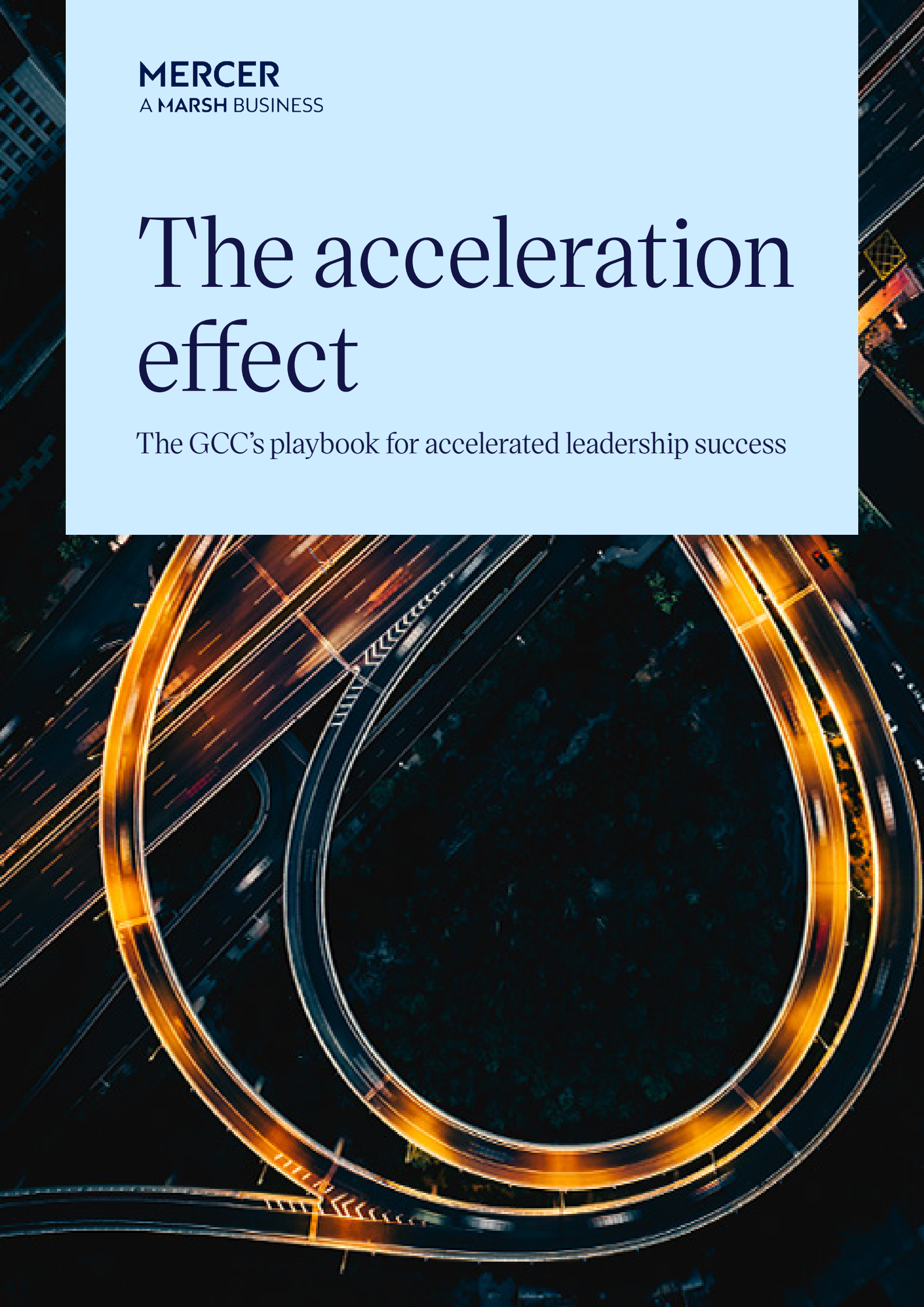


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The acceleration effect

The GCC's playbook for accelerated leadership success



The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is undergoing rapid economic and social transformation, guided by visionary national agendas, such as Saudi Vision 2030 and UAE Centennial 2071. **The region's most valuable asset is its youthful demographic, with over 50% of the population under 25.** For example, young Saudis make 44% of the population and up to 78% of the workforce.¹ This presents both immense potential and unique challenges, as young professionals are promoted into leadership roles at an unprecedented pace, posing significant risks to both individual career success and broader national objectives.

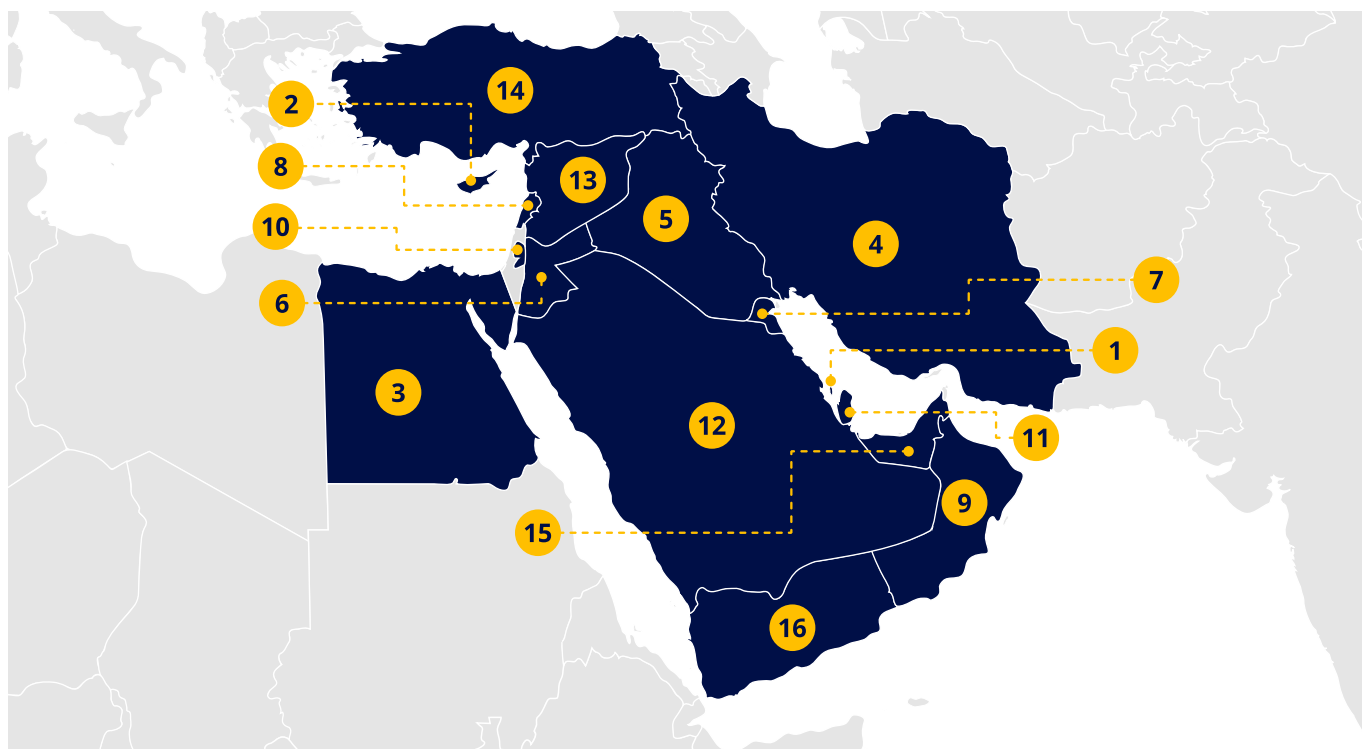
This accelerated advancement poses a significant challenge: existing leadership development models (traditional development models), primarily designed for gradual career growth, are insufficient for the region's accelerated leadership trajectories. Consequently, a gap emerges between technical competence and essential leadership skills.

Therefore, for immediate and sustained impact, a tailored multi-modal approach to leadership development, emphasizing experiential learning, coaching, mentoring, and digital leadership training is essential. As organizations across the GCC strive to diversify economies, accelerate digital transformation, and foster sustainable growth, the urgency for such an approach to leadership development has never been greater. By adopting these context specific, immersive leadership programs, organizations can effectively bridge the current skill gaps and empower young leaders to drive the region's economic and societal transformation in alignment with national strategic objectives.

These methods equip emerging leaders not only with technical expertise but also with the capabilities required to manage the complexity of our modern era. This ensures they can confidently navigate today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) landscape, and have a deep understanding of the context in which they lead.



1. World Economic Forum, How the GCC is giving young people a central role in their future, 2025.



Map 1. The Middle East is represented by these 16 countries:

1		Bahrain	5		Iraq	9		Oman	13		Syria
2		Cyprus	6		Jordan	10		Palestine	14		Türkiye
3		Egypt	7		Kuwait	11		Qatar	15		UAE
4		Iran	8		Lebanon	12		Saudi Arabia	16		Yemen

Below are the national visions of the six GCC countries which they established for their development.

Announcement Year	Country	Vision Name
2008	Bahrain	Bahrain National Vision 2030
2008	Qatar	Qatar National Vision 2030
2016	Saudi Arabia	Saudi Vision 2030
2017	Kuwait	New Kuwait 2035
2020	Oman	Oman Vision 2040
2023	UAE	UAE Centennial 2071



The leadership imperative in the Middle East

Unlike in Western economies, where leadership progression is gradual, GCC professionals often assume managerial responsibilities in their late 20s or early 30s. The urgency for developing effective leadership is even more pronounced. As national visions such as Bahrain National Vision 2030, New Kuwait 2035, Oman Vision 2040, Qatar National Vision 2030, Saudi Vision 2030, and UAE Centennial 2071 seek to pivot economies away from oil dependency, young professionals are being promoted to leadership roles at an accelerated rate.

This fast-tracking of careers, while promising, presents unique challenges. As a matter of fact, the insights analyzed from Mercer's The Thriving Index® psychometric assessment conducted within the GCC region, pertaining to a sample of 12,632 participants, reveals that **44% of assessed leaders are under 36 years of age.**

This rapid rise of young leaders has exposed a growing gap between technical expertise and leadership capabilities.² Many of these professionals excel in specialized fields such as engineering, finance, or technology. But many lack formal training in critical leadership competencies such as community leadership, managing complexity, resolving conflict, strategic agility, entrepreneurial mindset, and change orientation. Without structured support, these young leaders potentially struggle to make the transition from technical

experts to visionary leaders, and risk stalling their own growth and that of their organization. Recent research from the Center for Creative Leadership and Harvard Business Review confirms that gaps in strategic thinking, adaptability, and team leadership persist in the region.³ This suggests that leaders often face difficulties in adapting to change, building and leading effective teams, and developing strategic thinking—all essential skills in today's volatile business environment.

63% of Saudis are under 30 years old.⁴

Additionally, lack of bridging the gap may impact leadership capability in the future. Fast-forward to 2026, the trend remains with similar competencies being observed as developmental areas on leadership and executive levels. The findings of the past and the present underscore the need to reinforce immersive leadership development strategies that go beyond traditional classroom learning to focus on real-world applications.

2. Center for Creative Leadership, Developing Leaders in the Public Sector of the Kingdom, 2020.

3. Leadership Across Cultures, Harvard Business Review, May 2015.

4. Saudi population at 32.2 million, 63% of Saudis under 30 years old, census shows, Reuters, May 31, 2023.

Moreover, Mercer's 2025 Executives Outlook report explicitly mentions that **81% of executives say leaders struggle to balance long-term strategic planning with short-term operational needs.**⁵ Leaders also endorse the need to align more closely on strategies for balancing sustainability (82% of executives possess this perspective), which resonates with national visions. Finally, within the Middle East, one of the main priorities for Human Resources leaders is to improve people managers' skills.

Furthermore, cultural factors play a pivotal role in shaping leadership practices across the Middle East. Research from London Business School reveals that leadership in the region is deeply influenced by relationship building, respect for hierarchy, and community-oriented decision-making.⁶ In high-power distance cultures such as those in the GCC, leaders are expected to command authority while also fostering trust and collaboration among their teams. Balancing these expectations requires leaders to develop a unique set of skills that are often overlooked in Western-centric leadership models.

Traditional leadership development programs are often culturally and technically inappropriate to address this prevailing gap in the Middle East. The conventional approaches assume gradual career progression, providing leadership training over extended periods. However, given the pace at which professionals in the GCC are promoted, organizations require **structured, high-impact, and experiential leadership development journeys tailored to the realities of the region.** Without such interventions, there may be a risk that young leaders will be unprepared to handle the complexities of their roles, hindering efforts to meet national transformation goals.

To meet the demands of the rapidly changing landscape, organizations in the Middle East are advised to rethink their approach to leadership development.

This involves creating tailored programs while respecting the region's cultural values and economic priorities. Through these customized approaches, the region's young workforce can be empowered to lead with confidence and drive the transformation envisioned by their respective national agendas.



5. Mercer, 2025 Executive Outlook Study.

6. Leading Teams: Tactics Inspired by the Middle East, London Business School, May 15, 2017.

The evolution of leadership development

Historically, leadership development within organizational contexts predominantly relied on structured classroom-based theoretical frameworks and methodologies. In both Western and Middle Eastern contexts, leadership development programs traditionally emphasized authoritative instruction, guided by trainers who communicated predetermined leadership theories and practices, often delivered through structured lectures, case studies, and role-playing scenarios designed to simulate organizational challenges.

In both, Western and Middle Eastern contexts, training would typically conclude with summaries, full of theoretical insights intended to solidify understanding and foster learning retention.

This approach reinforces traditional hierarchical structures, with a strong emphasis on respect for seniority, authority, and cultural norms. Having limited opportunities for change and shifting workforce expectations, this conventional approach has limited opportunities for interactive and experiential learning, which is deemed inadequate with our modern VUCA world, especially in the Middle East.

The conventional approach has increasingly been recognized as insufficiently effective for meeting the dynamic demands of our modern environment.

With rapid technological advancements globalization, and societal shifts, particularly among younger leaders in the Middle East, traditional classroom-based models have lost relevance.

With shortened attention spans and evolving interests, leaders seek more engaging, personalized, and

applicable training experiences.⁷ Research from the University of Chicago reveals that experiential learning can lead to higher retention rates and impact (90%), compared to just 5% from traditional methodologies.⁸

This whitepaper explores the benefits of this modern experiential, multi-modal learning approach and outlines practical methodologies and application tools to equip the GCC's next generation of leaders.

Mercer's 2023 GCC Leadership Survey found that 78% of GCC organizations are dissatisfied with traditional training methods.⁹

7. American Psychological Association, Why Our Attention Spans Are Shrinking, *Speaking of Psychology*.

8. Understanding the space of variation, Higher Education Research & Development.

9. Mercer GCC Leadership Survey, 2023.

The GCC context and its impact on leadership development

The GCC's rapid economic transformation presents both opportunities and challenges. As nations across the region diversify their economies beyond oil, there is a heightened demand for leaders who can effectively navigate new industries, drive innovation, manage change and foster sustainable growth. However, traditional leadership development frameworks are not sufficient to meet the unique challenges facing leaders in this rapidly evolving landscape. Numerous reasons resonate with the need for a modernized approach, some of which are described below.

Fast-track promotions and leadership readiness

One of the most pressing challenges in the GCC is the rapid acceleration of career advancement for young professionals. Many individuals in the region reach managerial and executive roles significantly earlier than their global counterparts. This phenomenon, while promising, has led to a readiness gap, the difference between an individual's technical expertise and their capacity to lead teams, make strategic decisions, and influence organizational change.

The issue is not a lack of ambition or intelligence but rather a lack of structured leadership training designed for young leaders thrust into high-stakes positions. Young professionals often excel in their technical domains, such as engineering, finance, or IT, but have had little exposure to leadership skills such as community

leadership, conflict resolution, strategic agility, change orientation, and managing complexity.

The gap becomes increasingly apparent when leaders are required to inspire teams, manage complex projects, or lead organizational transformations.

The overall Leadership Paradox Index, which measures a leader's adeptness at managing all paradoxes within our framework, reveals only 18.6% of leaders score highly.¹⁰

Within the region, Mercer's studies have backed up this global research showcasing that 70% of leaders lack the critical traits that reinforce the Leadership Paradox, including empathy, agility, energy, resilience, perspective, and conviction.

10. Mercer, Cracking the Code: Five imperatives for executive assessment success.

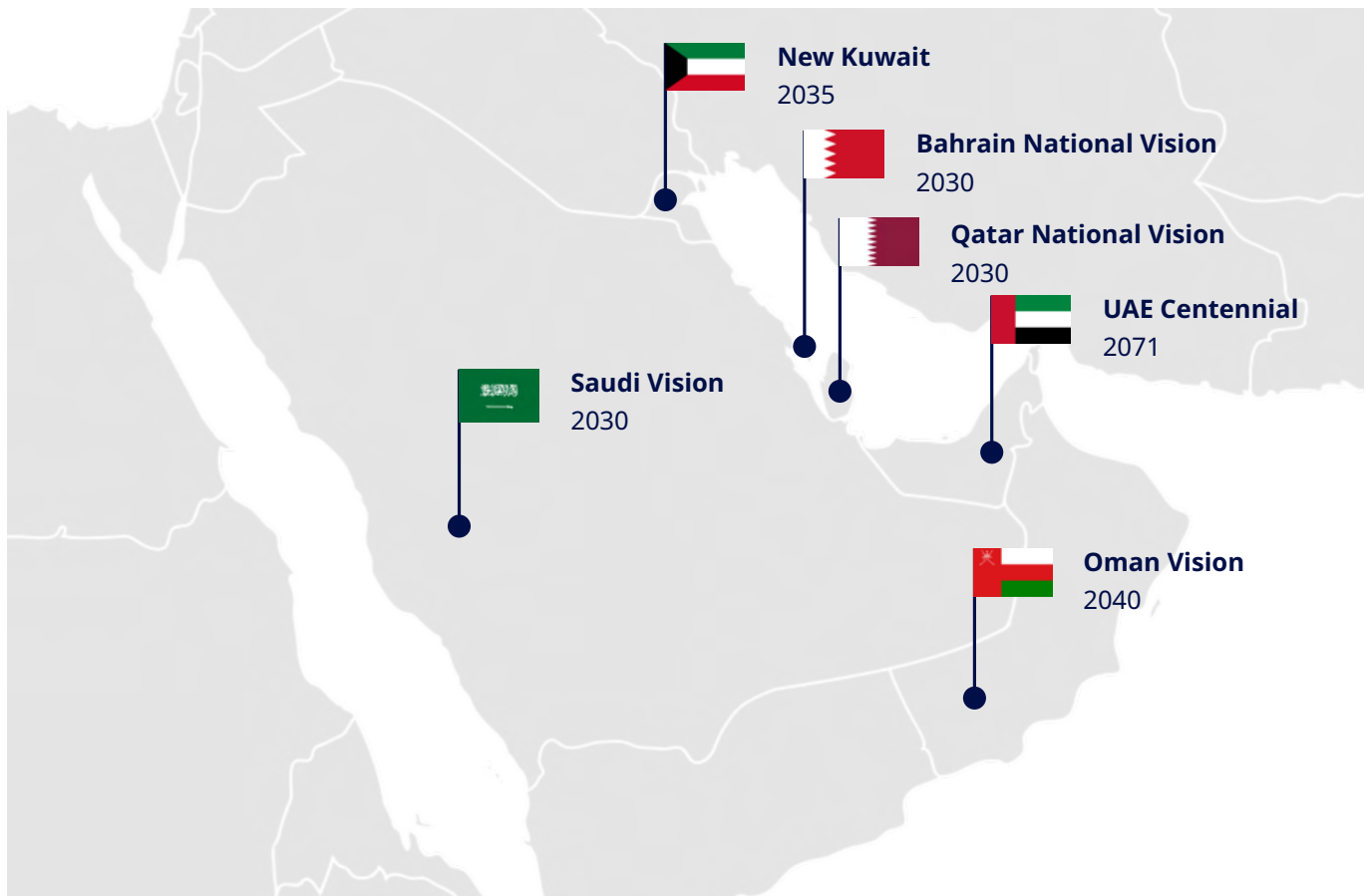
National visions shaping leadership needs

Ambitious national development plans such as Bahrain National Vision 2030, New Kuwait 2035, Oman Vision 2040, Qatar National Vision 2030, Saudi Vision 2030, and UAE Centennial 2071 require leaders who can effectively drive economic diversification, social transformation, and technological innovation. These visions aim to create knowledge-based economies, with a strong emphasis on entrepreneurship, digital transformation, and sustainability.

As a result, leadership development must align with these strategic ambitions. The demand is for leaders who are not just effective managers, but who demonstrate proficiency in several key areas:

- **Digital leadership:** Leaders are encouraged to embrace technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and blockchain to remain competitive.
- **Innovation management:** Leaders are encouraged to take risks, foster creativity, and lead change initiatives across organizations.
- **Agility and adaptability:** Leaders are encouraged to build resilience to navigate the uncertainties brought about by economic fluctuations and global disruptions.¹¹

Map 2. National development plans in the GCC



11. UAE Government, National Innovation Strategy, The Official Portal of the UAE Government, 2014.



Cultural shift: From hierarchical to empowered leadership

While respect for hierarchy remains an important cultural value, the region's fast-evolving economic and social landscape demands a shift toward more empowered, collaborative, and agile leadership styles. Traditional top-down approaches are giving way to models that encourage dialogue, mentorship, and inclusive decision-making.

This transition requires leaders to skillfully and culturally manage competing demands—balancing authority with empowerment and tradition with innovation. These are critical to engage the region's younger workforce,

who value open communication, collaboration, and empowerment. Failing to embrace these changes within organizations poses a risk of losing relevance and effectiveness. Cultural transformation is therefore essential to meet these demands.

Initiatives like Aramco's Young Leaders Advisory Board (YLAB) exemplify how leadership shifts from hierarchical to empowerment. The YLAB provides a direct channel between young talent and the CEO and the Group Strategy Committee (GSC), which serves as an active resource in driving innovation and strategic alignment.¹²

To meet these demands, organizations across the GCC must invest in structured immersive leadership journeys, that blend experiential learning, coaching, and digital tools – tailored to the region's unique context.

12. Aramco, YLAB: Young Leaders Advisory Board, Aramco, 2021.

The future-focused solution for leadership development in the Middle East

Leadership journeys and experiential learning approaches offer transformative opportunities for both Middle Eastern and Global Leaders. They allow for critical skills that drive sustainable growth and organizational resilience.

Although the value of these frameworks is widely recognized, it is essential to fully integrate them conceptually and implement them consistently.

This would allow the achievement of national agendas in the GCC considering the accelerated growth rate and preset deadlines for strategic objectives.





What are leadership development journeys?

Leadership development journeys are a compilation of numerous learning elements such as **workshops, coaching, mentorship, leadership shadowing, action learning projects, cross industry leadership forums, webinars, business simulations, stretch assignments, crisis and scenario-based learning and many more**. These learning elements span across a duration of 6-12 months to ensure continuous development in a leaders' journey.

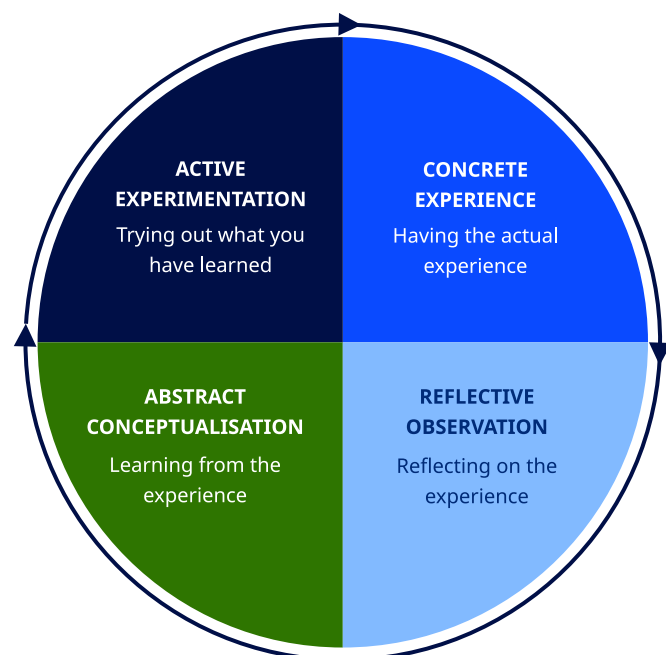
Mercer's approach focuses on two key principals:

Experiential learning approach – based on Kolbs' Experiential Learning Framework where leaders engage with real-world challenges;

Blended learning approach – ensuring a mix of face-to-face and virtual elements that accommodate the demanding schedules of leaders who may not consistently be able to attend physical workshops and activities.

This framework provides a fast-tracked solution to young leaders in the GCC region.

Figure 1. Kolbs' experiential learning framework illustration.



Experiential learning: Developing leaders through real-world challenges

Experiential learning offers leaders the opportunity to engage directly with real-world business scenarios, fostering skills development through hands-on experience rather than passive observation. For young leaders in the GCC, who often have deep technical expertise but limited leadership exposure, this form of learning is particularly vital.

Experiential learning allows them to develop leadership competencies in controlled environments that simulate real challenges, thereby bridging the gap between theory and practice.

How does experiential learning work?

Business simulations

Leaders solve complex business challenges reflective of regional, economical, and social contexts, enhancing their strategic thinking, decision-making, managing complexity, and critical thinking skills.

Stretch assignments

Structured rotational programs expose leaders to cross functional experiences, encouraging adaptability and a holistic understanding of the organization's operations.

Crisis & scenario-based learning

Focused exercises prepare leaders to navigate potential crises such as economic downturns or geopolitical disruptions, enabling them to lead confidently in uncertain environments.

Action learning projects

Small, task-focused groups tackle real-time organizational challenges, fostering collaboration, strategic thinking, and problem-solving skills.

Coaching and mentoring: Building leadership depth and self-awareness

In the fast-paced professional environment of the GCC, where rapid promotions can lead to feelings of unpreparedness or imposter syndrome, coaching and mentoring are critical. These enhance self-awareness, build confidence, and develop the emotional intelligence necessary for effective leadership.

Coaching provides a safe space for leaders to reflect on their strengths, address growth areas, and navigate the psychological and emotional challenges that come with sudden career advancements.

How does coaching and mentoring work?

Executive coaching

Tailored one-on-one sessions focus on leadership transition, supporting fast-tracked leaders, developing strategic thinking, and build confidence in their new roles. Executive coaching can also happen in groups to allow for cohesion and synchronization between leaders to steer the organization in the same direction.

Peer and reverse mentoring

Young professionals mentor senior leaders on technology and digital trends, while experienced executives offer guidance on strategic leadership, fostering a two-way learning environment that benefits both parties and enable the organization to grow exponentially.

Digital learning and AI-assisted development

With the digital transformation sweeping across the GCC—with technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and data-driven decision making—leaders must not only understand such emerging technology but also use them for their own development.

The region's rapid digital transformation requires leaders who are tech-savvy and capable of leveraging digital tools to enhance organizational performance.

How does digital learning and AI-assisted development work?

AI-assisted leadership assessments

These tools provide personalized development plans based on individual strengths, weaknesses, and potential growth areas.

Learning management platforms

Mobile-accessible resources offer leaders the ability to engage with leadership content anytime, providing flexibility and convenience with learning content specific to the needs of the region.

Social and collaborative learning: Leadership as a community effort

Effective leadership in the GCC is built on relationships, influence, and strong networks. Social and collaborative learning encourages leaders to engage with peers, share experiences, and solve organizational challenges collectively.

Given the relationship-driven nature of leadership in the GCC, fostering collaborative spaces allows leaders to expand their networks and gain valuable insights from diverse perspectives across industries and sectors.

How does social and collaborative learning work?

Cross-industry leadership forums

These forums bring together leaders from government, technology, finance, and other sectors to discuss shared challenges and develop collective strategies.

Fireside chats

Informal chats with internal or external industry experts allow young leaders to learn from seasoned professionals. They foster an environment where best practices are shared through hands-on experience from trusted advisors to the organization.

Leadership shadowing

Allows emerging leaders to closely observe senior executives in their daily work, gaining direct insight into critical behaviors such as decision making, stakeholder management, and strategic thinking in real-world scenarios.



We are a region with unique demographics and quite a young population, which also is reflected in many cases across leadership teams. With the fast pace environment, we sometimes notice businesses growing much faster than usual which does not give time for the leaders in the business to obtain the experience they need. And here comes the role of leadership development, to support leaders specially young ones to work on the areas they might have not had experience in or require development at. Strong leaders build leaders, and help bring out the most out of their teams, to do so they are required to be open to develop the areas that they lack.

- Najla Najm,

Partner - Career Business Leader, Mercer Middle East



The backbone of leadership growth

While experiential learning and coaching are essential, formal training remains a crucial pillar of leadership development. Leadership academies serve as the backbone of leadership growth, providing structured learning paths that combine traditional instruction with modern development methods, which enable leaders globally and in the GCC to lead effectively.

How does formal training and leadership academies work?

Effective training and leadership academies are not a one-size-fits-all journey. Different leadership levels require distinct skills and developmental focuses.

In the following pages are examples of journeys across three-levels: Emerging leaders, mid-level managers, and senior executives. Each have unique needs that must be addressed through targeted learning paths.

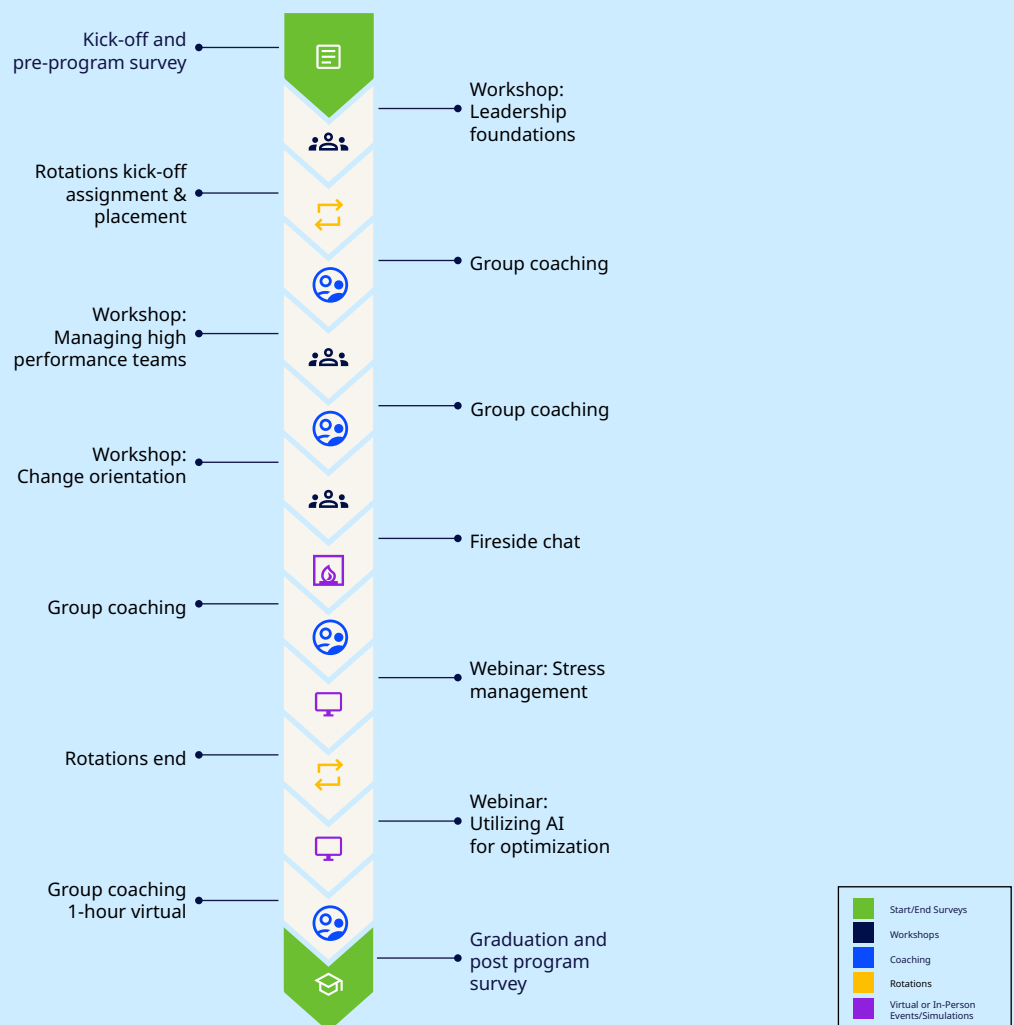
To address each of these levels needs and mitigate the future gap, which may continuously exist in the GCC, leadership academies are designed. The content of each of the journeys builds up in difficulty levels from one level to the other, allowing a mastery of competencies as one completes the Executive Leaders journey.



Level 1: Emerging leaders

Programs for early-career professionals focus on building foundational leadership skills, including team management, communication, and emotional intelligence. This level prepares early-career professionals for a successful transition from the foundations of leadership and business requirements to establishing the core competencies required for future growth.

Figure 2. Emerging leaders development journey



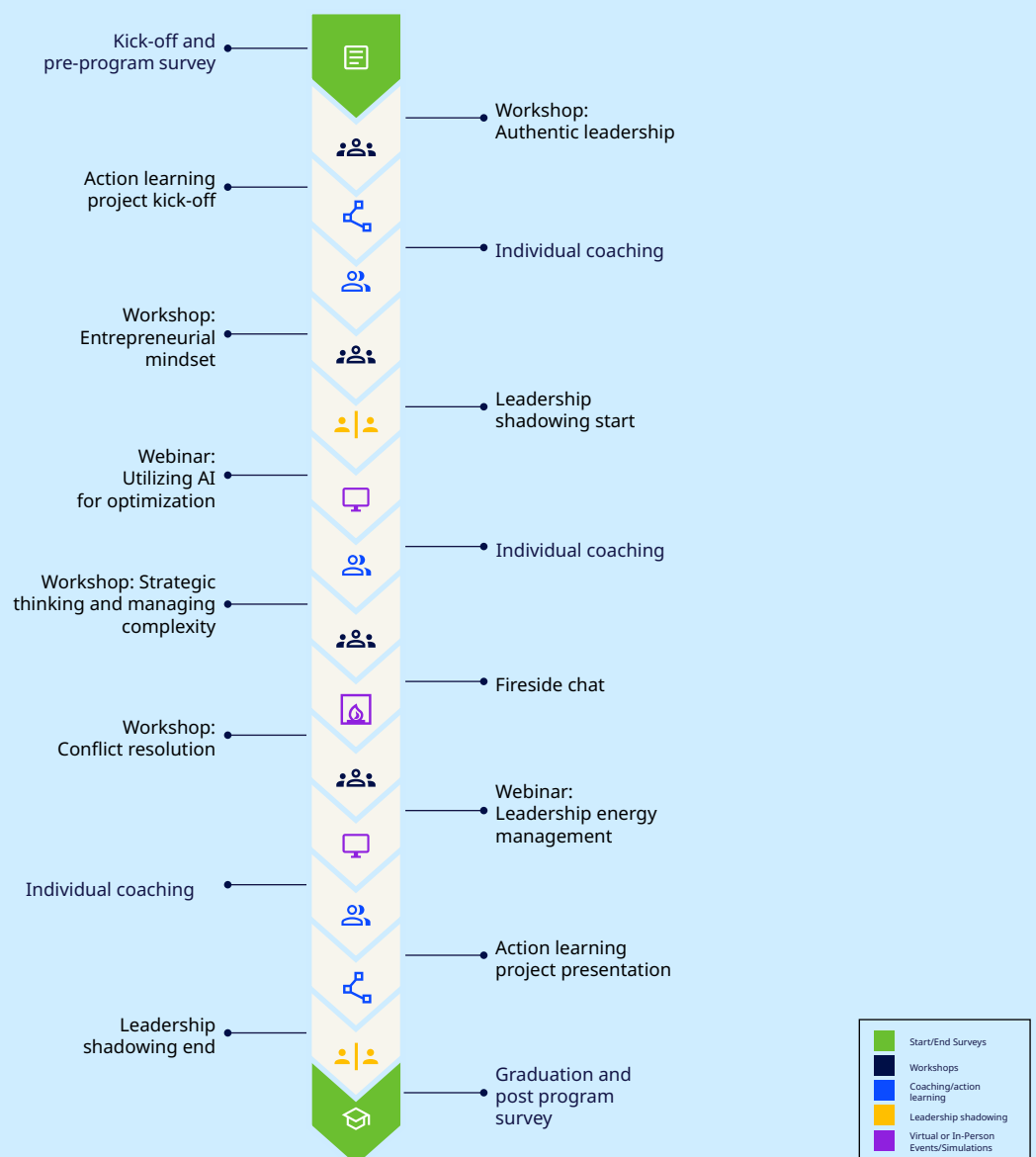
Throughout their journey emerging leaders:

1. Mentor their team
2. Conduct peer coaching circles

Level 2: Mid-level managers

For young managers and leaders, development shifts to more complex capabilities, such as strategic thinking, cross-functional collaboration, conflict resolution, managing complexity, and delivering through others. This is also the stage where leadership certifications and formal credentials from recognized institutions can be introduced to allow preparation for the next level of leadership that will help establish their credibility and signal their commitment to on-going professional growth.

Figure 3. Mid-level managers development journey



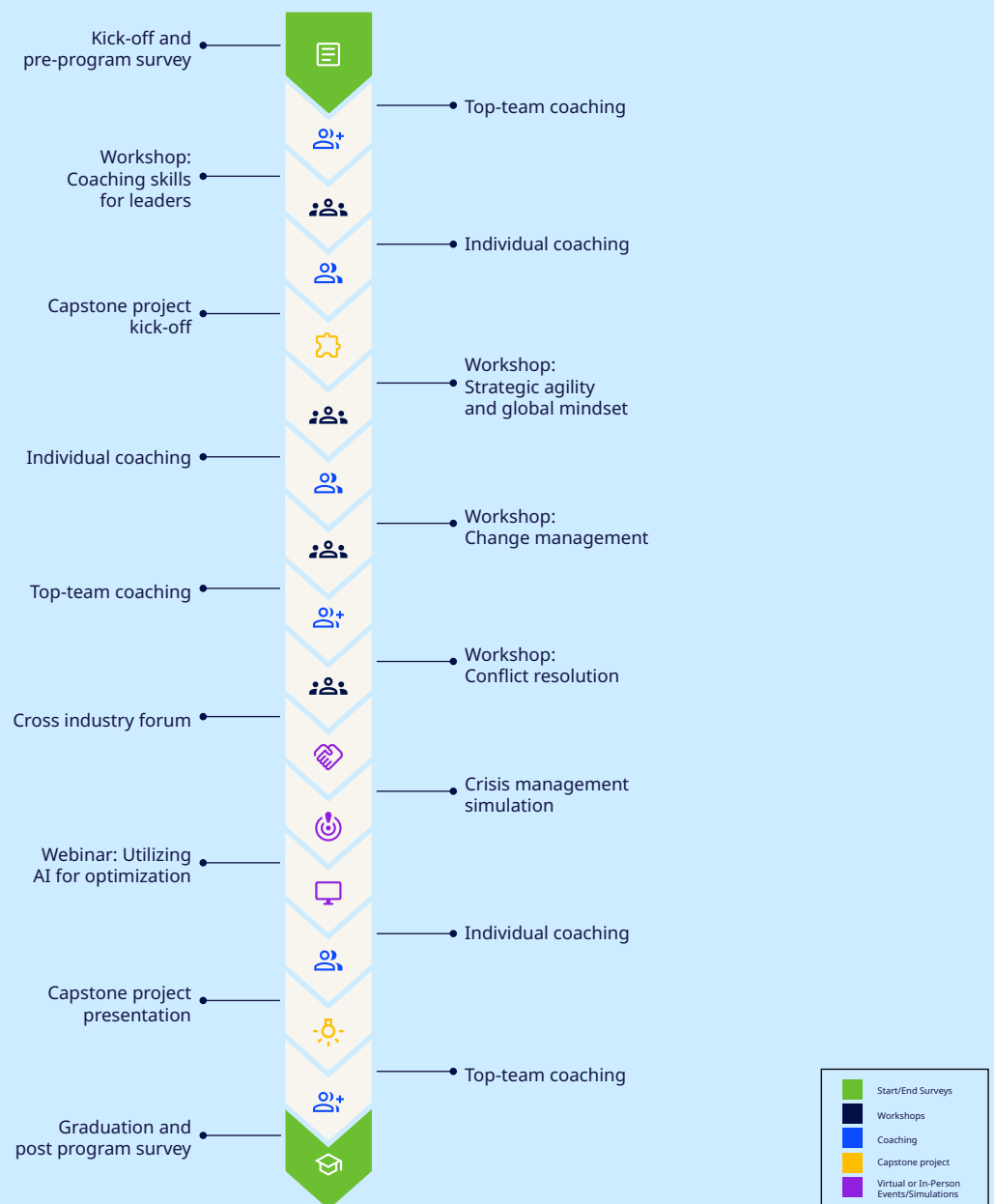
Throughout their journey mid-level managers:

1. Mentor emerging leaders
2. Attend coaching sessions with their executives

Level 3: Executive leaders

Senior executives require an advanced level of training to deepen their expertise in strategic thinking, conflict resolution, and managing complexity, linking all competencies to a global perspective and diving into organizational transformation across international markets.

Figure 4. Executive leaders development journey



Leadership academies serve as the platform for a blended learning experience, combining in-person experiential projects, virtual modules, and other learning elements discussed in this whitepaper to ensure the needs of leaders are met.

What's next for the GCC region?



The Middle East and GCC region are experiencing rapid economic diversification and demographic shifts, underscoring an urgent need for robust leadership development approaches. Young leaders, armed with strong technical expertise but often limited leadership experience, are stepping into executive roles faster than traditional Western-centric models anticipate.

This is confirmed by Mercer's recent research, which shows that the future of work has become more skill oriented and career trajectories are accelerated by technology and our ever-changing modern world.¹³

The path forward for the region is to adopt a multi-modal approach that integrates experiential learning, coaching, mentoring, digital tools, and formal training within the structure of customized leadership academies which provide dynamic and immersive development paths.

By blending theoretical knowledge with practical, real world applications leaders will be equipped with emotional intelligence, learn how to manage complexity, deal with conflict, and develop strategic foresight required for complex business environments.

When these multi-modal leadership journeys are aligned with national agendas—such as Bahrain National Vision 2030, New Kuwait 2035, Oman Vision 2040, Qatar National Vision 2030, Saudi Vision 2030, and UAE Centennial 2071—organizations can foster the confident, innovative workforce required to propel these bold national transformations forward.

13. Mercer, Global Talent Trends Middle East Executive Summary, 2025.



Conclusion

Adopting this framework is the key to accelerating leadership readiness in the GCC. Success requires a clear commitment to five critical actions:



By taking these steps, organizations can ensure their young talent is prepared to drive the region's transformation—on time and on vision.

The GCC's leadership landscape is evolving at unprecedented speed, and the leaders of tomorrow must be equipped to navigate complexity, drive innovation, and inspire across cultures. At Mercer, our leadership development experts understand the unique dynamics of the region and can partner with you to build a leadership pipeline that accelerates growth and builds resilient, future-ready leaders. **Reach out to us today!**

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About The Leadership Academy

The Leadership Academy is the leadership development engine of Mercer, a global leader in talent, leadership, and organizational development. Serving both global and GCC markets, the Academy drives learning, development, coaching, and knowledge sharing at scale.

Our mission is to accelerate the growth of today's leaders and equip them to shape the future. By integrating science-backed insights, experiential learning, and human-centered design, we help organizations cultivate leaders who inspire performance, navigate complexity, and lead with purpose.

The Leadership Academy's approach is rooted in Kolb's experiential learning principles, ensuring that leadership development is practical, personalized, and performance-driven. Our layered learning journeys are designed to build complex skill sets through a blend of instructor-led sessions, peer learning, digital modules, coaching, gamification, and simulations. This multi-modal approach creates a continuous learning ecosystem where leaders learn, apply, reflect, and evolve.

Each journey is tailored to local, regional, and industry needs, combining global best practices with focused local expertise. Our programs emphasize reflection and practical application, using action learning and business school training to embed knowledge and drive real-world impact.

Our global faculty includes senior consultants, certified executive coaches, psychologists, and experienced facilitators, many of whom have served as business school faculty. Together, they bring Mercer's global insights and local expertise to every learning experience.

