

Eight imperatives of impactful leadership development

How to break old routines and become a more effective leader.



Introduction

The board congratulates the CEO for addressing the needs of diverse stakeholders from customers to employees to shareholders. An IT executive reports that his teams are ahead of schedule on their software development and are energized to deliver early. A sales team led by a new first-line leader is recognized by the company for record-breaking sales in an area that everyone thought was winding down.

Extraordinary leadership moments like these are cherished by all, but sometimes feel like the result of the lucky alignment of the stars. Similarly, within the domain of leadership development, the keys to success can appear elusive. Gurus argue that leadership development programs fail to deliver. Companies invest billions yet executives remain concerned about developing leaders with the right capabilities (Gurdjian, Halbeisen & Lane, 2014).

Just as the CEO's, IT executive's, and sales team leader's achievements are not magic or fate, impactful leadership development is not due to fortunate happenstance—it is an act of will. More leaders will develop successfully—and more leadership development programs will be impactful—if eight principles are deliberately deployed in the design, delivery, and implementation of leadership development initiatives.

Individually, these principles are not new. But, by using the principles systematically, consistently, and in combination, organizations will increase the impact of their leadership development initiatives and enable more leaders to create and sustain personal change.

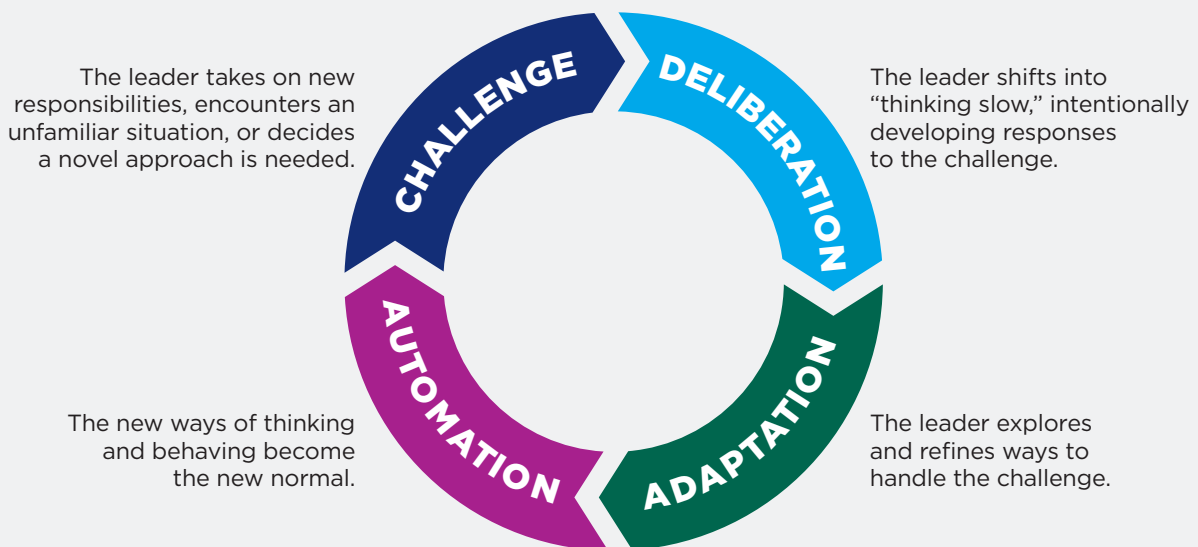
The Eight Imperatives

1. Embrace **new experiences**
2. Adopt **deliberate practice and reflection**
3. Learn from **others**
4. Foster a **growth mindset**
5. Leverage **emotion**
6. Optimize **stress**
7. Practice **mindfulness**
8. Enact **behavioral commitments**

The development cycle.

Leadership development is an ongoing process to deepen, broaden, and differentiate the executive’s capabilities required to perform effectively. It involves a learning cycle of adapting to destabilizing challenges and returning to equilibrium. The eight imperatives enable leaders to break old routines and intentionally focus on developing their capabilities to become more effective. The deliberate use of the eight imperatives will keep leaders from defaulting back to old approaches, habits, and routines that are not serving them effectively going forward. “Thinking fast” is efficient and adaptive in many situations, yet it creates a fixed pattern—leaving leaders without the range needed to handle shifting and dynamic situations or greater responsibilities (Kahneman 2011).

Figure 1
The development cycle



The observed and unobserved.

Three of the eight imperatives focus on behaviors that are observable: embracing new experiences, adopting deliberate practice and reflection, and learning from others. These visible aspects of leadership development can be seen, arranged, and designed for personal and group- learning settings.

They're complemented by three imperatives that are less visible and involve deeper aspects of individuals that are grounded in personality, values, and experience: fostering a growth mindset, leveraging emotion, and optimizing stress. Although less observable, these are critical to plan for and design into leadership development initiatives.

The final two imperatives help leaders pause and reset their automatic responses. Practicing mindfulness and enacting behavioral commitments are two distinctive

imperatives that enable leaders to break patterns of automatic behaviors and create space for new approaches.

Using all eight imperatives brings both “what we do” and “who we are” to leadership development, maximizing individuals’ ongoing motivation and to follow through the process of development. These eight imperatives create a matrix of personal change that catches leaders from falling back into old patterns and propels them forward into new behaviors. For example, executing only the observable steps of leadership development will have limited effectiveness as individuals go through the motions without truly being engaged. On the other hand, focusing only on “who we are” may lead to inspiring “aha” moments, but limited results in their actions.

Figure 2
Eight imperatives of leadership development

What we do

- 1 Embrace **new experiences** to spark learning and development.
- 2 Adopt **deliberate practice and reflection** to build skill and automate changes.
- 3 **Learn from others**, both in learning communities and when applying skills in the real world.

Who we are

- 4 Leaders foster **a growth mindset**; they have to care, be curious, and open.
- 5 Leverage **emotion** to spark motivation and activate effort.
- 6 Optimize **stress** to move out of a comfort zone and into a learning zone.

Pause

- 7 Practice **mindfulness** to quiet ego and pause automaticity, creating space to choose a different approach.
- 8 Enact **behavioral commitments** to create sustained personal change.

“What we do” imperatives.

1. Embrace new experiences.

Whether they occur in the world, on the job, or in formal leadership development settings, new experiences spark learning and development. Learning is stirred as a result of a contrast from the prevailing environment. Keys to an enriching contrast include novelty and challenge, along with active exploration and engagement. Continuously responding to novel experiences also builds a personal capacity for agility and adaptability.

Research has shown that job incumbents rate their jobs higher based on the extent to which they involve unfamiliar responsibilities, creating change, high levels of responsibility, managing across boundaries, and dealing with diversity experience greater growth. Supervisors rate them more highly on leadership skill development (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). And, over their careers, leaders who have had more challenging job experiences are viewed as more competent and promotable by their supervisors (De Pater, Van Vianen, Bechtoldt & Klehe, 2009; Dragoni, Tesluk, Russell & Oh, 2009; Dragoni, Oh, Van Katwyk & Tesluk, 2011).

Organizations can enable leaders to have meaningful new experiences in a variety of ways. By placing responsibility for development on leaders, organizations may provide an array of training programs and stretch assignments from which those leaders may pick and choose. The key here is to ensure these are not typical classroom training experiences, but that they are infused with immersive elements and bring the outside world in. Examples include visits to companies with very different contexts to their own who have a unique way they approach mutual challenges. Other organizations more systematically assign leaders to new experiences (McCauley & McCall, 2014).

The CEO’s success in understanding diverse stakeholders began when she participated in a leadership simulation in which she completed activities requiring her to be a “CEO for a day.” In each of the simulated activities, she had a tendency to overlook addressing the needs of all interested stakeholders. Her executive coach offered a few key questions she could ask stakeholders to help her understand his or her needs. She found these questions truly helped her uncover and clarify important issues. Years later, she continues to use similar questions and is known for her ability to understand and speak to the needs of diverse constituencies.

2. Adopt deliberate practice and reflection.

When acquiring complex skills, individuals who intentionally attempt to improve, avoid, or overcome plateaus are more effective (Ericsson, 2006). Deliberate efforts include setting specific goals for improving on narrow tasks and making small changes in behavior to achieve those goals. In addition, it's critical to monitor the resulting outcomes to determine if the goals were attained. Reflection about practice creates powerful personal change.

Understanding of deliberate practice has emerged from studying the development of expertise in sports, music, and chess. These lessons are directly applicable in the workplace. For example, insurance agents' performance improved when they deliberately explored new strategies, mentally simulated doing tasks differently, and asked for feedback (Sonnentag & Kleine, 2000). These strategies also aided business owners' acquisition of entrepreneurial knowledge and business growth (Unger, Keith, Hilling, Gielnik & Frese, 2009).

Further insight into the importance and value of monitoring outcomes comes from research on reflection. Structured systematic reflection provides people with insight into what to do differently in the future and greater confidence in the ability to complete specific tasks. It has been linked to improved performance and changes in interpersonal behavior, including increases in evaluations of leadership (DeRue, Nahrgang, Hollenbeck & Workman, 2012; Ellis, Carette, Anseel, & Lievens, 2014).

Key characteristics of effective reflection include analysis of one's own behaviors, generation of explanations for success or failure, and identification of alternate perceptions or explanations of the events. Successful reflection also requires feedback (Anseel, Lievens & Schollaert, 2009; Ellis, Carette, Anseel & Lievens, 2014).

Deliberate practice with reflection has always been, and remains a powerful element of leadership development. Concepts from the expertise literature can be applied to help leaders routinely engage in deliberate practice (McHenry & McKenna, 2014). Deliberate practice can be incorporated into training programs, encouraged by mentors and coaches, and be part of an orientation to development practices that emphasize experiential learning, such as job rotation, action learning, and expatriate assignments. Leaders also can be trained to use systematic reflection to make a habit of it. Coaches, mentors, bosses, and/or peers should be trained and enabled to serve as practice/reflection facilitators. Finally, creating a culture in which feedback is easy to seek and receive will empower deliberate practice and reflection.

3. Learn from others.

As reflected in the popular 70/20/10 catchphrase, roughly 20 percent of key developmental experiences recalled by successful executives involve learning from relationships (Yip & Wilson, 2010). Consistent with this, many successful leadership development practices involve learning from or with others. For example, having a mentor and receiving more support from mentors is related to gains in learning (Eby, et al., 2013). Further, individuals who work with a coach after receiving multi-rater feedback show more development (Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas & Kucine, 2003). Similarly, summaries of research on action learning underscore the value of learning from others (Leonard & Marquardt, 2010).

There are likely many mechanisms through which leadership development is facilitated or accelerated by working with others. A classic social learning component has always been present where leaders learn from watching others and gaining insight from the outcomes they experience. For example, in mentoring relationships, where role modeling is an important function served by the mentor (Eby, et al., 2013), mentees learn both what to do and what not to do from observing their mentors (Hezlett, 2005).

In addition, working with others facilitates several of the other leadership development imperatives such as new experiences, deliberate practice and reflection—further strengthening the web of personal change. Powerful leadership development initiatives must include opportunities to learn from and with others.

An IT executive's team expanded from several direct reports with whom he could have regular individual meetings to more than 20 software developers whom he needed to keep updated and informed. He had to do more communication via meetings and broadcast emails, and found he wasn't always having the intended impact. His manager offered to coach him, so the IT manager began running communications by his manager before releasing them. From his manager's valuable suggestions, he quickly learned to communicate more effectively. Today, he still runs critical communications by someone else for input to keep the skill sharp.

“Who we are” imperatives.

4. Foster a growth mindset.

Personal change requires letting go of things you have valued in the past, and redefining yourself in some new ways. The act of letting go, or deconstructing some elements of self, can threaten one's self worth. A growth mindset, or learning goal orientation, helps people to overcome resistance to change and the unconscious addiction to the familiar. It enables people to welcome instability and self enrichment because they view their capabilities as malleable and possible to change (Dweck, 2007 & 2012).

Research on self-directed learning has shown that individuals with a stronger learning orientation are more motivated to develop and participate in more developmental activities (Boyce, Zaccaro & Wisecarver, 2010; Maurer, Lippstreu & Judge, 2008). And, although some people are more inclined than others to have a learning orientation, a growth mindset can be cultivated (Dweck, 2007 & 2012). It's not a fixed individual attribute. Recent findings support this at the physiological level. Neuroplastic changes continue to occur in the human brain throughout life (Lillard & Erisir, 2011).

Colleagues, coaches, managers, trainers, and senior leaders can foster growth mindsets. Describing failures as learning opportunities and rewarding attempts to change help leaders embrace, rather than fear, change. Role modeling and reinforcing this mindset through a learning culture in an organization, creates a positive set of features — from continuous improvement and innovation, to retention and agility.

5. Leverage emotion.

Emotion is often viewed as unwelcome in the world of work or at least something we don't talk about. It can be seen as something to be controlled and avoided in leadership development. The brain is thought to operate like an electric switch. When the limbic system — the brain network responsible for emotional experience — fires up, it reduces the resources available for prefrontal cortex and inhibits cognitive functioning e.g., decision making and problem solving (Rock, 2009). In this view, emotional regulation (i.e., reducing emotional arousal) should enhance a person's analytical capabilities in challenging situations (Hyland, Lee & Mills, 2015).

This notion of emotion reduction in leadership development must be examined from a much broader perspective than analytical effectiveness. Emotion is the integral aspect of the neural operating system. We don't just remember facts but also feelings associated with them. A large number of studies have demonstrated the memory-enhancing effect of emotion (Hamann, 2001). Instead of hindering our cognitive functioning, emotions may actually speed our thinking by providing an immediate response to circumstances.

Emotion also facilitates leadership development by fueling motivation. Our logical side may help us set developmental goals, but it is our emotional side that provides the passion to persevere through trying times. We are driven by our emotions. We learn best when our minds, hearts, and bodies are all engaged.

The implication for leadership development is twofold: to understand one's own emotions, and then to recognize and understand the role of emotions of others with regard to the impact of these elements on motivation. Both aspects of emotion should be included

in the learning process. Effective leadership development creates emotional resonance in leaders to spur their motivation and activate effort. Under the surface, content of any developmentally challenging experience is a wealth of subtle feelings. In leadership coaching, emotion serves as the vehicle to investigate our inner self to understand what we are attached and averse to.

6. Optimize stress.

Some stress inspires learning: People move out of their comfort zone and into their learning zone. Yet, the degree of challenge or stress in a new experience should not thrust people into the panic zone. Neurologically, when stress is too high, the higher-order thinking skills of the frontal lobes are impeded and the brain uses the more reflexive nature of the amygdala. Stretching too far in job challenges results in diminished development for some leadership competencies (DeRue & Wellman, 2009).

To maintain constructive levels of stress, coaches, mentors, and managers can keep an eye on an employee's "thermostat." Effective leaders can turn up the heat when needed but in a slow, deliberate manner. For instance, managers can frame new employee experiences as "experiments," and creating short timelines (to spur energy), while ensuring those short projects have defined finish lines. On the flip side, managers can ensure an employee doesn't overheat from stress by monitoring workloads.

A first line leader was surprised when her 360-degree feedback showed that her direct reports found her abrupt, unapproachable, and focused on work without interest in people. She very much wanted to change this, and began wrapping up meetings by checking in to make sure others had what they needed. She regularly asked her direct reports to tell her how she was doing. The feedback helped her tailor her efforts. Now a successful executive, she continues to build effective relationships by showing she does care what her team thinks and feels.

“Pause” imperatives.

Leadership development is more than mastering new skills and behaviors. It’s a journey of reinventing and transforming ourselves to be personally free from the constraints and limitations of the past (Gross, 2015). In our lives, we form our identities by interpreting and making meaning out of our experiences and creating our personal narratives about ourselves. Manifested as values, assumptions, and beliefs, our narrative self becomes the lens through which we view current and future experiences. This lens influences how new experiences are assimilated into existing cognitive schemas. This process occurs automatically, without much of our attentive effort and is called “automaticity.”

Automaticity has certain adaptive benefits. More than 40 percent of the actions people perform each day are not conscious decisions, but habits (Duhigg, 2012). However, automaticity can lead to systematic performance errors in changing environments where response flexibility is essential to positive outcomes (Dane, 2011). When left unchecked, or under stress, our narrative self hijacks our ability to fully experience the present moment, thereby imposing a limitation on what is possible.

Pausing this automaticity creates space for leaders to intentionally make small changes, and develop. Practicing mindfulness and behavioral commitments are two powerful techniques that enable leaders to pause automaticity.

7. Practice mindfulness.

Mindfulness is the inner state in which we can observe ourselves in action. Instead of reacting to new experiences automatically, mindfulness creates a space between the stimuli and the reaction, allowing us to reflect and question our beliefs and assumptions, freeing us from the impact of past experiences. Beliefs and assumptions that have served us in the past

may become disjunctive with the new environment. Mindfulness empowers leaders to transform their way of being as they assume greater responsibilities in their lives.

8. Enact behavioral commitments.

Behavioral commitments also help people overcome existing automaticity and drive new, more productive habits. Paradoxically, they help replace existing automaticity by making it easier to create new automaticity, completing the leadership development cycle more smoothly.

Imagine the difference in results between the leader who resolves to stop micromanaging and the one who backs up that resolution by making the following behavioral commitment: “When I feel concerned about team members’ progress on projects, I will ask open-ended questions to better understand the actions they will take to achieve expected results.” This commitment is easy to implement, and will change the dynamic in the moment and yield positive results that will reinforce the new behavior.

Behavioral commitments are powerful drivers of personal change for multiple reasons. Individuals have a need to maintain a positive self image (Cialdini, 2008) that requires following through on commitments to avoid cognitive dissonance. People also want to avoid reputational damage when they’ve made commitments to others (Festinger, 1957). Specific goals also drive behavior change by focusing attention and directing behavior (Locke & Latham, 2006).

To encourage leaders to pause their automaticity and create space for growth, techniques such as mindfulness, “catching yourself in the moment” and the use of behavioral commitments, should be designed and embedded into every leadership development initiative.

Application

Our experience over several decades of designing and delivering thousands of leadership interventions of all shapes and sizes around the world, leads us to this: To maximize the amount of personal change you generate in your leaders and to have it stick—these eight learning imperatives should be designed into all leadership development initiatives. They should serve as a checklist to ensure you are getting the most out of your leadership development portfolio.

Table 1. Three examples of applying the leadership development imperatives.

Imperative	Service Learning project for emerging leaders	Mentoring Program for mid-level leaders	Executive Development for C-suite leaders
<p>1. Embrace new experiences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lead the implementation of a project in a foreign country designed to have a positive impact on a community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentors and mentees participate in program events, including an orientation, brown bag lunches, social events, and a closing ceremony. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> During the “in residence” portion of the program, executives complete exercises to interview or host leaders from other organizations, or early-in-career talent from key markets. Engage in a series of visits to companies who address similar strategic issues differently (e.g., digital leadership).
<p>2. Adopt deliberate practice and reflection</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deliberate practice tactics and reflection journaling are explained pre-departure. After a week on-site, participants are asked to select a skill to practice. Participants are sent reminders once a week to write journal entries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentees shadow their mentors as they complete one or more job tasks. Mentors have conversations with mentees about how they’re modifying their approaches to understanding their roles, getting to know the organization, and leading their teams as they onboard. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As executives begin implementing their leadership plan, they meet regularly with three seasoned consultants to discuss what is going well and refine their approach. Executives find peer coaches in the cohort. Peer coaches meet regularly to discuss their progress on the projects or leadership exercises and reflect on the learning.
<p>3. Learn from others</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants meet with past participants prior to leaving. Participants in the same cohort interact and share lessons learned in a virtual community of practice with asynchronous and synchronous communication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentors share their knowledge of the organization and introduce their mentees to people in their network. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Senior executives are coached by three seasoned consultants. Learning a platform—or knowledge-management system facilitates sharing and supporting among members in the learning community.

Imperative	Service Learning project for emerging leaders	Mentoring Program for mid-level leaders	Executive Development for C-suite leaders
<p>4. Foster a growth mindset</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sponsors make it clear that the assignment has a learning goal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> During orientation, participants are asked to reflect on their own mindset and practice using growth (vs. judgmental) language in sharing a past experience on overcoming an obstacle. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Executives discuss how the mindset impacts their attitude and behavior. Establish the ground rules to foster a constructive environment in which cohort members feel safe to provide candid feedback to each other.
<p>5. Leverage emotion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prior to departure, participants learn different stages of adjusting to a foreign culture/environment. Once, in country, they use this knowledge to watch for and understand different types of emotional reactions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At orientation, mentees are given a template to record their aspirations and fears about joining the organization. During and at the end of onboarding, mentees are reminded to review what they wrote. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Executives complete self-reflection on triggers of emotions. Executives complete exercises to surface their personal values and connect their sense of purpose to their organizational leadership to generate compassion.
<p>6. Optimize stress</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn different sources of stress while working in a foreign environment. Prior to departure, participants write a plan on how they will manage their stress. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentors are encouraged to challenge mentees to stretch themselves, but also provide a safe place where they can discuss and search for constructive solutions for obstacles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Executives assess or reflect on their stress coping strategies. Executives learn to control dysfunctional coping and use more adaptive coping.
<p>7. Practice mindfulness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-departure preparation introduces meditation to provide practice on non-judgmental awareness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have lunches on mindfulness. Includes discussion of how mentees can apply it as they meet and build relationships. Remain mindful during onboarding by asking simple questions “How the situation is different?” and “What are different ways of looking at this situation?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand how auto-pilot works. Identify and be sensitive to automaticity-prone situations.
<p>8. Enact behavioral commitments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants write a development plan for their project, including 3 “if, then” statements specifying how they will respond to specific challenges. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentors and mentees discuss their expectations and set goals for the relationship, including how often they will meet and what they will accomplish. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leaders identify and commit to one or two specific developmental objectives related to their interpersonal or organizational leadership. Executives address the barriers that could sidetrack their development effort.

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