



## Six Keys to Design a Learning Journey for Leaders

### How to Create Informative Development Experiences

#### Learning Journeys Are not Alike

Leadership is a journey of learning opportunities, in which individuals face transformational challenges that help them grow with time. For this reason, no two journeys are alike.

Consider the following questions to gauge the quality of how you currently develop leaders:

- Is there a clear link between business goals and your leaders' development plans?
- Do you have a cookie-cutter approach to leadership development, or do you personalize the experience for your leaders?
- What do you do before and after formal learning or training to ensure application of new skills?
- Do you involve senior management in development initiatives?

#### How do you get started?

Here are six things to keep in mind when creating a Learning Journey.

1. **Begin with the end in mind.** Start a dialogue with senior stakeholders and management team to help contextualize and gain their buy-in to support this development investment. Discuss the key strategic priorities, cultural issues, leadership competencies, objectives and benefits of the program, expected challenges and barriers, and the support learners need to make the journey a success.
2. **Know where the gaps are.** A well-designed Learning Journey starts with an accurate diagnosis to determine and focus on the most critical leadership skill gaps. This may be a group needs analysis or individual assessments based on 360-feedback or assessment centers. When a learner knows exactly where his or her gaps are, it creates a tension—and increased momentum—to improve and change.
3. **Extend learning beyond development events.** The 70:20:10 philosophy—where 70% of the learning occurs on-the-job, 20% from others, and 10% in formal learning experiences—helps drive a culture of continuous learning where leaders are getting support and development they need, even when they don't realize it. Organizations that get it right are finding ways to engage their learners more before, during, and after the formal development events with the right mix of methodologies including coaching from mentors, projects back on the job, just-in-time learning through online portals, peer learning and networking groups, simulations, and executive speakers. Social technology further enables the 70:20:10 approach. The term "Learning 2.0" describes the ability to take new social media tools (like blogs, wikis, and discussion forums to name a few) and use them to enhance Learning Journeys.

#### WHAT IS A LEARNING JOURNEY?

Learning Journeys are a strategic development approach anchored in business strategy, but with practical application. Ideally intended for groups, cohorts, or communities of leaders, a Learning Journey takes place over time. It incorporates multiple formal and informal development components into a unique design, which optimizes your training investment and maximizes learning "stickiness" to change behaviors and transform leaders. A Learning Journey is perfectly tailored to your organization's leadership style, culture, and the specific needs and preferences of the audience's level of leadership.



## WHY A LEARNING JOURNEY?

Research from HR.com and DDI (“**Be Better Than Average: A study on the state of frontline leadership.**”) reveals that only 9 percent of HR professionals rate their organization’s development program as very high when they offered open enrollment programs with a curriculum of classroom-based courses. In contrast, 91 percent rate their organization’s development program as very high when their programs utilized a journey-based approach, with continuous learning and a mix of methods. Organizations using the Learning Journey approach to develop their leaders are nearly 75 percent more confident in that level of leadership. With a well-designed Learning Journey, benefits include:

- Clear alignment between development solutions and an organization’s business strategies.
- New perspectives, insights, and a common leadership language among the cohort of leaders learning together.
- Sustained learning to build a culture of continuous learning.
- A thoughtful blend of formal and informal learning

4. **Involve the learners’ direct managers.** Do you often hear: “Is my boss going through this too?” Like any successful leadership development initiative, successful execution of a Learning Journey requires support from the leaders of the learners and management. Without buy-in from the senior management team, and the continued support from the direct managers who manage those embarking on the Learning Journey, the initiative will surely fail. Involve them by providing content overviews through formal programs and reference guides. Establish learner-manager meetings to set expectations and agree on specific ways and opportunities to apply the new skills in a project or to solve a real business issue.
5. **Measure impact.** Conduct individual or group assessments after the formal learning component to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of your Learning Journey. Tools include self-assessments to promote learning insight, feedback surveys around critical skills, behavioral assessments, program evaluation and measurement of impact or ROI. Documented success will help build the case to create more Learning Journeys in the future to benefit more leaders.
6. **Plan for flawless execution.** Clarify parameters of the Learning Journey such as timings for the initiative, audience size, and delivery modalities (e.g. instructor-led, virtual, or Web-based options). Consider the Learning Journey’s alignment with other talent systems and processes. Confirm accountabilities and milestones with the project team from design to implementation.

When designed right, three critical perspectives converge in the Learning Journey, enabling individual and organizational transformation. These perspectives are *business*—understanding and solving business challenges and cultural priorities; *role*—improving leadership in one’s area as well as the overall organization; and *self*—evolving one’s knowledge, experience, competencies, and beliefs.

A journey often denotes more than simply going from one place to another – it invokes a sense of personally meaningful change; that you will return somehow different from when you left. Leadership development must simulate the essence of taking a journey so that, upon return, leaders and their organizations are transformed. And just like any other journey, a Learning Journey requires planning, discipline and execution to be successful.

Annamarie Lang is a Senior Consultant with DDI’s Leadership Solutions Group. She develops innovative leadership solutions, such as traditional and virtual classroom courses, sustainability activities, and other new products. Annamarie has a passion for supporting clients in creating holistic approaches to training and development and in working toward practical applications for positive business results.

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