



Building World-Class Business Leaders Through Experiential Learning

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Introduction

Leadership is a hot topic in organizations of all sizes. A quick Amazon search for books about leadership delivers more than 250,000 options with topics that include changing your mindset, creating new habits, and how to achieve greatness. The number of available leadership development programs is also likely in the thousands. If you are interested in learning how to be a better leader, or how to cultivate leaders in an organization, there is clearly no shortage of content.

However, despite a plethora of training material, many organizations do not feel that their leadership development programs are effective. According to a 2015 Brandon Hall Group report¹ on the state of leadership development:



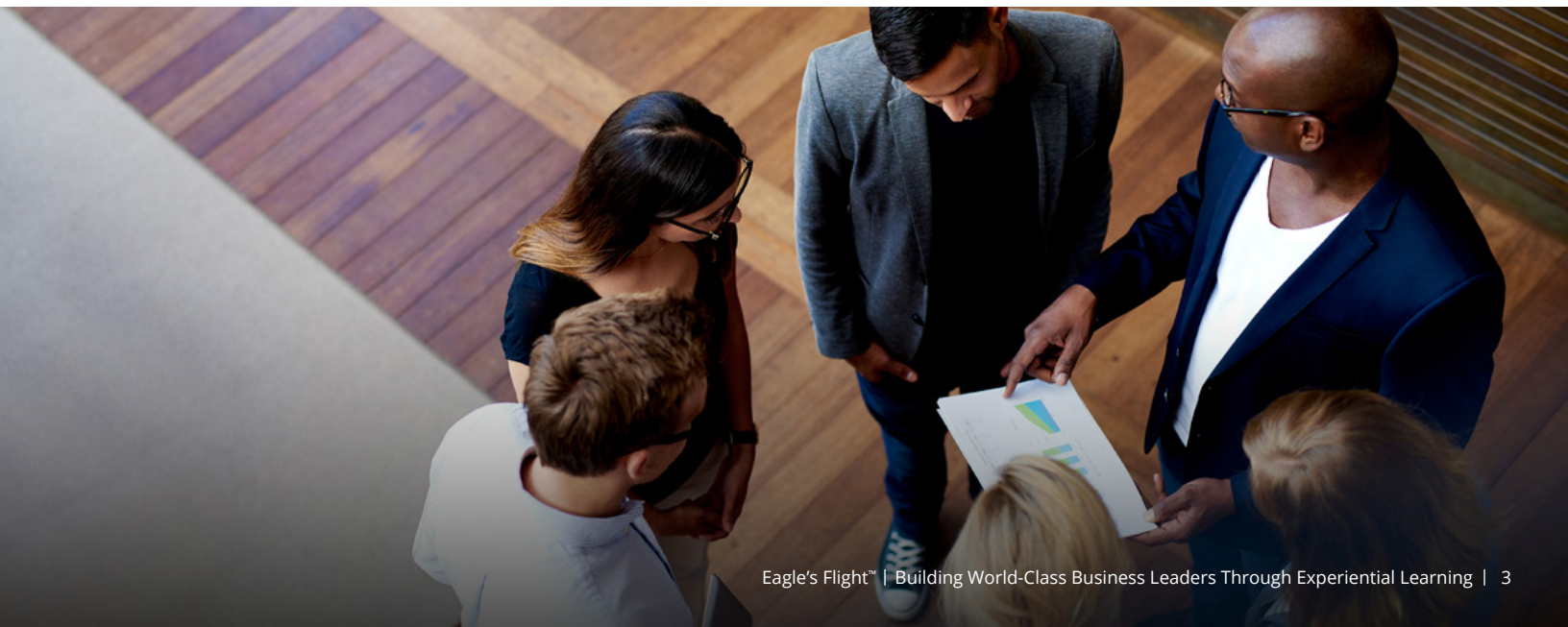
36 percent of organizations believe their leadership development practices are below average or poor.



About 50 percent of organizations said their leaders are not skilled to effectively lead their organizations today.



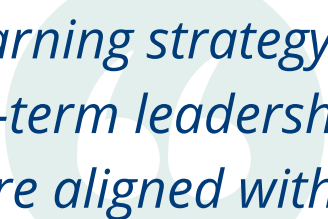
71 percent said their leaders are not ready to lead their organizations into the future.



With so many leadership development opportunities available, these are startling statistics, especially when you consider that, according to a 2016 Deloitte report,² 89 percent of organizations rate leadership as a top priority. However, the Brandon Hall Group report indicates that 43 percent of companies do not have a formal learning strategy to guide them.

An effective learning strategy should include short- and long-term leadership development objectives that are aligned with business goals, as well as measurement and reporting systems that help you stay on track. The training tools used to achieve those objectives can include a broad range of approaches such as e-learning platforms, classroom training, self-study programs, and experiential learning.

In this guide, we will explore why there is a disconnect between the desire to cultivate great leaders and the reality of executing successful leadership programs. We'll also take a closer look at experiential learning, one leadership development approach that can help reconcile this disparity. By connecting powerful, immersive training experiences with real-life leadership challenges, experiential learning fosters the long-term behavior change that creates great leaders.



“An effective learning strategy should include short- and long-term leadership development objectives that are aligned with business goals.”

Why Leadership Programs Fail

With 71 percent of companies saying that their leaders are not ready to guide them into the future, it's clear that the leadership programs that do exist are not producing the desired results. Leadership programs that are not effective fail both the organization and the employees who participate in them. The organization doesn't see a return on its investment, and leaders don't acquire the skills and behaviors they need to effectively execute their roles in the company.

Why are leadership programs failing? *Harvard Business Review*³ asked the same question and came to these conclusions:

- Knowing about leadership does not translate to practical execution
- True leadership requires emotional courage or conviction
- Experience is the best teacher of emotional courage

Our experience with leadership development confirms that this assessment is accurate. We would also add these factors that can contribute to the failure of leadership programs:

Leadership is not limited to senior positions.

Leadership development is often misunderstood as only applicable to the most senior positions, when, in fact, leaders exist at every level in the organization. Developing leaders early and throughout their careers ensures your employees are maximizing their potential today and are ready to take on new leadership roles in the future.

Behavior change is essential.

Many programs lack methods that focus on changing behavior and focus instead on transferring knowledge. While understanding training content is important, if the information is not applied in practice, the lessons learned in training will not lead to lasting behavior change.

Conviction is crucial.

Many leadership programs do not sufficiently focus on building conviction. Without this, there is no driving force to make the required shifts and changes. Conviction pushes leaders to take ownership of everything they do in the organization because of the inherent belief that their actions make a difference.

Training must be connected to real life.

Programs that don't relate to the challenges employees face every day at work do not set participants up to successfully translate the knowledge gained to their work reality. For example, understanding the importance of active listening as a communication skill is not the same as applying that skill for oneself in a situation that mimics one similar to the workplace. When participants don't have the opportunity to practice new skills in a safe environment, they are more reluctant to test-drive those skills back on the job.



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Reinforcement and measurement drive results.

Not incorporating a post-training reinforcement and measurement strategy is a sure way for programs to fail. In order to create lasting change, new skills and behaviors must be retained, coached, reinforced, and measured over time. Seeing how applying new skills leads to performance improvement prompts individuals to continue their efforts and stay engaged with the development process.

Many of these common pitfalls—failure to foster long-term behavior change, lack of conviction, and not connecting training content to the real world—can be addressed through experiential learning.

Why Experiential Learning Is So Powerful

Understanding why leadership programs often fail is the first step toward implementing a system that works. The next step is to adopt a training approach that incorporates experiential learning to successfully cultivate strong leaders.

Experiential learning is an approach that can be employed not only to deliver information about a particular concept but also to change behavior through eight critical aspects:⁴

1. Participants are fully engaged and committed to achieving an outcome.
2. The activity is themed to mask any connection to day-to-day reality.
3. The activity is an exact metaphor for the reality faced by the participants.
4. It's captivating and fun.
5. The compressed timeline creates an intense focus on a single, desired outcome.
6. A facilitated debrief connects the results of the experience to the results at work.
7. The debrief can be customized to the unique business reality of the audience.
8. Participants see the results of their actions, building the necessary conviction to change behavior after the training concludes.

When providing leadership training with the expressed intention of building better leaders, adding a component that actually makes the learning fun should be a priority. Doing so increases the interest level for the participants, increases their degree of engagement, and accelerates their learning. And experiential learning does just that. Not only will you develop the identified leadership skills and competencies defined in your development program, but leaders at every level will be engaged throughout.

Competencies of World-Class Business Leaders

Experiential learning is an ideal methodology for building leadership competencies across all levels of leaders, as participants not only gain knowledge but can also practice and apply new skills, which is a critical factor in leadership development success. At Eagle's Flight, we recommend using experiential learning to build the following key competencies to grow world-class leaders in your organization.⁵

Accelerating Performance of Direct Reports

Strong leaders recognize the value that every individual in the organization contributes and strive to help each of them realize their potential, regardless of experience or position.

Some of the skills and competencies that will help leaders accelerate employees' performance are:

- Holding others in esteem
- Assessing employees' successes and opportunities for improvement
- Collaboratively establishing goals that are effective, actionable, and results-oriented
- Leading an empowered environment

By approaching every individual with the same level of respect, recognizing each of their unique talents, and assessing performance based on results, leaders will be able to build high-performance teams. Moreover, great leaders are able to improve performance by setting clear goals, consistently reinforcing them, providing the necessary resources and support to achieve them, and monitoring progress along the way.

Becoming Brilliant at Interpersonal Communication

Effectively communicating with others is an essential characteristic of world-class leaders. Whether discussing performance issues with employees, describing the benefits of a product to a customer, or presenting financial data to shareholders, a leader must communicate with clarity, conviction, and compassion.

Some of the skills and competencies that can be taught to develop better interpersonal communication skills are:

- Making a face-to-face impact
- Knowing when to speak versus when to listen
- Keeping communication simple and concise
- Exhibiting patience when communicating with others
- Employing analogies to provide greater clarity

The ability to clearly convey information to the right people at the right time is just the foundation of professional communication. A world-class leader will also speak with conviction, actively listen, and communicate using imagery that brings the listener to a deeper level of understanding.



*“A leader must communicate with clarity,
conviction, and compassion.”*

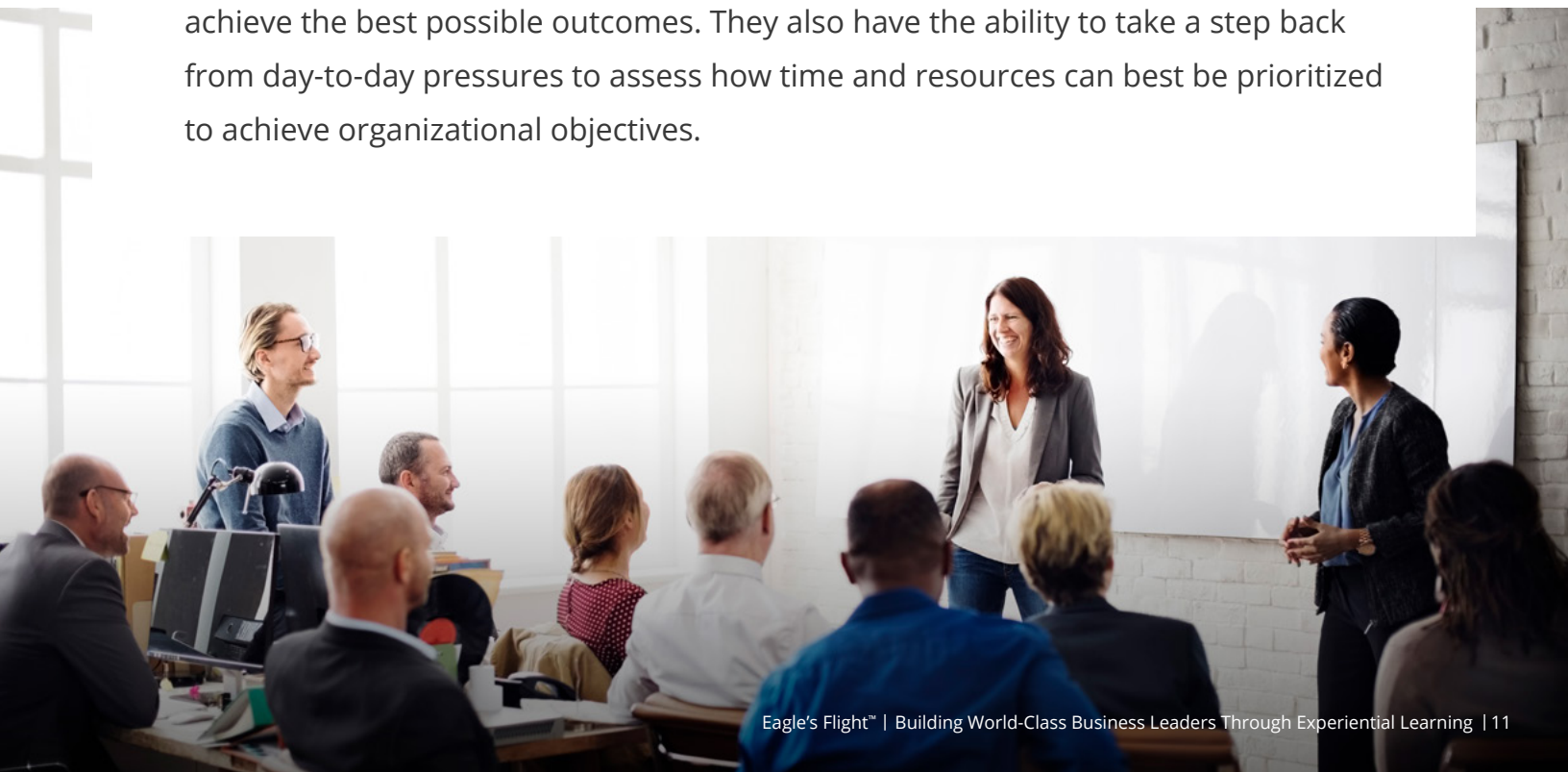
Going Beyond Time Management

When it comes to leadership, time management is about more than just completing tasks when they are due and juggling a busy schedule. World-class leaders have the ability to manage priorities at multiple levels in order to improve individual, team, and organizational performance.

For leaders to succeed, they must develop the following competencies:

- Setting priorities at an organizational level
- Matching priorities to time available
- Responding to changing priorities
- Applying sound judgment when setting priorities
- Maximizing accomplishments in the shortest possible time
- Looking at the big picture

Great leaders take the priorities of others into account when making decisions to achieve the best possible outcomes. They also have the ability to take a step back from day-to-day pressures to assess how time and resources can best be prioritized to achieve organizational objectives.





Achieving Executional Excellence

Executional excellence is achieved by aligning specific, quantifiable goals with the organizational strategy and ensuring that individuals with the right mix of skills are in the most appropriate roles.

Achieving executional excellence is both a science and an art. The specific skills and competencies that world-class leaders employ to do it include:

- Linking strategy and tactics
- Training to improve competency
- Being open to new, innovative ideas
- Learning from every source
- Consistently learning new skills and developing existing skills
- Reassessing processes and how tasks are completed
- Leading productive meetings

A strategy is only as good as its execution, and execution is only as effective as the thinking behind it. Great leaders have the ability to successfully navigate this two-way relationship by both articulating the long-term plan and executing the practical details necessary to accomplish it.

“Achieving executional excellence is both a science and an art.”

A photograph of two women in professional attire. The woman on the left is looking towards the woman on the right, who is partially visible in profile. They appear to be in a meeting or discussion.

Producing Champions

The strength of an organization lies in the sum of all of its parts, and people are a significant component of the equation. World-class leaders recognize that investing in individuals will maximize their potential and that leadership is responsible for nurturing strengths and closing knowledge/competency gaps.

Leaders can help individuals grow both personally and professionally by developing the following skills and competencies:

- Teaching their own strengths, lessons, and experiences to others
- Understanding when and how to teach
- Creating champions in an organization, department, or team

By recognizing strengths, nurturing them, and increasing self-confidence in others, great leaders are able to develop employees into champions. This requires learning and using teaching skills, having patience while others learn, and empowering others to utilize their new skills to support and forward organizational objectives.



Setting the Pace

Leaders bear the obligation of setting an example for others in the organization. World-class leaders see this as an opportunity to set the highest standard against which performance is measured.

Some of the skills and competencies that allow leaders to set the pace in an organization are:

- Becoming and living the gold standard
- Bringing personal discipline to bear
- Leading by example
- Creating an empowered, productive environment that includes time for fun
- Motivating others
- Managing personal improvement and development

Setting high standards for oneself, and living up to them, is a key element in the journey. Great leaders set the tone for others by aiming not just to do their best but also to be the best by striving for mastery of their professions. The discipline and determination it takes to achieve this are key to motivating others in the organization to commit to the same.

“Great leaders set the tone for others by aiming not just to do their best but also to be the best by striving for mastery of their professions.”

Maintaining Core Principles

When building an organization, great leaders consider certain core principles in everything they do. This allows them to set clear priorities and implement or improve practices that maintain those principles.

Some of the skills and competencies that can enable leaders to maintain core principles are:

- Fostering teachability and a desire for lifelong learning
- Demonstrating integrity in all decisions, actions, and behaviors
- Speaking truth in an effective manner
- Building and sustaining personal credibility
- Requiring personal accountability

Rewarding teachability and integrity at every stage of career growth builds an organization of individuals who are more prone to learning and applying high-performance behaviors. Establishing credibility and being personally accountable are not by-products of great leadership. These are qualities that can be developed and should be honed by leaders who wish to perform at the world-class level.





Mastering Organizational Communication

Interpersonal communication skills are necessary for any leader to be successful, but world-class leadership also requires mastering communication at the organizational level.

Leaders can become better communicators by acquiring the following skills and competencies:

- Demonstrating personal conviction and encouraging others to find, and embrace, their own
- Understanding and mastering communication principles
- Effectively gathering feedback
- Communicating with transparency and being open to questions or feedback

Effective communication starts with personal conviction about the chosen course of action, whether it is rolling out a new process or initiating change. Through mastering communication principles that lead to better understanding from all parties, great leaders have the ability to unify the individuals and teams in an organization toward achieving a common goal.



“Effective communication starts with personal conviction about the chosen course of action.”

Leading Organizational Change

An organization is not a static entity that can be frozen in time at its peak. Changes in the marketplace, employee turnover, company growth, and countless other factors contribute to ongoing change in an organization. Whether the change feels like a ripple or a tidal wave, leaders must be prepared to shepherd the organization through it.

Although leaders may not be able to predict all transitions, they can make them go smoothly by learning skills and competencies such as:

- Harnessing the power of vision
- Providing strong leadership during times of change
- Capitalizing on transitional times to improve performance

Successfully leading through a transition starts with a strong vision that is clearly defined and effectively communicated. By describing what the goal of the change is and providing a clear path to get there, world-class leaders can tap into the emotions and intellect of individuals to engage and motivate them to change.

All of the above competencies can be taught and cultivated through experiential learning more effectively than other training approaches. Think about time management, for example. Emerging leaders could watch a lecture, read informative articles, and even listen to advice from mentors, but until they have practiced the skills, seen the results of their actions, and changed their mindsets, they will not be able to see for themselves the benefits of embracing the change. Experiential learning provides the opportunity to safely test new skills and gives participants the confidence to implement them back on the job.

What's Next?

Closing the gap between the desire for excellent leadership and the reality of failed leadership programs requires a fresh approach to training and development. Leadership programs fail for a number of reasons, often because they do not:

- Connect conceptual knowledge to practical execution
- Successfully instill conviction
- Address leadership at every level in the organization
- Focus on changing behavior
- Include a measurement and reinforcement strategy



Building world-class leaders requires implementing an ongoing development program that addresses the above shortfalls and teaches the skills and competencies that enable leadership to:

- ✓ Accelerate performance of their direct reports
- ✓ Master interpersonal communication
- ✓ Master time management skills and strategies
- ✓ Achieve executorial excellence
- ✓ Produce champions in the organization
- ✓ Set the pace and quality standards for the company
- ✓ Maintain core principles for themselves and others
- ✓ Master organizational communication
- ✓ Lead during periods of organizational change

“Closing the gap between the desire for excellent leadership and the reality of failed leadership programs requires a fresh approach to training and development.”



Mastering any one of the above categories requires dedication to becoming a world-class leader and having the necessary training resources available to achieve long-term behavior change.

Experiential learning is a valuable tool for transferring knowledge, allowing participants to test new skills in a safe environment, and instilling the conviction to change behaviors back on the job. When incorporated into a comprehensive leadership development program that includes measurement and retention strategies, experiential learning enables an organization to cultivate the world-class leaders who drive it to become an imitated global competitor.

If you'd like to learn more about experiential learning and how it can be used to build world-class leaders in your organization, get in touch with Eagle's Flight today.



Whether your goal lies in reducing turnover, succession planning, increasing sales, improving customer satisfaction, or transforming the culture across your organization, an Eagle's Flight expert can match you with the right program.

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Toll-Free North America: 1-800-567-8079 • **International:** +1-519-767-1747 • **www.eaglesflight.com**
Asia Pacific: +65-6805-0668 • **Europe:** +44-0-175-353-3010 • **South America:** +55-11-3050-2210

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