work circumstances and reducing the need for “translation” of insights from the classroom to the workplace.

The benefits of our proposed approach are real and significant, but implementing it is not without challenges. Indeed, recent work has warned against an overly and purely positive understanding of

leadership and leader development (e.g., Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Fischer et al., 2024; Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). Some of the more salient obstacles are as follows.

First, some organizational members may not be interested in becoming leaders (Day, 2024). Others might engage in some of the initial elements of the program, but not all. In fact, research on other scaled learning programs suggests that the attrition rate of these programs is often quite high (Reparaz, Aznárez-Sanado & Mendoza, 2020; Xing, Chen, Stein & Marcinkowski, 2016). A flipped-script program of leader development will likely appeal to those already oriented toward personal growth (whom Vongswasdi et al., 2023, label “believers”), as well as those who emphasize behavioral change as an important outcome of leader development programs (“empiricists”). However, other individuals, whom Vongswasdi et al. (2023) label “cynics,” will tend to dismiss these programs as nonsubstantive “window dressing” at best and ill-disguised hidden “perks” for politically minded employees at worst. Naturally, employees with this mindset may be wary about engaging in flipped-script initiatives. Organizational stakeholders may therefore need to take additional actions to encourage participation. They can communicate from the program’s onset that this is not merely bureaucratic hand-waving meant to make employees feel good to help lessen perceptions of the program as “window dressing” or as an HR marketing ploy. They can also emphasize how the proposed flipped-script program invites employees to integrate leader development into employees’ daily work, thereby addressing a second core belief of the cynical mindset that leader development programs are disconnected, stand-alone activities, and unrelated to work (Vongswasdi et al., 2023). Lastly, by expanding leader development opportunities to the forgotten majority, flipped-script programs uniquely address the concern that such programs are merely symbolic rites of passage for career advancement by making them available to all.

Additionally, while a potential benefit of the proposed approach is the development of a more diverse pool of leader talent, demographic minorities may face additional barriers in the workplace that could restrict their willingness and ability to opt into flipped-script programs. This includes people who do not see themselves as reflected in the organization’s rhetoric of who a leader is or do not see people like themselves in the current leadership ranks of the organization (Begeny, Huo & Ryan, 2023). Proactive outreach (e.g., through personal invitations,

mentoring relationships, and inclusive leadership) to explicitly invite and involve these groups in leadership development will introduce greater diversity of experience, thought, and representation into the organization’s leader pipeline.

Finally, while we believe leader development can benefit leadership development by increasing the available leader talent, we note that, for this potential to be fully realized (i.e., for the contributions of the individual leaders a flipped-script program produces to be optimally synchronized and aligned to produce reliable and long-lasting shared or distributed leadership), additional efforts and support would likely be required. Among these, explicitly describing and promoting group and collective narratives of leadership as part of the flipped-script program’s evolution (Day, 2024) could help members enact collective leadership (e.g., Empson, Langley & Sergi, 2023). More distributed formal leadership roles would also need to be publicly codified and strictly adhered to in order to combat the constant pull back to centralized authority (Lee, 2024). Top leaders must support but not control the leadership development process, all while combating heroic leadership assumptions in themselves and throughout the organization (Day, 2024). Despite these obstacles, a flipped-script leader development program presents an exciting new starting point from which to enact these changes and lays the groundwork for the development of leadership as a collective.

## CONCLUSION

Like luxury handbags, organizations’ traditional leadership development programs hold the promise of profound value. However, their exclusivity currently limits their utility. While it has long been held that leadership is learned from experience (and therefore that anyone can learn it), there is also a growing recognition that such learning does not always happen naturally and that just what is learned is often “happenstance and ad hoc at best” (Day, 2010: 41). We argue that organizations can cultivate more profound leadership growth by “flipping the script” on traditional leadership development approaches. Teaching *all* employees a set of practices that enable them to grow themselves as leaders, and supporting and scaling that growth using the latest technological innovations and other long-standing organizational supports, enables organizations to offer a leadership development program that is both broadly adopted and deeply personal. In this sense, organizations can move from providing a select few employees with

expensive, decorative handbags to equipping the majority of employees with customizable backpacks. By transforming leadership learning from a privilege for the elite few into a resource for the many, organizations can unlock the latent leadership capacity of their entire workforce, unleashing positive change at both the individual and organizational levels.

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