



Empowering Leaders:

Don't Become Siloed in a Rapidly Changing World

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What makes leadership dynamic is that it is both an area of study and a practice. It's not only about who you are but also what you do, pairing innate characteristics with experiences that shape potential. We aren't born with all the abilities, we can't just read a book and become a great leader, and we don't gain all the competencies needed to face a rapidly-evolving future in a weeklong seminar. Leadership development is an ongoing and iterative process of self-awareness, learning, reflection, application, and skill development. How can we best bridge the gap between learning and doing to keep pace with the times?

Growth as a leader
happens in community and
over time, not in a vacuum.

In the COVID era, leaders face more intense pressure, complicated problems, and global challenges than ever before, and at the same time, they're also more physically and socially isolated. Finding peer learning opportunities with people of diverse backgrounds and outlooks from outside your organization is a powerful way to gain a new frame of mind. Peer learning that is well organized and implemented works in both face-to-face and virtual environments and is among the most cost-effective of learning strategies.¹

Leaders are often surrounded by people who are like-minded, have similar experiences and backgrounds, or who are likely to agree with their world view. We can become siloed in a department, sector, or industry. It is tough to get real insights

¹Topping, K. (2005). Trends in Peer Learning. *Educational Psychology*. 25: 6, 631–645.

or candid feedback from colleagues, family, and friends who are either too close to our situation, worried about our feelings, or lack relevant experience. We need insights from people who are objective about our situation, bring fresh perspectives from a variety of environments, and are willing to push us outside our comfort zone. Growth as a leader happens in community and over time, not in a vacuum.

However objective we think we may be, our thoughts and actions are usually influenced by unconscious biases. Exploring a range of approaches from a variety of businesses, non-for-profits, and government organizations can generate new ideas. The more diverse the thoughts and opinions – whether that be age, gender, cultural, racial, religious, socioeconomic, personality – the better. With a deeper understanding of our instinctual behaviors and those of others, we can work together to pinpoint and address biases.²

Encountering new people, places, and ideas allows us to make unexpected connections and challenge our established ways of thinking.

Even if we are disciplined in thought and action, we don't know what we don't know. We can be missing the big picture and even bigger opportunities. Sometimes we need different experiences to gain new perspectives and pique our curiosity. Encountering new people, places, and ideas allows us to make unexpected connections and challenge our established ways of thinking.

New experiences can spark our innate inquisitiveness, and the more innovative the instruction, the more likely we are to actively engage in the content. We learn faster and better when we discover things on our own instead of passively listening. Challenging our brains with new experiences and staying socially engaged may create new connections between brain cells and keep our thinking sharp.³

Experiences without reflection are just activities. Insights come from thinking about what we've done and connecting the dots in a new context. We need to spend time processing what we think we have learned with others who have gone through the event with us. Reflection encourages community amongst participants and a higher level of analysis that allows us to bring actionable insights to our real-world situations.

The learning doesn't all happen in a retreat or workshop. Real sharing and insights often happen on the perimeter – in private conversations – where you find out no one has perfect families, everyone faces struggle and loss, and what shows are the most binge-worthy this season. These shared experiences and common bonds provide a foundation of trust for members of the group to feel comfortable confiding important issues and pushing one another to make progress.

You don't have to go it alone, but it does come down to you. A personality profile assessment can help you get grounded in how you're hard-wired to behave, adapted for the workplace, and best able to perform in a team. Based on your individual goals – or where you're stuck – an executive coach can help you accelerate your progress to amplify your strengths and overcome barriers through thoughtful questioning, strategic planning, focused attention, and accountability.

Even with self-awareness and a solid peer group, leadership development is a process. Complex situations that involve human behavior change require iterations to make progress. Our evolution as leaders happens through countless small steps. We learn new things, apply them in the real world, and see what works and what doesn't. Our ability to grow requires experimentation with new approaches and context changes that prompt us to make the right decision.⁴ Consistent peer meetings, whether that be in person or virtually, give us an opportunity to mark progress and to receive timely feedback. Having a consistent meeting rhythm with people we know well and connect with regularly helps with short term issues and ongoing development.

²Chugh, D. (2018). *How Good People Fight Bias: The Person You Mean to Be*. Harper Collins Publishers.

³Owens, M. & Tanner, K. (2017). Teaching as Brain Changing: Exploring Connections between Neuroscience and Innovative Teaching. *CBE Life Sciences Education*. 16(2): fe2.

⁴Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R. (2009). *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. Penguin Group.

Best Practices for Leadership Development:

- 1 Surround yourself with a peer learning cohort from a variety of sectors and industries
- 2 Learn new approaches from world-class thought leaders
- 3 Seek novel experiences in unique environments
- 4 Encourage the exchange of diverse perspectives
- 5 Complete an in-depth personal assessment to become more self-aware
- 6 Engage an executive coach for leadership growth and progress toward important goals
- 7 Concentrate on mindset and getting comfortable with ambiguity
- 8 Take time for discussion with peers and self-reflection
- 9 Focus time on developing key leadership competencies
- 10 Apply insights in the real world as part of an iterative process

Leaders need to be ready to address an unprecedented amount of revolutionary changes. The technology-enabled future with autonomous vehicles, augmented reality, 3D printing, and radical healthcare breakthroughs is upon us. The convergence of interrelated technologies like artificial intelligence, solar power, quantum computing, and blockchain will unleash exponential change and dramatically impact every

industry and aspect of our lives.⁵ Our natural response in the face of uncertainty is to hunker down and resist new ideas, and people value practicality over creativity when faced with ambiguity. Our tendency is to become more closed-minded and negative at precisely the time we should be more open, collaborative, and adaptable.⁶

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How can we overcome this hard-wired predisposition? It starts with a growth mindset that focuses on abundant possibilities instead of the limitations of scarcity and linear progress. We need an outlook that considers opportunities over restraints, that values invention above critique and that celebrates failure as a means to success.⁷

It's unnatural for us to embrace change and get excited about ambiguous situations, but a curriculum focused on developing a growth mindset combined with a strong peer support network can help leaders get more comfortable feeling uncomfortable. Leadership competencies are not intuitive traits for most of us to develop, and we have to overcome significant barriers for these ways of thinking to thrive. If we are aware of our biases and opportunities, we can adapt our thinking and take appropriate action. We can surround ourselves with people who can help us break out of our linear thinking conventions. We can seek novel experiences that will expand our perspectives. We can build capabilities that make us better prepared for the future. And we can create the conditions for our organizations and the next generation of leaders to flourish.

Leadership is challenging because it's always two things at once -- learning and doing, self-examination and group interaction, helping people where they are and getting them where they need to be. It often feels like we're building the bridge as we're going across it. That's why leaders enroll in

⁵Diamandis, P. H., & Kotler, S. (2012). *Abundance: The Future is Better than You Think*. Simon & Schuster, Inc.

⁶Roberto, M. (2019). *Unlocking Creativity: How to Solve Any Problem and Make the Best Decisions by Shifting Creative Mindsets*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

⁷Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Random House.



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the Tobias Fellows Program - the leading university-based experiential leadership development program that helps leaders across sectors broaden their horizons. Over the course of a year, Fellows build relationships, gain actionable insights, and develop key leadership competencies based on their unique abilities and circumstances.

The Randall L. Tobias Center for Leadership Excellence prepares leaders for 21st century challenges. Since 2006, the Tobias Center's signature initiative, the Tobias Fellows Program, has bridged the gap between knowledge and practice, so leaders are empowered to develop people, organizations and communities who can solve complex problems. The yearlong, immersive interactive program is unique among leadership development opportunities as it brings together a peer learning cohort from a variety of sectors and industries to cultivate skills and immediately make an impact on their organizations. Fellows attend ten leadership retreats in unique environments, while receiving multiple one-on-one executive coaching sessions for leadership growth and progress toward important goals.

Those interested in this topic or other topics at the intersection of the study and practice of leadership should contact the Tobias Leadership Center to explore the leadership programs now available.

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