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Trends and challenges in developing emerging leaders for ambiguous working environments: a qualitative research study

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TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING EMERGING LEADERS FOR

AMBIGUOUS WORKING ENVIRONMENTS:

A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY

A Research Project

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Abstract

This qualitative research study examined trends and challenges faced by leadership development practitioners in developing emerging leaders for ambiguous working environments, particularly considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Twenty-five participants were interviewed using 16 questions related to competencies, changes in the leadership landscape, and best practices and challenges in developing emerging leaders for present-day working environments. The study found that leaders in hybrid and ambiguous working environments face increased demands, necessitating flexibility, and agility. The results emphasized the importance of a growth mindset and a desire to lead as foundational traits for emerging leaders. Strong communication and interpersonal skills were also crucial, including empathy and creating equitable experiences for distributed teams. A focus was placed on the leadership development gap during the transition from individual contributor to a leadership role. Employee-driven models and inclusivity were identified as important considerations for new leaders. Best practices for developing emerging leaders included coaching, personalized support, and simulations of real-life challenges. This research emphasized the importance of organizational support and behavioral shifts to develop emerging leaders effectively. Based on the research, leadership development practitioners should consider the evolving leadership landscape and emphasize the human element of leadership. This involves cultivating a growth mindset, nurturing a desire to lead, and providing personalized support for new leaders.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Between 2020-2023, how and where we work has changed significantly. The context of a traditional work environment has shifted with an uncertain foreseeable future. Many organizations are moving toward a hybrid or distributed environment, where people work from various locations, both in the office or at their homes, potentially states away (Alexander et al., 2021; Mayer et al., 2023). As employees return to proximal relationships after 2+ years of completely remote working due to the COVID-19 pandemic, new leaders must be equipped with the necessary competencies to effectively inspire and engage their teams (Paakkanen et al., 2021). With the continued ambiguity of our working environments, these leaders must also be more intentional about creating equitable experiences for their direct reports (Klonek et al., 2022).

The term "emerging leaders," for the context of this research study, refers to those entering a phase in their careers where they are responsible for inspiring, influencing, and making strategic decisions on behalf of their larger team, working group, or managed programs (Bolander et al., 2019). While this definition does not exclusively focus on first-time people managers, the research found a significant overlap in how leadership development practitioners see these new leaders. This thesis research aimed to understand best practices, trends, and challenges that leadership development professionals have experienced in developing new and emerging leaders for ambiguous working conditions due to the context of disruption, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

For years, researchers have shown the importance of interpersonal skills as a driver of effective leadership (Dearborn, 2002; Goleman, 1998; Kim et al., 2021; Meinert, 2018; Pitts et al., 2012; Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005). Brendel (2016) published an article in the Harvard

Business Review clearly defining the importance of "soft skills" amongst first-time leaders. A more recent study created by the School of Business at Northcentral University puts emotional intelligence (EI) at the core of its new virtual leadership framework (Lubich et al., 2022).

Charan (2001) describes an entire "transition phase" of skills that new leaders should know as they move from individual contributors to leading others. Other scholars have also suggested that transitioning from individual contributorship to managing people requires more than just competency development but a fundamental shift in how leaders think about themselves in the context of their working teams (Bolander et al., 2019; Crane, 2022; Ward, 2020).

There has also been a fair amount of research on leadership effectiveness in virtual-specific working environments and how the disruption of COVID-19 demanded a closer look at the shift in leadership competencies (Brown et al., 2021; Contreras et al., 2020). E-leadership and teleworking have been around since the 1990s, and some sources have outlined how leaders can guide virtual and distributed teams (Contreras et al., 2020; Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 2008). However, we are at a point where traditional leadership competencies may not directly translate into competency models for hybrid and ambiguous environments (Rabinowitz et al., 2018).

Fowler (2018) outlined the need for a new curriculum of leadership competencies, explaining the science behind top-down motivational strategies of the past becoming antiquated in how leaders empower their employees. Some studies have shown the necessity of emotional intelligence in leaders throughout the COVID-19 pandemic challenges (Brown et al., 2021; Paakkanen et al., 2021). Research suggests that the shift in leadership development needs has been building for some time, even before the pandemic changed how we think about work (Fowler, 2021).

Research Objective and Approach

This research aimed to understand trends in the development of emerging leaders for ambiguous working environments in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was examined from the perspective of leadership development practitioners, particularly in companies that operate in a hybrid work structure. The following questions supported this purpose:

1. What competencies does this present-day environment call for in new and emerging leaders?

2. How has the leadership landscape changed from 2020-2023?

3. What are some best practices and challenges to developing new leaders in our current environment?

Implications of this Research

Between 2020-2023, organizations have changed their work practices in response to government regulations to stop the spread of COVID-19 among their employees and the general public (Klonek et al., 2022; Lubich et al., 2022). As a result of that shift, we have seen specific competencies for effective leadership rise in priority as we continue to navigate through ambiguous circumstances (Brown & Nwagbara, 2021).

There are many capabilities that literature suggests leaders need for hybrid and ambiguous environments; flexibility, empathy, trust, effective communication, emotional intelligence, and several others (Alexander et al., 2021; Brown & Nwagbara, 2021; Center for Creative Leadership et al., 2016; Fowler, 2018; Ovans, 2015; Rose, 2021). Few of these studies focus on new and emerging leaders. This research will shed light on what leadership development practitioners think is essential for new and emerging leaders to thrive in ambiguous working environments.

Organization of Thesis

      This chapter provided an introduction to the study, including a brief background on the subject, the purpose of the study, and the significance of the study. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on developing new and emerging leaders for ambiguous working environments. Chapter 3 outlines the methods used to conduct the study. Chapter 4 reports the study results. Chapter 5 discusses the findings and conclusions, with limitations and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The literature reviewed summarizes the research on trends and challenges in developing new and emerging leaders for hybrid and ambiguous working environments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is structured in the following sections: developing emerging leaders, virtual and hybrid leadership, research on leadership development in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and leadership agility. Though the research on trends and challenges in leadership development since the beginning of COVID-19 is ongoing, this review sheds light on studies conducted until January 2023.

Developing Emerging Leaders

Leadership Competency Frameworks

To understand which leadership competencies today's environment calls for, we must first define and understand "leadership competency." *Leadership competencies* are skills or behaviors that an individual can use to influence a group to achieve a common goal and are considered a "behavioral approach to a person's talent" (Boyatzis, 1982, 2008).

It is natural for competency models and frameworks to change in response to an organization's external environment, including political and economic climate and the industry's maturity. (Boyatzis, 2011, Goleman, 1998). Boyatzis (2011) identifies two leadership abilities, each broken into three categories. Of the two categories, one is a set of behavioral habits that are bare essentials, and the second is a set of competencies that distinguishes outstanding leaders from average ones. The primary leadership abilities suggested are 1) expertise and experience; 2) knowledge (facts and processes); and 3) basic cognitive functioning, including memory and deductive reasoning. The additional competencies specify abilities that differentiate outstanding leaders from average ones (Boyatzis, 1982, 2008; Bray et al., 1974; Campbell et al., 1970;

Dreyfus, 2008; Goleman, 1998; Goleman et al., 2002; Hopkins & Bilimoria, 2008; Howard & Bray, 1988; Koman & Wolff, 2008; Kotter, 1982; Luthans et al., 1988; Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Thornton & Byham, 1982; Williams, 2008) These competencies are clustered into three categories: 1) complex cognitive abilities (systems thinking, recognizing patterns); 2) emotional intelligence; and, 3) social intelligence. However, there are more frameworks to depict common competencies among leaders today.

Fowler (2018) recommends three competencies that aim to support the psychological needs and motivations of employees, which include a) encouraging autonomy, b) deepening relationships, and c) building competence. By utilizing these abilities, leaders will motivate their employees better, empowering them to do their best work and ultimately contributing to organizational success (Fowler, 2018).

Deloitte released a study examining traditional leadership competency models and identified that a core challenge to understanding them is a general overload of information (Rabinowitz et al., 2018). The result of this article was the "Deloitte Leadership 8 Capability Model," which replaces the traditional competency model with a more relevant and effective tool, describing what strong leaders do while corresponding those actions to a 1-2 word capability (Rabinowitz et al., 2018). The eight capabilities included in this model are inspirational leadership, execution, influence, collaboration, direction, business judgment, competitive edge, and building talent.

Another competency model worth noting is the Fin-Tech 5 Competencies (Rabinowitz et al., 2018). In the Deloitte study, the Fin-Tech 5 competencies include strategic thinking, business acumen, aligned execution, people leadership, and informal influence. These competencies are compared or matched to several traditional competency library model examples.

Although this is not a comprehensive evaluation of competency frameworks, research shows that people leadership and relationship management are capabilities commonly found throughout traditional and modern models of leadership competencies.

Emerging Leaders

When individual contributors take on more prominent roles overseeing other employees, relationship management, effective communication, and self-regulation become more critical to their success (Brendel, 2016). New leaders face many challenges as they transition into their new roles, including learning skills that may not have been crucial in their previous roles as individual contributors (Charan et al., 2010; Eiser, 2008).

In addition to these specific skills and competencies, research suggests that while transitioning into a leadership role for the first time, employees should be reflexive in questioning and understanding how their identity or mindset as a manager will develop and how they might use this knowledge to relate to and influence others (Bolander et al., 2019; Crane, 2022). Emerging leaders often do not understand the shift required and continue allocating time to work as they did as individual contributors (Charan, 2010). Studies showing the differences between high-performing individual contributors and successful leaders emphasize the importance of having a growth mindset that is flexible and adaptable to unique situations (Crane, 2022). Additionally, Charan (2010) describes a level of availability or openness that new leaders must have with their employees, which is more likely to inspire their reports to trust them.

Interpersonal skills help new leaders succeed by developing trusting and interdependent relationships with their direct reports and others and creating supportive networks among their managers (Eiser, 2008). Additionally, professionals reported mentorship, constantly using their soft skills, and maintaining a team-player mentality as factors that have led to their success as leaders (Eiser, 2008).

Charan (2010) views the transition as more value-based than skill-based, explaining that relationship building is not a primary responsibility of an individual contributor. Entering a leadership role means receiving constructive feedback from their reports to improve their performance. Crane (2022) explains that new leaders who are most effective operate with a learning goal mindset, actively seeking opportunities for improvement and growth.

Moving from hard skills toward soft skills development, such as focusing on emotion regulation and cognitive adaptability, the new leader can strengthen their shift by developing a mindfulness practice, which encourages self-awareness and being fully present (Brendel, 2016; Crane, 2022).

Overall, the literature demonstrates that shifting into a state of mind focused on enabling the team's success and building trusting relationships with their reports will allow new leaders to be more effective in influencing others (Crane, 2022; Guchiek, 2020). Some of the components noted supra could be combined to summarize the unique skills needed for new leaders. For example, interpersonal skills (relationship and team building, effective communication, empathy, and trust), emotional intelligence (self-awareness and ability to manage one's own emotions), and an ability to influence others with a mindset that focuses on enabling the growth, development, and achievements of the overall team rather than the individual's success.

Virtual and Hybrid Leadership

In addition to employees transitioning into leadership roles, a tremendous shift has been the addition of leading remote and virtual teams for the first time (Gurchiek, 2020; Lubich et al., 2022). Many different terms are used interchangeably to describe leaders in these virtual and remote environments, complicating research in this field. The term e-leadership (Avolio et al., 2000) was developed to recommend that leadership structures may need to adapt accordingly as our society engages and interacts with advanced information technology (Lubich et al., 2022).

Contreras et al. (2020) studied management and leadership trends within the remote working environment, hypothesizing that leaders must develop more complex skills in communication, training, and emotional intelligence (Flood, 2019). Additional studies have identified that a practical approach to leading virtual teams may be from a relationship-focused perspective. The leader is most concerned with building trust and facilitating teamwork to engage team members (Mutha & Srivastava, 2021; S. Brown et al., 2021).

In transitioning from face-to-face interactions to completely remote environments, subtle nuances and visual cues from body language are lost, requiring a heightened sense of awareness and emotional acuity from a leader (Lubich et al., 2022; Mutha & Srivastava, 2021; S. Brown et al., 2021). Traditional leadership frameworks do not account for remote and technology-hosted working environments (Hooijberg et al., 1997; McCann & Kohntopp, 2019), while more contemporary research emphasizes several competencies for leaders working in remote environments (Mutha & Srivastava, 2021). Research suggests that the competencies crucial to hybrid and virtual environments include establishing trust amongst team members, emotional intelligence, and a shared understanding of team and individual goals (S. Brown et al., 2021).

While virtual teams allow organizations to be more flexible and adaptable, they come with challenges around communication, trust, and team cohesion (Mayer et al., 2023). Virtual teams can become self-managing units if the leader can implement systems that support the necessary functions. Research suggests that setting upfront expectations of the team members allows for more autonomy, where the team understands the mission and how it aligns with their individual goals (S. Brown et al., 2021; Steude, 2021).

Leaders face several challenges that usually arise when leading a virtual and distributed team. A significant risk is team members feeling isolated or disconnected from the group and their work (Contreras et al., 2020). It is up to the leaders of these teams to establish positive and

interdependent relationships to fuel a sense of belonging and encourage their team members to all work towards a common goal (Contreras et al., 2020). Not only are leaders expected to have adequate social skills and team-building skills, but there is an additional layer of technological knowledge, change management, and trustworthiness that is required from a leader in a remote environment (Contreras et al., 2020; Lubich et al., 2022; Mutha & Srivastava, 2021; Van Wart et al., 2019).

While there is much research around virtual, remote, and e-leadership, there is a gap in research around hybrid and continuously changing working environments. Some employees work remotely, others are in the office, and many switch those postures regularly. These leaders must tolerate and accept a certain level of ambiguity while they strive to create equitable experiences for their subordinates.

COVID-19 and Beyond

There have been several studies on how the disruption of COVID-19 has shifted our way of working and the complexity of leadership practices and attitudes that follow that shift (Contreras et al., 2020). Microsoft's annual Work Trend Index (2021) suggests that there has been a significant increase in the employees' need for control and autonomy in where and how they work, uniquely since the beginning of COVID-19. This study was conducted by Edelman Data x Intelligence and analyzed productivity and labor signals across Microsoft 365 and LinkedIn, as well as survey data from more than 31,092 full-time employed or self-employed people in 31 countries. This report, along with other research, suggests two major themes. The first theme is that expectations of leaders from their employees, and thus the overall relationship, have changed significantly due to the shared vulnerability, ambiguity, and potential burnout they have faced throughout the pandemic (Brown & Nwagara, 2021; Contreras et al., 2020; Linvill & Onosu, 2023; Lubich et al., 2022; Microsoft, 2021). The second is that researchers are suggesting

a "leading with the heart" style of leadership that is more transformational, empathetic, inspirational, and focused more on interpersonal relationships than financial outcomes (Alexander et al., 2020; Brown & Nwagara, 2021; Contreras et al., 2020; Linvill & Onosu, 2023; Lubich et al., 2022; Microsoft, 2021). A study was done across the Departments of Technology Leadership & Innovation at Purdue University and the Department of Management at Georgia State University to understand the leader and follower dynamics during the evolving organizational elements brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Linvill & Onosu, 2023). Using qualitative data from 12 interviews across Africa, Asia, and the US, their results suggested that leaders shifted from power and control to a more adaptable leadership style, focusing on emotional intelligence and creating an environment of open communication, belonging, empathy, and awareness (Linvill & Onosu, 2023). Research suggests this leadership style may inspire stronger, higher-quality motivation, connection, and commitment to the employee's work (Brown & Nwagara, 2021; Fowler, 2018; Linvill & Onosu, 2023). Additional engagement opportunities between leaders and employees are also recommended, including rewards for building social capital, coaching or mentorship opportunities, and collaborative work processes, which can empower employees to do their best work (Alexander et al., 2021; Linvill & Onosu, 2023).

Another theme found throughout the literature research is the suggestion of extreme flexibility and continuous improvement measures, such as feedback, as two critical factors for leadership success in the current ambiguous working climate (Alexander et al., 2021; Microsoft, 2021).

Leadership Agility

Studies done between 2020-2023 suggest that the development of agility, innovation, empathetic communication, and collaboration are imperative to leadership success (Bauwens et

al., 2022; Cote, 2021; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). A bibliometric study on leadership development and COVID-19 recommends that most leadership responses and approaches should be situational, considering the complexity and context of any circumstance (Bauwens et al., 2022; Turrini et al., 2020).

However, the flexibility and collaboration needed to adapt to unforeseen events is not a novel concept. Kets de Vries (2005) stated that leaders must have the foresight to understand what is coming and how these events may impact their organization. Contingency theory suggests the concept of adaptive leadership, where the behavior must change appropriately as a reaction to a situational transition (Dinh et al., 2014; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). Additionally to having situational awareness, Cote (2022) believes leaders need strong communication and emotional intelligence development to approach their employees' needs more empathetically.

Though studies have shown the shift toward employee-focused leadership and away from the command-and-control hierarchical models (Fowler, 2018), it seems that COVID-19 has shone a bright light on leadership styles centered around emotional intelligence, relationship building, empowerment, communication, collaboration, and adaptability (Bauwens et al., 2022; Dinh et al., 2014; Dirani et al., 2020; Mani & Mishra, 2020; McGuinness, 2020; Zhu et al., 2019). Additionally, as leaders build trusting relationships with their employees and other leaders, the weight of accountability and responsibility is distributed, which research suggests can lead to higher employee motivation, commitment, and loyalty (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

Chapter 3

Methods

This chapter describes the research methodology, participants and sampling structure, and data collection and analysis procedures used throughout the study.

Research Methodology

A grounded theory approach was used (Creswell, 2018). Interview data were used to develop themes and theories based on participants' viewpoints inductively (Maxwell, 2013). While there is significant leadership development research regarding COVID-19 and virtual leadership, there is a gap in research surrounding first-time leaders in ambiguous and ever-changing environments. This research was conducted to supplement research on developing new leaders for ambiguous working conditions. These interviews were conducted to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What competencies does this present-day environment call for in new and emerging leaders?

2. How has the leadership landscape changed between 2020 and 2023?

3. What are some best practices and challenges to developing new leaders in our current environment?

The study began with an extensive review of existing competencies for effective in-person and virtual leadership that has appeared in research over the past three decades. Additionally reviewed was the shift in motivation science and leadership competency models due to the COVID-19 pandemic, creating an ambiguous working environment in which leadership is becoming a hybrid between in-person and virtual.

Sampling Methodology and Participant Demographics

Purposive (Light et al., 1990; Palys, 2008) was used as participants were selected based on their professional backgrounds and organizational positions (Maxwell, 2013). Participants

were both internal and external leadership development practitioners. This included human resources & learning and development leaders within companies with hybrid work structures and external leadership development consultants who design development programs for emerging leaders. The original target sample size was ten internal and ten external leadership development professionals to generate an even sample size for data collection. These participants design programs for new leaders as we navigate the volatile and ambiguous environment, giving them direct insight into this topic. Interviewees were chosen based on their tenure in the industry (8+ years of experience) to understand how leadership competencies and development programs have changed over time. The final sample size totaled 25 participants, 16 internal and nine external leadership development practitioners with 8-10+ years of experience designing and delivering programs for emerging leaders.

Data Collection

An interview protocol (Appendix B) was designed to explore the shift in leadership competencies from 2020-2023 due to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact that shift has had on leadership development programs. The protocol began with the background and purpose of the study, followed by an explanation that all data collected would be confidential and reported at an aggregate summary level only. The interview questions were sequenced in the following order: participant's professional experience, capabilities and competencies needed for effective leadership in a variety of working environments, trends, or best practices experienced in the leadership development space since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and challenges to developing new leaders so they are better equipped for present-day and future working environments. See Table 1 for how each interview question was used to answer the above research questions.

Table 1

Interpersonal Equity Ratio Frequency

	Question	Relevance to Research Questions
1	Please state your job title and your role within your organization.	Personal Experience
2	Please share a brief overview of your experience and tenure within the leadership development space.	Personal Experience
3	What industry (or industries) have you done this work in?	Personal Experience
4	What core capabilities do you think are necessary for new leaders?	Competencies Needed for New Leaders in Current Environments
5	What capabilities do you think leaders need in hybrid working environments, where employees work both in-office and remotely?	Competencies Needed for New Leaders in Current Environments
6	What capabilities do you think leaders need in order to effectively navigate the complexity and ambiguity of our present way of working?	Competencies Needed for New Leaders in Current Environments The Impact of COVID-19 Disruption on Our Expectations of Leaders
7	Over the last 2+ years, we have experienced significant disruption to how and where we work. Are there any specific leadership competencies or capabilities that have risen or fallen in priority as a result of that? + follow up	Competencies Needed for New Leaders in Current Environments The Impact of COVID-19 Disruption on Our Expectations of Leaders
8	How do you think the motivation of employees (now vs. before) has influenced the expectations and needs of leadership?	Competencies Needed for New Leaders in Current Environments The Impact of COVID-19 Disruption on Our Expectations of Leaders
9	In your opinion, what skills or capabilities would you want to see taught in leadership development programs, specifically for new leaders?	Competencies Needed for New Leaders in Current Environments
10	Is there a way to identify (skillset, qualities, etc) whether a person is ready to become a leader?	Competencies Needed for New Leaders in Current Environments
11	What trends are you seeing in your industry that focus on developing leaders for the new working environments in response to the global pandemic?	Successes and Challenges of Leadership Development for Ambiguous Working Environments
12	Have you found any best practices for developing emerging leaders to be effective in hybrid working environments?	Successes and Challenges of Leadership Development for Ambiguous Working Environments
13	What program elements have you found successful for developing leaders, so they are more equipped to manage other complex and ambiguous environments?	Successes and Challenges of Leadership Development for Ambiguous Working Environments
14	From your perspective, what are the challenges to developing new leaders, so they are better equipped for hybrid working environments?	Successes and Challenges of Leadership Development for Ambiguous Working Environments
15	What are the challenges to developing new leaders, so they are better equipped for other complex & ambiguous environments?	Successes and Challenges of Leadership Development for Ambiguous Working Environments

Qualitative data was collected through Zoom interviews. The population interviewed consisted of experienced practitioners in designing programs for emerging leaders. An introductory email was sent to a target population of 20 potential participants to obtain voluntary participation. To reach a final population of 25 participants, a recruiting email (shown in Appendix A) was sent to colleagues within their network and posted the messaging to LinkedIn groups of which they are members. Referrals were requested from participating interviewees. Once interest was secured, Zoom interviews were scheduled with each participant to collect the data.

Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes and was recorded for optimal data review. The following steps were used to analyze this data: a) read the interview transcripts while listening to the accompanying audio files; b) memos during the first read-through of interviews to begin coding high-level themes; c) read through the interviews a second time to add additional coded themes; d) fractured the data gathered into categories; and d) compared these data to original theories developed for similarities and contrasts. A coding matrix using computer-assisted qualitative data software called MaxQDA was developed. The data analysis method was validated by a secondary researcher and confirmed the coding matrix chosen.

Chapter 4

Results

This study aimed to explore trends and challenges experienced by leadership development professionals in developing new leaders for ambiguous working conditions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview consisted of 16 questions (Appendix B) designed to address the following questions:

1. What competencies does this present-day environment call for in new and emerging leaders?
2. How has the leadership landscape changed between 2020-2023?
   What are some best practices and challenges to developing new leaders in our current environment?

Table 2 shows a high-level overview of the themes discovered through these interviews.

Table 2

High-Level Themes from Interview Results

Themes	n	%
Competencies Needed for New Leaders in current environments		
Emotional Intelligence	24	96%
Communication Skills	22	88%
Relationship management	21	84%
Flexibility/Agility	19	76%
Desire to be a leader	19	76%
Strategic Thinking	19	76%
Growth Mindset	17	68%
The jump from individual contributor to Leader requires additional skills	13	52%
Changes over the last few years and impact on leadership		
Generational difference in motivation	19	76%
Being in Hybrid/Remote Environments Requires Trust & Autonomy	19	76%
Social awareness. Picking up on Non-verbal cues	18	72%
Inclusion + Valuing Diversity of Thought Has become more central	18	72%
Whole-person, more personalized approaches to leading	16	64%
Employee Well-being	14	56%
Hybrid requires more intention	9	36%
Role of a leader is more demanding	9	36%

Themes	*n*	%
Successes and Challenges for Leadership Development		
Experiential Learning	16	64%
Coaching	15	60%
Just-in-time resources + continuous application	13	52%
Peer learning/networking	11	44%
Not Valued Highly Enough, Not enough time	9	36%

Competencies Needed for New Leaders in Current Environments

The first research question asked the respondents what competencies, skills, or abilities new leaders need to successfully navigate our current working environments. During the data analysis phase of the study, the researcher focused on the respondents' answers to interview questions 4-10 to answer this research question. Table 3 represents the themes that emerged from the interview data related to competencies needed for new leaders to be successful in today's working environments.

Other common responses concerned themes of emotional intelligence, which included self-awareness, self-management, empathy, psychological safety, and mindfulness; communication skills, including the ability to set expectations, solicit and receive feedback, navigate challenging conversations, and communicate a vision to inspire team members; relationship management, including the facilitation of collaborative environments, cross-functional relationships, connecting with team members; flexibility and agility, and the ability to be adaptable and pivot quickly; the desire to be a leader, and showing that through initiatives or influencing without authority; strategic thinking, which includes being business-minded, making data-informed decisions, and asking the right questions; and having a growth mindset, or the willingness to experiment and learn from mistakes or failure. A less common theme, although reported by more than half of the interviewees, was that additional skillsets were needed to effectively navigate the shift from individual contributor to leadership roles.

Table 3

Competencies Needed for New Leaders in Current Environments

Themes	Sample Comments	*n*	%
Emotional Intelligence	I think the core capabilities that are necessary for new leaders involve a lot of skills that are not necessarily taught and hopefully were modeled somewhere along the way, including listening, paraphrasing, empathy… Trusting vulnerable connections in a virtual world is more challenging. So all the more important for a leader to have high EQ.	24	96%
Communication Skills	Leaders have to really be looking forward. They have to be getting and seeking out and soliciting feedback from the younger generations on how they see the future work. So communication is key. You have to be able to communicate effectively across all levels of the organization and be able to deal with difficult conversations to have productive conflict.	22	88%
Relationship management	Two things that I actually think are very important are figuring out how to create camaraderie and a sense of team when not everybody's in the same place. The more we partner [with our team members], the more we have happier, engaged team members that can only make a better business for us, which you know, connects to a better world for us.	21	84%
Flexibility/ Agility	I think today, they especially need to be agile. So agility, organizational agility, cultural agility, the ability to just adapt to the situation. I think flexibility has become more important. Being able to pivot, to adjust, or look for different ways of doing things instead of thinking they have to be done exactly the same way has become more important.	19	76%
Desire to be a leader	I think that, that leadership starts with that, with a willingness to push yourself You gotta love what you do and love the people that do it. As a leader, I think you have to care about the people that you lead.	19	76%
Strategic Thinking:	You've got to understand strategy, and how your tasks and work are as a leader are contributing to that strategy. Having a passion to understand what the business is doing; there is a clear demarcation between people who want to learn, and the curiosity they demonstrate versus people that don't.	19	76%
Growth Mindset	You now need to be able to create an environment where you can experiment where you can test and learn, where you can fail fast. A psychologically safe environment where it's okay to fail and learn from it. So I feel like at its very basic level, you have to have somebody who's willing to grow and listen and accept feedback, even if that feedback may be a little hard to hear.	17	68%
New skills needed to shift from individual contributor to leader	You get put in this position because you're the doer, you've been doing the things and probably really well, and now you have to let go of control and get other people to do it. And it's probably not going to be the way that you wanted it done. You have other things (more strategic and less tactical) things to do. So how do you effectively delegate versus coach versus, you know, support your people? I see new leaders struggling with delegation. Doing a job well myself is one thing, helping others to do their job well is something else. And that is really a different skill set than helping others to do that.	13	52%

The primary theme, emotional intelligence, was represented in 96% of interviews. Respondents broadly spoke about emotional intelligence using one of the following words or phrases; self-awareness (60%), self-management (44%), empathy (48%), vulnerability (32%), and psychological safety (24%). Participants typically spoke about the value of emotional intelligence on the leader's followership, identifying the importance of a leader being aware of their strengths and triggers and managing their reactions effectively. One participant, in particular, commented, "As a leader, if I yell at people, no one's going to trust me... They won't take my direction and align behind my vision of where we need to go." Another respondent reported that building an environment of vulnerability and psychological safety has become vital to teams' success since COVID began, especially when there is more uncertainty and distress in the workforce. Many participants spoke on the value of leading with empathy to understand team members' challenges or personal situations, so those leaders can better know what accommodations or flexibility their team members might need to do their best work.

The second most common theme was the importance of communication skills. This theme showed up in 88% of the interviews. Within the broader umbrella of Communication Skills, participants spoke on the significance of setting expectations (28%), soliciting and receiving feedback (40%), navigating challenging conversations and conflict management (20%), and clearly communicating a vision to their team, or providing the context necessary to help inspire their team toward a common end goal (56%). One participant stressed the importance of new leaders' strong communication skills:

> Everything is built off of their ability or inability to communicate. As a leader, I'm now setting the direction for the team. But how do I do that in a collaborative way that's engaging, rather than a command-and-control way where I might get compliance because I'm the boss, but I'll never get commitment, and I'll never get any discretionary effort or engagement.

In discussing the difference in how we interact in person versus over video, another participant stressed the importance of leaders developing communication norms and etiquette regarding how and when they interact with their teams. Participants also emphasized the importance of feedback and the ability to differentiate between different types of feedback. One participant mentioned that appreciative feedback from a leader is equally as crucial as developmental feedback.

Relationship management was the third most common theme, which some participants considered a culmination of the abovementioned themes. When we consider empathy and communication skills, participants felt these were essential to building relationships and connections with people. This theme was represented throughout 84% of interviewees. Participants discussed the value of leaders facilitating collaborative environments, managing stakeholder relationships, and connecting with team members. One participant reported, "I think [the past two+ years] amplified that if you don't have the ability to connect, relate to your people, invest in them, develop them, you're not somebody that people will want to work for moving forward." Another participant summed up their experience by saying, "You know, there's a lot to managing, but when it comes down to the crux of it, it's about the relationships that you're building, you cannot be a successful manager [in my industry] without having excellent relationships." Many participants felt that this was the most critical skill to have as a leader, actually crediting the success of a leader to their ability to develop strong relationships with their direct teammates and cross-functionally.

The theme of leadership agility and flexibility was represented in 76% of interviews. Particularly when discussing ambiguous environments, participants felt that leaders need to develop a capacity to adapt and be flexible in how they get to their end goals. One participant specified, "You can't stick to a very rigid format. That is as much important [for leadership] as it

is in terms of the impacts of COVID. If you're very stuck to a certain method, you're just going to

fall behind."

Regarding the ambiguity and volatility of the last several years, one participant stated:

If there's one thing that COVID has taught us, it's that in life and in professional you'll need to pivot. And more often than not, you won't have the notice or the time that you need to think about a pivot, you will just need to pivot. So how do leaders stay nimble in their thinking, strategy, and approach? I think this is extremely important and in some way or another will determine their success as leaders.

Nineteen out of 25 participants suggested that the most successful leaders they have seen

are genuinely passionate about leading. They also suggested understanding why an employee

wants to take on leadership responsibilities. When speaking of how one might identify leadership

readiness, one participant reported, "You do not need a title and formal structure to deliver

results for the business. You can inspire and motivate, and bring everybody along the journey to

deliver results." Another participant described leadership readiness by stating, "Somebody who

has a passion for leading people and who wants to help their teams grow and become the best

versions of themselves at work."

The theme of strategic thinking emerged in 76% of interviews by being business-minded,

making data-informed decisions, and asking questions to understand better the "why" behind

actions, strategies, and decisions. Participants also mentioned the importance of prioritization,

one stating:

In a disruption, everything might seem critical. But how do you extract the voice of the customer, and dig deeper to understand what the root cause is so that you can prioritize work for your team, you can actually focus on what needs to be done.

The other significant commentary was about a leader's ability to hold paradox between

their personal beliefs and what is best for an organization. One participant stated, "part of being a

leader is you might not always agree with the decisions, but you have to lead professionally for

the circumstances." Participants also suggested using external environments and edges of the organization as a resource for understanding what might be the best way forward for their internal team, one stating, "Using information and data from the edges of the organization, from associates and from customers, and being able to process that information."

Having a growth mindset was another theme that came out of these interviews. Participants felt it was important for a new leader to have a mindset of experimentation and the ability to learn and grow from failures and mistakes. This theme was present in 68% of interviews. One participant expanded on this as "A growth mindset with a particular emphasis on a willingness to experiment and fail. And so sort of like a wise perspective on risk-taking and failure, and how it's framed in the mind." Though our present ambiguous working environments may call for many different skills, many participants acknowledged that without a desire to learn and grow, there is less likelihood that a new leader will succeed. One participant said, "If you have the will, I can give you the skills."

A theme that about half (13 of 25) of participants reported was that as individual contributors begin to take on leadership responsibilities, many different skills are needed to thrive in those roles that may vary from their day-to-day technical skills. Participants noted a gap in acknowledgment of this fact, and many organizations and team leaders expect the promotion of high-performing individual contributors into leadership roles to yield successful results. However, if organizations do not set expectations or give new leaders the opportunities, skills, and tools to navigate effectively, we often see the opposite; one participant reported:

> People get promoted into people management because they're very good at what they do. And then we take away what they're good at and give them this new job, and don't train them to manage people, it's no surprise that they're not thriving.

Additional elements respondents expanded on included: relationship dynamics with team members who may have been peers, learning the ability to accomplish through others, and an

overall mindset shift that can impact a new leader's effectiveness. One participant expressed that frequently the reason for promoting someone to take on leadership responsibilities has more to do with their contributions rather than their strengths in leading and influencing people. This participant stated:

> I think a critical skill set that all new leaders need is a good amount of humility to recognize that there are opportunities to improve and that it's a gradual process, and that you're not at the pinnacle of your career.

Impact of COVID-19 Disruption on Leadership Landscape

The second research question asks how the leadership landscape changed during 2020-2023 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. How have leadership development practitioners adapted to these shifts? Questions s 6, 7, and 8 provided data to identify trends and themes around how the changes from the last few years have impacted what employees expect from their working environment and their leaders. Common themes that emerged include: being in hybrid or remote working environments requires more trust from leadership in their employees to be autonomous; there is a more substantial need for social awareness and the ability to pick up on non-verbal cues; inclusion and valuing diversity of thought has become more central in how we lead; there is now a need for a more personalized approach to leading, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach; there are generational differences in followership motivations and expectations of leaders, especially when faced with more choice; employee well-being has become more central than it was pre-pandemic; hybrid environments may require more intention; and the idea that the role of a leader has, in general, become more demanding. Table 4 shows examples of the themes that emerged from the questions designed to answer how the last few years have impacted leadership development.

Table 4

Impact of COVID-19 Disruptions on Leadership Landscape

Theme	Sample Comments	*n*	%
Being in hybrid or remote environments requires trust and autonomy	One thing we discovered through the pandemic was that if you left people alone, it wasn't that they wouldn't get their job done. Because people, a lot of people are more efficient working from home. And trust that your employees will do what is asked of them without you having to manage every aspect. That's something we do in [participant's company], as part of our leadership program is giving managers the permission to step back and to lead and to empower their employees.	19	76%
Social awareness and picking up on non-verbal cues (in hybrid and ambiguous environments) have become more important	It's important to ensure that when you are in a hybrid situation… you need to understand and pick up cues of nonverbal behavior. Focusing leaders on how to do that in a hybrid situation is key. I think just the way that you interact in person versus on video is different. And so leaders need to understand and learn to adjust to that. So for instance, if you're in a room together, it's easy to sit around and talk for three or four hours, take quick breaks, and the time just flies by, and in a video context, that's really difficult, people get fatigued by sitting in front of their laptops, even engaging is different…And I think it's important to learn to read the cues that are different in the video environment.	18	72%
Inclusion and valuing diversity of thought has become more central	A community of inclusion is important. Because not everybody's together anymore at the same time in the same space or even in the same time zone. I think we need to be mindful of how we bring teams together. We are now a global ecosystem, a global community, and a global way of working, so we have to be cognizant of that. It's really about creating that sense of belonging and equity, in terms of access to you as a leader, equity in participation in team meetings, and in-person versus VC connections.	18	72%
Whole-person, more personalized approaches to leading	Leaders have to understand that everybody works a little bit differently. And the things that they need, that might mean they have to work remote, that might mean they need a hybrid schedule. Everybody has to be approached on an individual level, which has the dual aspect of creating better and stronger relationships. The expectation that your manager would consider what's going on in your personal life as they're delegating workload is new. There's a second hat of "caring" that leaders wear now.	16	64%
There are generational differences in followership motivations and expectations of leaders, especially when faced with more choices	Pay, or the ability to drive towards and achieve results were huge motivating indicators [in my generation]. And I don't think that's very motivating for people anymore. And so I think that because it's so much more prevalent now that people are motivated by their own motivations, and they're not going to like keep quiet about it. They're going to demand that the workplace in general has to change and I think the expectation of leaders is they have to be more flexible and understanding.	15	60%

Theme	Sample Comments	*n*	%
Employee wellbeing has become part of the leader's role	I think that the role of a manager changed overnight and to wearing two hats. one was to get your work done and manage productivity, which is what we've always traditionally done as managers. But overnight, you became responsible for the well-being of your team.	12	48%
	Leaders need to be able to talk about those types of things with their employees, find out what's going on. Not just factors that could impact their performance, but factors that are impacting the person, and pay particularly close attention, especially to your high performers. Because those people will log on as soon as they wake up, and not log off until they go to bed at night. And try to help them set boundaries so that they don't burn out.		
Hybrid requires more intention	It's harder to just walk next door and have a conversation. So it takes more of a concerted effort. And I think even more the invitation is to be on task, on topic, and not waste time.	9	36%
	It's easy for us to be all in the same office and be like, Hey, I know this person works well, I've seen them do it. Let me tap into them. Versus now you have to think about it from a virtual perspective. And that's a part of human nature, who you see in front of you is who you remember to tap into verses, 'Oh, I think somebody in [XYZ Location] could do this work.' And I think that's very important for us to flex our muscle there.		
Role of a leader is more demanding	We are now expected to be a coach and a mentor for people, not just a person who manages the outputs of everybody that reports to us, but also the feelings, the emotions, the satisfaction an employee has… we are user experience creators in the sense that we are creating the experience that our employees have working for our company. And if we don't think about our work as a leader that way, our people will leave us or they will become disengaged.	9	36%

The most prevalent theme was the idea that working in remote or hybrid environments requires more trust from our leaders in their team members to do their job effectively and autonomously. This theme showed up in 76% of interviews, with participants commenting on the value of the leaders' ability to trust their employees and build strong, trusting relationships with their teams. One participant stated, "Something that's risen in importance is trust. If you're gonna (sic) work in a hybrid or a virtual space, having some confidence and faith that people are going to still get their job done on their own is crucial." The argument is that because employees have been able to work remotely for the past few years effectively, they have experienced much more

autonomy. To be micromanaged or forced to return to the office might result in good employees leaving the company. Another participant stressed:

> There's this old saying that people don't quit companies, they quit managers. Like, that's the person who most directly influences and impacts your day-to-day. And [as a leader], if you're not building a sense of connection and trust with your team, then no matter how great you are at your individual contributor job, it's not going to translate into anything effective.

In addition to trust and autonomy, interviewees showed that the normalization of hybrid working environments has brought about several changes in what is expected from leadership. The themes of social awareness and the ability to pick up on nonverbal cues were present in 64% of interviews. Participants felt that a certain level of sharp-sightedness is crucial for leaders to see what might happen under the surface amongst their team members. One participant described this by saying:

> One thing I think [leaders] need in hybrid is maybe the ability to, let's just call it the need to notice. It's like acute vigilance, the detection or hyper-vigilance of what is going on in oneself one's team, and the larger context. Yeah, like constantly scanning.

There was also an expressed significance of a leader having an awareness of the group dynamics on their team and being able to adjust their approach based on their team members' needs. One participant stated:

> There are certain people who need certain things that you need to provide as a leader to get the most out of them, and if it means that you need to flex your style to do that, then you have a responsibility [as a leader] to do that.

Overall, inclusion and diversity of thought have reportedly taken a front seat since the pandemic's beginning, as reported in 72% of interviews. Participants identified leaders needing to embrace diversity and proactively consider it as they develop strategies and bring their teams together. They shared the value of embracing diversity as leaders connect with their teams. One

participant explained that the many different areas of diversity are essential for leaders to pay

attention to, stating:

> How we see our world shapes our experience. And being able to see things, like
> putting on glasses from multiple perspectives, finding value, and creating from
> those differences, rather than expecting and getting frustrated when they don't see
> it my way.

> This participant's response suggested that the inclusion of perspectives different from

their own can increase a leader's awareness of the world around them. A participant summarizes

the value of inclusion in the workplace by reporting:

> As a leader, for you to inspire and to motivate and to help people or to create
> spaces where people can do great work, I think, is an expectation from employees.
> Your ability to connect with your team members on a human level and embrace
> their differing perspectives is critical. For your own and your organization's
> success.

> The theme of creating a whole-person or personalized approach to leading was present in

64% of the interviews. It is built on the idea that everyone works differently and has different

needs. Regarding the previous quote about leaders' needing to flex their style based on their team

members' needs, participants expressed similar sentiments around employees wanting their

leaders to just "be human" and "consider what's going on in your personal life as they're

delegating workloads." One participant summarized this theme: "Many leaders used to have a

one-size-fits-all approach to leading, but it's important to meet your employees/trainees where

they're at. My gap might not be the same as your gap."

Another theme, at 60%, is a generational difference in the motivation of employees and

their expectations of leaders, especially when faced with more choices. Fifteen of 25

interviewees shared sentiments that the pandemic allowed employees to take stock of what they

wanted out of their roles and overall career paths, one participant stating:

> What we've seen over the past few years, specifically, is that since the balance has
> changed, [employees] have been able to voice their desires and their needs more,

and basically say, I'm not going to work for an organization that's not going to help me, that's not going to take into consideration my needs, that is going to treat me like a cog in the wheel. Right. And so, because of that, I think that employees are saying that I'm only going to work at the organizations that have a really good culture, and that is a good fit for where I want to go.

Other participants shared observations of generational motivation differences, explaining that their generation's motivation was gaining wealth to purchase homes. Whereas employees now are more focused on whether they are interested in the product or company and what the future of their career might look like, one stating:

We're seeing even more job opportunities than there were before. So when people have choice, they're asking - what is the opportunity? Am I interested in the product? Am I going to grow in development? What is my career future look like? And is this the right leader I'm going to learn from?

One participant mentioned that when people realize they have many job options, they might be less likely to tolerate environments or leaders that they feel need to be improved.

Employee well-being (48%) was expressed as an increasingly important element for leaders. One participant mentioned, "There are now higher expectations from managers to understand the effect burnout has on their employee's performance and their overall well-being." Participants acknowledged that the role of a leader has changed over the last few years and that helping employees put boundaries in place is essential in supporting the reduction of burnout.

Intentional connection and communication were less common themes throughout 36% of interviews. Participants shared their experiences going from working in an office to working in distributed locations, the effect of that separation on their connections with their leaders, and how leaders might have to be more mindful of how and where they communicate with their team members. One participant stated, "As there's more and more opportunity for remote work, it's less about getting up and walking around, and more about making sure that you are coming up with a communication and touch base strategy with everybody individually." Concurrently,

participants expressed the complexity of running meetings and workshops in a hybrid setting and

stressed the significance of providing equitable experiences for those on screen and in the office.

One participant suggested that leaders create a level playing field, stating:

> Figure out a way when you're running meetings to make sure that the people in the room aren't privileged over the people who are over video. And I think that there are so many other things that go along with it, like making sure that you're offering the same level of coaching and feedback to people who are out of the offices are in the office, like making sure that you have the same level of visibility into the work of those in and out of the office.

The above themes contribute to the overall perception that the role of a leader has

become more demanding. Throughout the interviews, 36% of the participants shared that some

more skills or abilities are expected of leaders since the start of the pandemic, with few to none

becoming less of a priority. One participant stated:

> The leader has such a significant role in driving the employee's experience & performance. I think the hybrid world makes it even more so. Because your workplace is even further narrowed now. And it's defined mostly.. by your interactions with your manager. So I think it places a lot more onus on the manager. So in addition to having good management, practices, and skills, you also have to now bring empathy to how you lead.

This suggests that we need to support our leaders more than ever. A participant reports:

> Part of this now also means that we cannot ignore our managers. That we have to know that it's difficult for them. It's especially difficult now, and they actually need more attention. If we want them to do all of these things for our employees and we need to make sure that we are looking after them.

Next, the researcher will report the best practices and successful elements that leadership

development professionals have experienced in the last several years.

Successes and Challenges in Developing New Leaders for Ambiguous Working

Environments

The third research question in this study was, "What are some best practices and

challenges to developing new leaders in our current environment?" The researcher analyzed the

responses to questions 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15 in the interview protocol to identify themes answering the above research question. Common themes included: experiential learning or simulation when developing practical training workshops (64%); one on one coaching for more personalized programs that help leaders to learn how to answer questions on their own (60%); creating just-in-time resources and finding ways for leaders to apply their learnings (52%) continuously; and peer learning or networking, for leaders to have an opportunity to connect with people who may be going through similar experiences (44%). The significant challenge for developing leaders for our current environment was reported as leaders needing more time, interest, and engagement. A congruent feeling that the organization did not value it comprised the main challenge leadership development professionals experienced over the last few years. Table 5 shows these themes that the researcher identified throughout the study, with sample quotes to further expand on those themes.

Regarding the development of training curricula, many participants stated their success with experiential learning opportunities. This theme was present in 64% of the interviews, with participants further explaining that using realistic and directly relatable examples in simulation workshops has a more impactful effect on leaders, allowing them to be immersed in an experience much like one they may have to navigate as a new leader. One participant expanded, stating:

> I think one of the most impactful program elements is simulation. And, you know, you can do that virtually, you can do that in person. But it's like throwing people into a situation. And having them actually play the role that they would play in real life. And figuring out, how would they navigate this situation? Who would they talk to? What information do they need? What would they tell their team?

With this model, a leader can turn theory, frameworks, or ideas into action and reality, where they can build skills through experience rather than knowledge through reading.

Table 5

Successes and Challenges in Developing New Leaders for Ambiguous Working Environments

Themes	Sample Comments	*n*	%
Experiential Learning	Make it very real, if everybody's upset because you had a recent layoff, and you're doing change management, that is the first thing you talk about. You don't dance around it, go to the thing that really hurts upfront, because it kind of wakes people up.	16	64%
	I think leadership development and applicability of the skills have to come in closer, like increased experiential design, more robust, simulative type of work that can break down the difference between how somebody thinks they are and how somebody really is.		
Coaching	The training is one thing, but having that one on one time, someone to serve as a thinking partner with me on complex things that I'm dealing with in real time. The training is okay, it's theoretical, I am learning. But having that coach, that's asking me insightful questions and helping me think about the context in which I work. That's what we're hearing from people	15	60%
	And I think coaching gives people a better shot at figuring out alternatives if they're stuck. And tools to try that they just might not be aware of, and even just a place to think it through and hear themselves, problem solve, more than just gripe to their spouse or their partner or their friend.. I think coaching really gives people a chance to build on their positives and take a healthy look at what's not working and find some ways to make it work.		
Just-in-time resources + continuous application	It's really being thoughtful of like from a development strategy, what's the moment that matters for leaders. first learning this skill, but also how do they get access to the right resources when they actually need it.	13	52%
	You can't just do a workshop about empathy or communication or something like that, and call it done. You have to constantly reinforce that. And you have to make it part of that individual's performance review and things like that. I want to caveat that by saying I was guilty that for the first 10 years of my career. We built these one day workshops or courses, and we call that done. We are really missing out on that opportunity for continuous growth of that individual, because they're gonna go back to their job, and probably within a month or so they're going to forget 90% of what you've taught them.		
Peer learning or networking	I think the peer network, yeah, more than anything else to know that they're not dealing with a situation in isolation, that they're not the only ones who are having to face this and that there are others.	11	44%
	We start every session with a reflection question, that gets the group to start talking to each other. At the end, they work and solve each other's problems.		
Challenges: Time, Not valued highly enough	The challenge is, once they get absorbed into their department, it's hard to get them back. It's hard to get them to carve out time.	9	36%
	I can see that in some organizations a barrier is like, how much does your organization actually support learning?		

The next theme broadly presented throughout the interviews was one on one coaching. Participants saw coaching as a rising trend amongst leadership development practitioners and an effective way to deliver personalized programming while allowing leaders to find answers and solve problems independently. Participants also mentioned that personalized coaching has become more accessible since the beginning of COVID-19 and that, as we saw in earlier themes, people learn and adapt at different paces, and people experience the world differently from others. One participant noted the benefits of coaching by stating:

> The particular emphasis on coaching for me is the fact that it is individualized, customized to meet this person where they're at. It is strengths-based. And there's something to those elements that I do believe is special, magical, and makes a huge impact. And from my research, is one of the only modalities that has consistently proved high ROI in any sort of scenario for intervention in improving behavior and impacting behavior change.

The third theme was the need for just-in-time resources or the ability for leaders to continue to apply their learnings after completing the training, workshops, or sessions. This theme was present in 52% of interviews, with comments on the ineffectiveness of creating a workshop with no follow-up or opportunities for further application. One participant expressed the frustration that might ensue if a leader has been given training but cannot easily access those tools or information when needed. Another participant reported:

> Sometimes you learn a lot in the moment. And if you learn something six months ago, but you never had that situation, it's really hard to remember what it is that you can do to get past whatever that situation is. And so I think it's really important to not only give managers those tools and resources, but give them a really simplified way of going back and reviewing what those are and honing them whenever those situations arise. So that those tools are right at their fingertips.

It was noted that participants who shared these sentiments felt these resources and ongoing opportunities to apply learnings were vital elements to the success of any leadership development program.

Another best practice reported by 44% of interview respondents was peer learning or networking. Leadership development practitioners noted that it is beneficial for leaders to connect with others who might be experiencing similar scenarios. Participants felt that this allows leaders to feel less isolated and be able to solve problems through conversations with others. One participant stated:

> At the end of the day, they want to hear from other people who are in their roles. They want to hear what they're doing that's successful, and maybe what they're doing that's not successful, and really get down to sort of the meat and potatoes of what makes a successful manager in a hybrid environment.

> Another benefit noted by practitioners is the unbiased feedback that leaders may receive

from those who are in similar roles. One participant suggested leaders to

> …have a group of people that you can go to that can relate to your challenges that you can be fully vulnerable with. So ideally, not friends and not your spouse, but just people that can relate to your circumstances. And that's the only reason why you know each other, yeah, that will help you gain the objectivity you need.

Networking and connection with others have been a thread throughout the data analysis process, which the researcher will explore during the next chapter.

Nine out of 25 interviewers shared that while many individuals may want to grow and develop, the time they put into attending a workshop might not be as valuable to them as taking time to get actionable work done for their role. Additionally, there were reports that many organizations espouse the value of leadership development, but in reality, the overwhelming workload of a leader leaves little room for them to feel that developing their skills is a priority in their role. One leader said:

> Getting their time is probably the biggest challenge. New leadership feels a lot of pressure to produce and to do great work. And it's a hard tradeoff for them, you know, this time away, "I could be using to do XYZ for the team. So is this time away gonna help me ultimately? Or is it just gonna set me back 3 days?"

> There also may be a barrier to a leader's willingness to learn. One participant stated:

> You can't coach if the person is not willing to be coached and you can't develop them if they're not willing to be developed, a lot of people still feel like they're being signed up for trainings and they don't want to be.

Practitioners felt that the barriers of time, support from the organization, and participant

engagement contributed most to the challenges of developing new leaders.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Conclusions

This study aimed to supplement research on developing new leaders for ambiguous working conditions. Twenty-five interviews were conducted to understand the competencies our present-day environment calls for in emerging leaders, how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted what is expected from leaders, and some of the best practices and challenges leadership development practitioners have experienced in the following years.

This chapter discusses the conclusions and considerations based on the data analysis. While these results might not provide definitive answers, they offer valuable insights into the thinking of leadership development practitioners as they approach their work with new and emerging leaders in ambiguous environments. This chapter concludes with a summary of the learnings.

Discussion and Interpretations

When discussing emerging leaders with leadership development practitioners, the researcher found that there was considerable overlap in how these practitioners saw those who are entering a phase in their careers where they have the power to inspire, influence and make strategic decisions on behalf of their larger team, working group or managed programs versus how they saw first-time people managers.

Eight competency-relevant themes emerged from the interviews; emotional intelligence, communication skills, relationship management, flexibility & agility, desire to be a leader, strategic thinking, growth mindset, and the idea that moving from an individual contributor to a leadership role requires additional skills.

To understand which competencies are required today for an emerging leader's success, understanding the skills gap one may experience when transitioning from an individual contributor to a leadership role is key (Bolander et al., 2019; Crane, 2022). As suggested in several interviews, organizations need to proactively acknowledge the deficit in skills that may occur as an individual contributor begins to take on more leadership responsibilities. Literature suggests that an individual's identity or mindset may change and should change as they step into a leadership role to accommodate the learning that will equip them for success (Bolander et al., 2019; Crane, 2022).

More than half of the participants spoke about two themes critical to new leaders' success: a growth mindset and the employee's desire to lead, which both indicate a specific way of thinking. Participants suggested, in congruence with the literature, that the passion for leading others and mastery in identifying growth opportunities in themselves could determine an emerging leader's success, as skills acquired through training alone may not be sufficient (Bolander et al., 2019; Crane, 2022).

In addition to valuing their leadership roles, strong communication skills were identified as necessary for emerging leaders to succeed in ambiguous working environments, particularly around giving and receiving feedback. These skills can tie back to the above, stating the importance of having a growth mindset. While one can develop the skill of giving feedback, research suggests that having a growth mindset is fundamental to effectively receiving feedback (Crane, 2022).

The interview's competency-relevant themes were generally aligned with the literature, particularly the competency models listed in the Deloitte study (Rabinowitz et al., 2018). Data suggested that interpersonal skills were top of mind for leadership development practitioners, which correlated to two of the "Fin-Tech 5 Competencies" described in the literature review:

people leadership and informal influence. More recent studies suggested a shift in the leadership models that have proven effective, with a mindset of enabling growth, empathy, and empowerment of employees, replacing the traditional command and control leadership style of older generations (Fowler, 2018; Linvill & Onosu, 2023).

The changes that have occurred in the leadership landscape due to the disruption of COVID-19 impact a leader's need to be flexible, agile, and intentional (Khalil et al., 2020). Organizations were forced to adjust due to environments rapidly shifting from in-person to remote, and revealed several areas that may not have been considered in the past (Cote, 2022; Fowler, 2021; Linvill & Onoso, 2023). Particularly within hybrid and ambiguous working environments, interviewees suggested that there are inequitable experiences that require more intentional strategy from leaders around being inclusive, building trust with their team members, and setting a clear direction for their team (Khalil et al., 2020).

The pandemic increased the importance of employee needs and wants, as reflected in the interview data and literature reviewed (Cote, 2020; Khalil et al., 2020; Linvill & Onosu, 2023). How an employee is feeling, what is going on in their personal lives, whether their perspective is being considered, and how a leader is tailoring their approach to that employee are all things that may seem foreign to previous generations of leadership (Cote, 2022). Organizational leaders should be aware that employees have many choices in where they want to work, and it is up to those leaders to foster environments attractive enough for their employees or risk losing top talent (Cote, 2022; Khalil et al., 2020).

This study suggests that structural elements of past leadership models, like hierarchical reporting structures, role rigidity, and task-based skills (Fowler, 2018), have become less imperative for leadership to succeed, but in turn, other expectations have been put on emerging leaders (Khalil et al., 2020). This begs the question, "How are organizations supporting those

emerging into leadership roles for the first time?" Fifteen practitioners suggested one-on-one coaching for emerging leaders to have more personalized support in their development, while 16 participants suggested building experiences in training workshops directly related to the work and challenges these new leaders may encounter to simulate their real-time response.

The one important challenge is time and value. Nine interviewees stated that unavailability was the most significant challenge in developing new leaders for ambiguous working environments. Participants expressed this unavailability to be either due to active disinterest, concern that they would lose valuable time they could have spent working on projects, or unawareness of development opportunities. An additional point discovered through interview responses was that organizations frequently did not actively support ongoing growth or continuous improvement after these emerging leaders underwent inaugural training.

Recommendations for Developing New Leaders for Hybrid Working Environments

The recommendations were developed through data analysis and a review of existing literature. The leading practical recommendation from this study is for leadership development practitioners to continue developing programs specific to those entering a phase in their professional career where they are going from leading themselves as individual contributors to leading and getting work done through others (Bolander et al., 2019). As several practitioners mentioned during the interviews, this has proven successful in many organizations.

To address the theme of self-awareness, it is suggested that assessment tools be used for emerging leaders to gain insight into themselves and how they might operate in the context of work. Another suggestion is to create programming with as many directly relevant, simulative experiences as possible, so these emerging leaders can learn as they might in real time. Though skills training is a priority, the importance of mindset work in their transition from an individual contributor needs to be emphasized. After the training commences, easily accessible resources

for these leaders to tap into as they encounter these potential problems later in their tenure should be provided.

Middle managers and senior leaders must carefully consider why they promote an individual contributor. Does the person have the desire to lead and develop others? If not present, alternative avenues to further their careers can be provided that do not involve managing or leading people. Listening to employees, learning what they need, and understanding their requests often results in building trust and employees wanting to stay in the organization. While it is not necessary to grant all of these desires, it is crucial for this upcoming generation to feel heard. Emerging leaders should also be equipped with resources such as a coach or mentor dedicated to helping them navigate their transition from individual contributor to leader. If organizations want their leaders and the organization to succeed, they must invest in their development and growth from the start.

Study Limitations

Four limitations were identified:

1. Sample characteristics. Many interviewees came from within the same industry, and several from within the same organization. This factor limits the conclusions' validity based on the need for more diversity in the participants' current roles and employers.

2. Researcher bias. While there was a significant effort to remove all subconscious biases throughout the process, a variety of researchers working together might glean more comprehensive and inclusive data.

3. Sample size was small. There were a total of 25 participants interviewed, which is substantial to developing themes, though more is needed to deliver definitive results.

4. Research period. This study was completed over 12 months.

Summary of Learnings

This study aimed to understand the trends and challenges to developing new and emerging leaders for ambiguous working environments by identifying competencies required for new and emerging leaders, understanding the changes in the leadership landscape from 2020-

2023, and examining best practices and challenges in developing new leaders for present-day working environments.

Through 25 interviews, the study found that the major themes, including emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, growth mindset, and the employee's desire to lead, were interrelated and closely aligned with the literature, which emphasizes enabling growth, empathy, and empowerment of employees. It was also found that COVID-19 significantly impacted the leadership landscape, with leaders needing to be flexible and agile, particularly within hybrid and ambiguous working environments (Alexander et al., 2020; Brown & Nwagara, 2021; Contreras et al., 2020; Cote, 2022; Khalil et al., 2023; Linvill & Onosu, 2023; Lubich et al., 2022; Microsoft, 2021).

There was a strong focus on the gap in leadership development for the specific transition from individual contributor to a leadership role, with a recommendation for leadership development practitioners to continue building their programs to center around this (Bolander et al., 2019; Brendel, 2016; Charan et al., 2010; Crane, 2022; Eiser, 2008).

Findings support the literature that describes how the shift in leadership expectations has moved toward a more employee-driven model, where the employees' wants and needs are being more heavily considered (Khalil et al., 2020; Linvill & Onosu, 2023). Hybrid and ambiguous working environments require more intention from leaders around being inclusive and building trusting relationships with their team members (Cote, 2022). The study identified coaching, personalized support for new leaders, and workshops that simulate real-life challenges as some best practices for developing new leaders.

The study suggests that organizations need to develop systems to support their emerging leaders, and without that investment and behavioral shift, training alone may not be effective.

Leadership development practitioners should consider the changes in the leadership landscape, emphasizing a growth mindset, a desire to lead, and personalized support for new leaders.

These themes spin a complex web of interrelated elements that leadership development professionals should consider when working with emerging leaders in hybrid and ambiguous working environments. While these recommendations can only be tentative due to the study's limitations, the strong alignment between interview data and literature shows promising results. Future research on this topic is expected to generate more insights about the future of developing emerging leaders for ambiguous working environments.

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Appendix A: Invitation to Interview Participants

Dear [Name]

For those of you I haven't had the pleasure of meeting, my name is Alanna Brahms. I'm reaching out as a Masters of Organization Development Student at the Graziadio Business School at Pepperdine University. I am conducting a research study that aims to understand **trends and challenges to developing new leaders for ambiguous working conditions**, and I need your help!

You have been identified as someone who works in the leadership development space, particularly within organizations that operate in a hybrid work structure. I would like to invite you to participate in a 1-hour [recorded] interview in a location of your choice to discuss your background and experience. Some topics we will cover include necessary leadership capabilities for today's organizations, how the last two years compare to your overall perspective of the leadership development space, and successes and challenges to developing new leaders for hybrid working environments.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and your identity as a participant will be protected before, during, and after the time that study data is collected. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The results of our interviews will be confidential and reported at the aggregate summary level only.

Please respond to this email confirming or declining your interest in participating in this study. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me directly via email or phone at [omitted].

Thank you in advance for your participation and support!

Sincerely,
Alanna Brahms

Pepperdine University
Graziadio Business School
Masters in Organization Development
[omitted]

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Overview of Process:
- Over the last two+ years, we've had significant disruption in how and where we work due to the COVID-19 pandemic,
- We understand that due to this, the world is more complex, with hybrid working environments becoming more of the norm.
- I'd like to understand (from your perspective) how the context of the last two years has affected peoples' needs and expectations from leadership and, as a result, how that has affected your way of approaching your own work, particularly as it pertains to developing new and emerging leaders for the future.
- The phrase "new or emerging leaders," for the context of this research study, will refer to those who are entering a phase in their careers where they have the power and ability to inspire, influence, and make strategic decisions on behalf of their larger team, working group or managed programs. It does not exclusively refer to first-time people managers.
- As a talent/leadership development professional, you have been selected as a critical feedback provider as part of this process.

- I'll be asking you a series of questions that work to identify trends, best practices, and challenges to developing new leaders for hybrid & ambiguous working environments (in response to the pandemic). There will be four sets of questions;
  - The first few questions will cover your professional experience.
  - The next set will be around capabilities and competencies needed for effective leadership in a variety of working environments
  - The third set will focus on trends or best practices that you've experienced in the leadership development space since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic
  - And the final set will cover challenges to developing new leaders so they are better equipped for present-day and future working environments.

Our meeting today:
- We will spend 60 minutes together.
- The data collected from the interviews will be used to identify key themes that professionals charged with developing new leaders have faced as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- Everything you say is confidential, and at no time will I share the specifics of what you've actually said. I aim to summarize themes that emerge across multiple interviews like this one, and all information will be reported at the aggregate level only.
- May I record this session?
- Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. Please state your job title and your role within your organization.
2. Please share a brief overview of your experience and tenure within the leadership development space.
3. What industry (or industries) have you done this work in?

4. What core capabilities do you think are necessary for new leaders?
5. What capabilities do you think leaders need in hybrid working environments, where employees work both in-office and remotely?
6. What capabilities do you think leaders need in order to effectively navigate the complexity and ambiguity of our present way of working?
7. Over the last 2+ years, we have experienced significant disruption to how and where we work. Are there any specific leadership competencies or capabilities that have risen or fallen in priority as a result of that? + follow up
8. How do you think the motivation of employees (now vs. before) has influenced the expectations and needs of leadership?
9. In your opinion, what skills or capabilities would you want to see taught in leadership development programs, specifically for new leaders?
10. Is there a way to identify (skillset, qualities, etc) whether a person is ready to become a leader?

11. What trends are you seeing in your industry that focus on developing leaders for the new working environments in response to the global pandemic?
12. Have you found any best practices for developing emerging leaders to be effective in hybrid working environments?
13. What program elements have you found successful for developing leaders, so they are more equipped to manage other complex and ambiguous environments?

14. From your perspective, what are the challenges to developing new leaders, so they are better equipped for hybrid working environments?
15. What are the challenges to developing new leaders, so they are better equipped for other complex & ambiguous environments?

16. Is there anything I haven't asked that you would like to comment on regarding leadership development for where we're at in our working world?

Close:

- Thank you for your candid feedback and participation. We have completed the interview
- Is there anything else we haven't discussed that you'd like to bring up?
- Do you have any other questions I can answer or thoughts you'd like to share?