HARVARD | BUSINESS | SCHOOL

Leadership and Organizational Behavior (LEAD) 2025 Fall Term: Course Overview

Introduction

Before coming to business school, many of you were *individual contributors*: your primary responsibility was to perform specific tasks, for example, in sales, engineering, financial analysis, or consulting. In many ways, your contributions depended primarily on what you could draw upon from your individual expertise, experience, and education. Most HBS graduates will be charged with management or leadership responsibilities within three years of completing their MBA. Typically, this will involve managing a team or, for some, formally leading a small organization or one of its subunits, possibly as an owner/entrepreneur.

The LEAD course is designed to address several fundamental aspects of managing and leading people. While many use the terms leadership and management interchangeably, John Kotter defined leadership as setting the direction and vision of the organization, and aligning, motivating, and inspiring others, and he defined management as the execution tasks of planning, budgeting, organizing, and staffing. The core aspects of leadership and management include understanding and influencing group behavior and performance; working with and managing people one-on-one; and leading, motivating, and aligning people behind a common vision or direction. The course puts a particular emphasis on the importance of developing highly adaptive, high-performance organizations and on the challenges of leading change. Finally, the course explicitly addresses some of the basic choices and strategic questions involved in learning to build one's career with purpose and intentionality.

While the course will provide insights into the work of leadership and management, it will also address the work that you need to do on your own personal development. LEAD is focused on who you are and what you are capable of, not simply what you know. To that end, the course puts up a mirror so that you can look at yourself honestly and assess: What am I good at? What am I not good at? What are my developmental challenges and opportunities? The aim of the course is to enable you to develop and formulate your own approach to leadership.

Course Objectives and Themes

The course helps you confront both the task learning *and* personal learning involved in becoming a manager or leader. To that end, the course is structured to allow you to learn about both the actual work of leadership and the personal developmental journey that one must embark upon to build the skills and capabilities to do that work. Although most first-time managers anticipate the demands for task learning (the need to acquire new skills or competencies), they are often surprised by those associated with personal learning (the need to gain self-knowledge and cope with the stress and emotions of being a manager). The course design reflects these dual learning objectives.

The Personal Leadership Journey

A. *The course offers a realistic preview of what it means to lead and manage.* Most new managers' expectations of their jobs are incomplete and simplistic. "Being a manager" is about not only assuming a position of authority, but also becoming more interdependent with others, both inside the organization (seniors, juniors, peers) and outside it (suppliers, customers, competitors, investors, creditors). In fact, the higher your position in an organization, the more *dependent* you become on others to get things done. This is as true for entrepreneurs as it is for CEOs of large corporations.

B. *The course helps you begin to transform your professional identity from individual contributor to manager.* First-time managers are often surprised by how stark the transition from individual contributor to manager can be. Research shows that they have to let go of some deep-seated attitudes and habits they have developed as individual contributors, responsible only for their own performance. At the same time, they must take on new ways of thinking and behaving that are consistent with their role as a head of a work unit or an entire enterprise. To use the analogy of an orchestra, they move from being violinists who concentrate on one part, to being conductors who coordinate the efforts of many musicians and who need to know about the entire score. First-time managers must seek new ways of deriving satisfaction from their work and measuring success not only by their own individual efforts but by the results of their team. Effective managers are aware of their personal style and its impact, their strengths and weaknesses, and their own motivations and values.

C. *The course helps you learn how to take initiative in developing as a leader and manager over the course of your career.* Companies pressed to survive in today's hyper-competitive and increasingly digital global economy are reworking the psychological contract with their employees. Job security and vertical mobility have diminished in most societies today, and the advent of artificial intelligence and other technologies have redefined countless industries. To build a successful and satisfying career, one must understand how to make appropriate career choices and become a self-directed learner. One also has to understand how to identify and capitalize on developmental opportunities, thereby updating and broadening one's expertise. Learning to manage and lead is a process of learning primarily from on-the-job experience, by doing, observing, and interacting with others. Effective managers know how to elicit feedback from others and engage in *structured reflection* so they can identify and consolidate the lessons of their experience.

D. *The course prompts you to begin thinking about your life course and personal priorities given the opportunities, challenges, choices, and tradeoffs that await you.* The MBA program is often a transformational experience for students, and even short of that, it is a transition point in students' lives. In addition to supplying you with the fundamentals for formulating your own approach to leadership, the course provides you with opportunities to think intentionally about how you seek to lead your life.

The Work of Leadership

E. *The course addresses the realities of operating and leading in a changing and increasingly fluid global landscape.* To be competitive in a global economy, companies are breaking down traditional boundaries to create lean and adaptive organizations. Horizontal networks, as well as agile, hybrid, and cross-functional teams that cut across national boundaries, are taking their place alongside, and sometimes even replacing, functional, hierarchical organizational structures. Companies are forming strategic alliances with suppliers, customers, and even competitors. As a result of these changes, formal authority is eroding as a source of power. Instead, managers must consider the needs and interests of various constituencies if they hope to get things done. Effective managers must know how to build relationships, based on mutual trust and

empowerment, with the complex network of people with whom they are interdependent.

F. *The course examines the process of developing effective relationships with a diverse collection of individuals and groups.* In an increasingly diverse work environment, effective managers must understand how to build and nurture inclusive organizations that foster and encourage authenticity, psychological safety, and empathy. To create these inclusive environments in which everyone can thrive, managers must learn to work across differences. This includes both an understanding of what it takes to build effective relationships with those who are different from you, as well as what it takes to adapt and modify one's managerial style and approach.

G. *The course helps you develop an understanding of what it takes to compete in today's turbulent and demanding business environment.* Organizations must continually revitalize and transform themselves. Consequently, the demand for effective leaders at all levels and stages of an organization is escalating. Leadership may entail building a company, guiding its growth, maintaining its stability, or changing it (sometimes incrementally, sometimes dramatically). Leadership requires the ability to understand the complex external context, develop a vision of the future for the organization, align the organization behind that vision, and motivate people to achieve the vision. Managers must be astute organizational architects, able to design organizations to fit shifting competitive conditions. Managers must also be effective change agents who understand how to overcome resistance to change, deal with the inevitable stresses associated with change, and implement appropriate change strategies.

Our research suggests that realizing these dual objectives (the personal leadership journey *and* the work of leadership) requires teaching methods that best capture the realities of managerial work and encourage learning from experience. Therefore, we will use a mix of interactive methods that rely heavily on carefully selected cases, often supplemented with video material to capture the nonverbal dimensions of interactions. You will be able to learn from the opportunities and challenges faced by managers in a variety of settings. By analyzing common dilemmas that managers encounter, you will learn how to anticipate and avoid problems and take advantage of emerging opportunities. Throughout the course, we will engage in role-plays, simulations, and self-assessment exercises. These activities allow you to see how you personally interpret and behave in different situations. Supplementing the classroom materials are readings that refine and integrate concepts and lessons that emerge in discussions.

The LEAD course will provide you with tools that will help you take charge of your own development throughout your career. Its frameworks are designed to help you make sense of your own on-the-job learning experiences and equip you with basic diagnostic and action-planning skills that can be used throughout your career.

Course Content and Core Modules

The course is divided into six parts: (1) Introduction; (2) Leading Teams; (3) Enhancing Interpersonal Effectiveness; (4) Leading, Designing, and Aligning Organizations; (5) Leading Change; and (6) Developing Your Path. As you join HBS, you work in small teams in your discussion groups and develop a larger team identity as part of your section. As such, we start the course with Leading Teams to equip you with the competencies to be effective team members and leaders. As part of the diverse section experience, you learn to work across differences and share divergent perspectives and insights. The next module on Enhancing Interpersonal Effectiveness provides you with some important tools to effectively navigate working across and through differences.

In the next two modules, we turn to "Capital L" leadership, moving from small group interactions and one-on-one relationships to the challenges and opportunities of leading at scale and scope when the leader no longer has line of sight into everyone in the organization. Without direct interactions, leaders must rely on other means to fulfill the organization's mission, communicate core policies, and reinforce

cultural norms. To that end, leaders must wear three hats – the leader as beacon, the leader as architect, and the leader as change agent – to create the vision for the organization (beacon), orchestrate and align the organizational components to deliver on that vision (architect), and adapt and evolve as the competitive and contextual landscape changes (change agent).

In the final module of LEAD, the course turns the lens squarely on you as you contemplate the leader you want to be and the life you want to live.

PART I: INTRODUCTION

The focus of the introductory module is twofold. First, it explores the realities, expectations, and pressures facing managers and the challenges of making the transition from individual contributor to manager. What capabilities and resources do new managers need to take charge and master their new assignments, and how do they acquire and develop them? Second, the problems and issues raised by the introductory cases provide a preview of the topics that the course will cover; especially in the subsequent two modules – Leading Teams and Enhancing Interpersonal Effectiveness.

PART II: LEADING TEAMS

Because teams accomplish so much of the work in today's organizations, managers must be skilled at participating in and leading teams. Leading a team also represents a fundamental shift in the nature of work you will be asked to take on; shifting from doing technical tasks and being responsible for your own piece, to enabling others to get their tasks done and being responsible for the entire team's effectiveness. This segment of the course explores the multiple factors that shape the development, dynamics, and effectiveness of groups, whether collocated, distributed, cross-cultural, agile, or otherwise. We will look in depth at the determinants of team effectiveness and how a group's culture emerges and shapes its effectiveness. Building on this understanding, we will then examine the manager's role in designing and building an effective team, and the impact of the manager's style on the team's behavior and performance.

PART III: ENHANCING INTERPERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Those in charge have always depended on others to get work done. This means building a network of effective work relationships. This module begins by identifying the critical ingredients for building effective relationships with superiors, colleagues, and subordinates. We will look at various interpersonal relationships from different perspectives, including hierarchical, demographic, and cultural. This module will also explore the advantages and disadvantages of different communication and influence strategies, and it will allow you to examine and confront your own preconceptions and perspectives about what it means to manage and lead others. Through this module, we hope to contribute to your section's ability to constructively discuss sensitive issues that explore identity, belonging, and inclusion.

PART IV: LEADING, DESIGNING, AND ALIGNING ORGANIZATIONS

To understand what leaders are called upon to do and what drives their effectiveness, we will study leaders building, growing, sustaining, and changing their organizations—often in the face of a shifting external landscape. This module will examine how leaders set direction for their organizations and what it takes to achieve congruence among an organization's components: its critical tasks, people, formal organization, and culture. We will study several leaders "in action" to gain insight into the critical functions and personal qualities that contribute to effective leadership, and how different leaders in various situations align the critical components of an organization to address emerging challenges and capitalize on opportunities.

PART V: LEADING CHANGE

Leading change is a natural extension and byproduct of continuous organizational alignment. Organizations do not live in a static world. As internal capabilities change, as organizations grow, mature, and decline, and as competitive and contextual factors emerge, leaders must adapt the organization to fit the new reality. In many instances, this adaptation process also requires that leaders modify their own leadership style and approach.

Leaders' attempts to renew or change their organizations often fail. In this segment of the course, we will compare efforts to transform organizations in an effort to distinguish critical choices and activities in the change process. We will identify different approaches for developing a change strategy and for mobilizing people to implement change. We will also address the following questions: What are the primary sources of resistance to change? What are the most appropriate ways to overcome them? What change strategies and tactics work, and under what conditions?

PART VI: DEVELOPING YOUR PATH

In the final module, we will focus on several strategic issues involved in building a dynamic career, paying particular attention to early- and mid-career choices and dilemmas. We will consider the following topics: How do individuals learn to lead? What critical experiences and relationships are needed? How do personal and professional opportunities and life decisions intertwine—and how might they be approached with care and intentionality? How do rising leaders handle the unforeseen twists and turns that their careers and lives take? How does and should passion influence career decisions?

CONCLUSION

In sum, LEAD introduces students to the work of managing and leading and the work of becoming a manager and leader. That work is different from what many have experienced before, and it is simultaneously challenging and rewarding. We are excited to embark on this journey with you.