

Business Insights

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5 STEPS TO CREATING A SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PLAN



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Matt Gavin |  Staff

 Career Development, Leadership, Leadership Principles

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Leadership development is a key initiative for many businesses today. In a [recent survey by global research and advisory firm Gartner](#), 57 percent of human resources executives said cultivating their company's current and future leadership pipeline is a top priority for 2020, with a focus on extending decision-making and planning responsibilities deeper down into their organizations.


Additionally, a [report by the World Economic Forum](#) projects leadership and social influence to be among the fastest-growing workplace skills through 2022, which ties into a burgeoning trend for all workers to become lifelong learners to address emerging skills gaps.

For motivated professionals seeking to advance their careers, creating a leadership development plan is vital to staying ahead of the curve and rising to the demands of the job market. According to Harvard Business School Professor Ethan Bernstein, the path to effective leadership is more fluid now than in the past.

“Once upon a time, you would enter a leadership development program in a company that might put you on a 20-year track to becoming an executive,” Bernstein says. “Many of us can’t even fathom that today. But that should be freeing in that it gives us license to develop ourselves and create our own individualized leadership development plans.”

As you plot your career trajectory and consider how you can maximize your professional influence and impact, here are five steps to creating a successful leadership development plan.

HOW TO DESIGN YOUR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PLAN

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1. Assess Where You Are Professionally

Mapping your leadership development starts with understanding yourself and where you stand professionally. Taking stock of your strengths, weaknesses, and workplace tendencies can help you identify areas for improvement and anticipate pitfalls that could arise on your journey to becoming a more capable leader.

“In the process of identifying how what you’ve done before may or may not make you successful going forward, you raise your awareness about how what you already know will contribute to, or undermine, your capacity to successfully lead others in the future,” Bernstein says.

Completing an [assessment](#) can be a valuable way to reflect on your motivational drivers and limitations, and gain a more holistic view of your [personal leadership style](#). Pairing self-reflection with a 360-degree assessment enables you to solicit feedback from your colleagues and peers, which can provide greater insight into how others experience you and, in turn, [build a keener sense of emotional intelligence](#) you can leverage throughout your leadership development journey.

Related: [4 Tips for Developing Your Personal Leadership Style](#)

2. Set an Attainable Goal

Goal setting is an essential component of any leadership development plan.

“Just like anything else: If you don’t know where you’re going, you’re probably not going to get there,” Bernstein says. “It sounds overly simplistic, but that summarizes why goals are important.”

Bernstein teaches the PACE model, an acronym for:

- **P**ick a leadership goal
- **A**pprise others in your inner circle of the goal
- **C**ollect specific ideas on how to improve
- **E**licit feedback on how you’re doing

PACE is employed by learners to select leadership goals and chart a course of action for achieving them. The first step in the process, Pick, is centered on identifying and prioritizing a goal you can strive toward to boost your professional effectiveness. When setting this goal, it’s important to take an agile approach and consider both the short- and long-term.

“You can’t lose sight of where you’re trying to go over the span of a decade or even a career, which is why making long-term goals is important,” Bernstein says. “But we can’t, as human beings, make progress if we make the milestones so grand and far away that they seem unachievable. A little bit of progress each day keeps the frustration at bay.”

As you define and establish your key goal, consider how you’ll measure progress along the way to ensure you stay on track.



3. Engage in Leadership Training

[Leadership training](#) can benefit you no matter your career stage. Beyond the opportunity to gain and practice the skills needed to [empower employees](#) and [influence others](#), you’re exposed to faculty and peers you can lean on for support, and from whom you can learn and grow.

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According to Bernstein, honing your leadership abilities in a classroom setting is advantageous because it provides a low-risk environment for reevaluating and fine-tuning goals when you encounter setbacks.

“It’s helpful to have a group of people—we call it your ‘inner circle’—who have heard and embraced your leadership goals, and whose conversations helped inform how you would go about achieving them,” Bernstein says. “In moments of challenge and relapse, you can go back to them for encouragement and courage. You can revise your goals in a safe environment because you have a level of openness and vulnerability with those people built into the course.”

4. Interact with Your Network

A professional network is one of the most valuable resources in any leader’s arsenal, so make it a point to [grow yours](#). Throughout your leadership development journey, connect with like-minded peers and seek out opportunities to not just employ the knowledge you’ve gained, but receive feedback on your progress.

These kinds of interactions are core tenets of the online course [Leadership Principles](#). In Leadership Principles, learners practice [delivering feedback](#) to each other through video upload exercises that allow them to evaluate their effectiveness in various business scenarios.

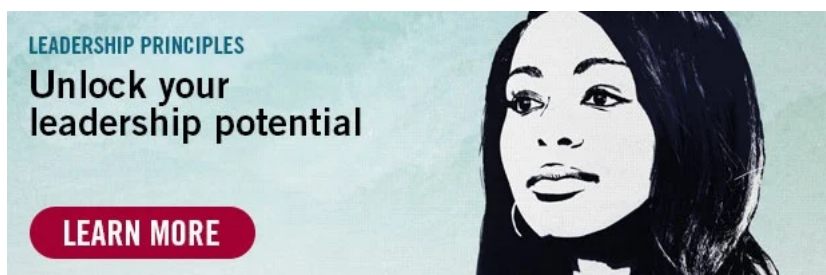
“Ensure your leadership development includes some interaction—with other learners and also with the people who are benefitting and suffering from your current capabilities as a leader,” Bernstein says. “We try to teach people to be good protégés, as well as good leaders. It’s an ongoing process. That interaction is important in making things that seem very theoretical ultimately become very practical.”

5. Hone Your Soft Skills

Effective leadership requires a unique blend of [characteristics and skills](#).

“There are skills you need as a leader that you don’t necessarily develop in any other context, at least in a focused way,” Bernstein says. “These include communication, career planning, knowing how to create and evaluate authentic change in a person, including yourself, and negotiating career transitions. These are things you typically won’t do many times in your career, but they will be very important to continuing your leadership trajectory.”

As you chart your leadership development plan, consider how you can bolster essential soft skills like [actively listening](#), practicing [empathy](#), and [creating value in a negotiation](#) so you can ensure you’re prepared to tackle any organizational challenges that come your way.



MAXIMIZING YOUR LEADERSHIP TRAJECTORY

Striving to become a strong, capable leader is a commitment you can make at [any stage of your career](#)—although doing so sooner means you can reap the benefits longer. Through assessing where you’re at professionally and thinking deeply about where you want to go, you can design a leadership development plan that enables you to channel your passions and build the skills needed to be more impactful in your role.

Do you want to enhance your leadership skills? Download our [free leadership e-book](#) and explore our online course [Leadership Principles](#) to discover how you can become a more effective leader and unleash the potential in yourself and others.

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About the Author

Matt Gavin is a member of the marketing team at Harvard Business School Online. Prior to returning to his home state of Massachusetts and joining HBS Online, he lived in North Carolina, where he held roles in news and content marketing. He has a background in video production and previously worked on several documentary films for Boston's PBS station, WGBH. In his spare time, he enjoys running, exploring New England, and spending time with his family.

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