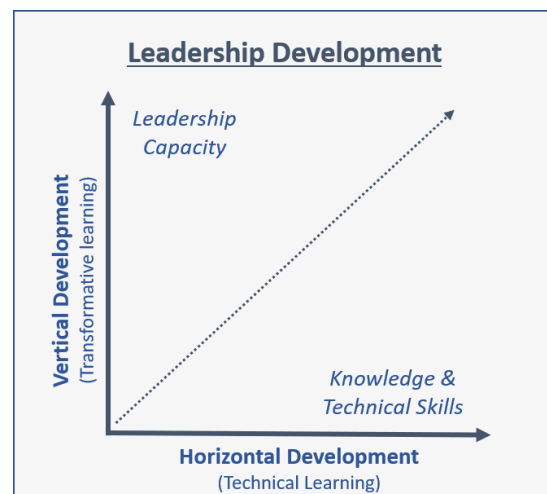# Vertical Leadership Development in the Virtual World

Individuals and organizations have had to adapt to a new reality – a virtual one. The era of Covid-19 has presented a challenge to organizations and their leadership development initiatives. In-person programs came to a screeching halt as the world tries to navigate the new reality of social distancing and tele-working. While the traditional barriers to in-person development programs such as high cost and considerable time commitment always existed, never before has there been a time where in-person training has not even been an option. While we all hope that the unique situation that we all find ourselves in is temporary, it is reasonable to expect that there will be implications from this crazy year of 2020 that will stick around even after our world goes back to "normal". It is therefore important that we use this opportunity and become creative about ways to foster transformational leadership development in the virtual world.

Transformative learning, sometimes also called *vertical development,* differs from technical (horizontal) learning. In the context of leadership development, the goal of transformative learning is to achieve a growth in mindset that expands the individual's *leadership capacity*. Leadership development programs grounded in transformative learning help develop leaders who are more self-aware, intentional, relational, who use critical thinking and are open to continuous growth. These leaders in turn create more inclusive working environments and act as positive change agents in the society. Leadership is, after all, inherently others-oriented. Horizontal learning is important but on its own it is not sufficient for increasing leadership capacity. One way to think about the distinction is to understand horizontal

development as an increase in expertise - what we know, while vertical development as a shift in *form* - how we know what we know and how we are in the world. Of course, leadership development is complex and includes a mixture of both horizontal and vertical development. However, drawing the distinction between the two types of learning is helpful, especially in the context of virtual learning. Traditionally, virtual learning has been effective in furthering technical knowledge, i.e. the type of knowledge that adds to our information (knowledge) base. However, there is a general consensus that virtual programs are inferior to in-person on-site programs when it comes to fostering vertical development and delivering transformational outcomes.

Leadership Development

Leadership Capacity

Vertical Development (Transformative learning)

Knowledge & Technical Skills

Horizontal Development (Technical Learning)

What can we do to facilitate vertical development in a virtual setting? The good news is that we are not completely in the dark about what it is that fosters transformative learning. Recent research, including my doctoral research study, provides insights into the aspects of learning and program design elements

that foster transformative learning experiences. These findings can be used to inform the design of virtual leadership development programs that foster vertical development in the participants. The research identified 5 important aspects of the learning process that need to be present:

1. *Focus on Deep Learning*
The term *deep learning* has been used in the context of describing artificial intelligence (AI) as a process that mimics the functions of a human brain allowing machines to solve complex problems. I use the term *deep learning* in the context of human development because I feel that it best captures the essence of vertical development. Examples of program design elements that stimulate deep learning include experiential activities, presence of productive challenge, feedback, reflection, and an intentional focus on emotions (affective learning). While it may seem that some of these elements may be more difficult to incorporate in virtual settings, virtual programs can draw on this data to provide developmental experiences that are more holistic in nature and require participants to engage in their development in real-world contexts. Development is inherently experiential, and it does not occur in a vacuum of the program itself. Incorporating aspects of deep learning into the program itself while challenging the participants to apply and practice their learning takeaways in real-world situations incorporates the experiential aspect into the holistic design of the program.

2. *Focus on Engagement/Self-directed Learning:*
It seems obvious that any kind of learning cannot be successful without the engagement of the learner. However, lack of engagement is often the Achilles' heel of virtual programs. It is thus one of the most important aspects that should be considered when it comes to virtual learning. One of the main ways to create engagement is to allow the participants to shape the learning process. Some options for fostering engagement and self-directed learning include participants being responsible for their own development, self-organization, participant-led exercises, dialogue, and facilitation that is focused on participant engagement. All these elements can be used to make learning in virtual settings more engaging and impactful for the participants.

3. *Learning Environment that Support Relationship Building and Trust:*
Development is an inherently vulnerable process. Unlike informational learning, vertical learning is a process that includes cognitive, affective, and relational aspects. Research shows that relationship-building and trust are core requirements for creating a learning environment that fosters transformative learning. Through my research I found that trust and relationship building can be fostered by cultivating an informal atmosphere, through participant socialization, by encouraging participants to share personal experiences, and by emphasizing the importance of maintaining confidentiality within the program. It is undoubtedly easier to create this type of environment as part of in-person development programs, however I would argue that these elements can successfully be integrated in a virtual setting improving the impact of virtual development programs.

4. *Cohort format that Supports Mutual Learning:*
Mutual learning is probably the most important prerequisite of transformational outcomes. My research found that relational learning plays a role of a moderating variable for transformational learning, meaning that relational learning greatly enhanced vertical development in participants. In the context of program design, the aspects that foster relational learning include having a cohort format where participants can learn from each other's experiences, creating a sense of shared experience,

incorporating group exercises that allow for small group discussions, and having participants serve as mentors to each other. Virtual programs should intentionally incorporate elements of relational learning into their designs. There are countless virtual platforms that can help engage participants with each other in a meaningful way. Virtual programs should also provide a social platform for participants to engage with each other outside of the structured program.

5. *Relevant Learning Content:*
One last element that fosters transformative learning is having learning content that is relevant to the participants. This may seem obvious, but it is not as easy to achieve as it may seem. First step lies in understanding the audience and targeting the content to their needs. The next step, however, is equally, if not more important. In my research I found that participants' engagement in the program was highest when they were able to relate the content to their personal experiences, real-world applications, and the organizational context. It is thus not only the content itself that matters, but also how the content is delivered and how it relates to the participants' individual contexts that facilitates engagement.

Leadership development is complex, but it does not have to be complicated. When approached with intention, all the elements described above can be used to inform the design of virtual development programs and deliver meaningful transformative experiences for the participants. Who knows, this virtual reality that was forced upon us may lead to some new creative approaches to leadership development. The virtual world allows us to span across geographical boundaries and provides an opportunity to reach and engage a much wider audience. We should view virtual development programs not only as a necessary alternative to in-person learning but also as an opportunity to *enhance* current approaches to leadership development program design.

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