

Reinventing Leadership Development for a World That Won't Sit Still

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Executive Summary

Across industries, CHROs and talent leaders are rethinking leadership development as disruption accelerates and AI reshapes how work gets done. Many are moving away from static, content-heavy programs and toward approaches that build human leadership behaviors through faster iteration, peer learning, in-person experiences, and coaching. The article outlines three shifts driving this change and offers a practical lens on what development needs to look like to keep pace.

Change is no longer a simple disruption; rapid change is the ecosystem. The modern leaders who will thrive are those who can navigate through it all while maintaining a deeply human touch.

Organizations today are standing on edge. Geopolitics are shifting daily. Markets are volatile. Cutting-edge technological innovations are obsolete by the time they can be implemented. Talent expectations keep evolving.

The most resilient leaders do more than surrender to uncertainty; they grasp onto and wield it. They transform it into the fuel of imagination and invention. As a result, their organizations (and reputations) rise.

In an uncertain environment, people need more than answers; they need someone they trust to lead them through the chaos. Competent and confident leadership is the difference between people feeling steady or scattered, energized or indifferent. And [our research](#) reinforces this critical point: Leadership behaviors account for 70% of direct reports' day-to-day experiences (i.e., everything from productivity and efficiency to belonging and purpose). When the very environment surrounding leaders rapidly shifts, so too must the organizations and HR departments that support them.

To understand how organizations are developing leaders for the future, we spoke with more than 20 Chief Human Resources and Talent Leaders about leadership development in the age of AI and ongoing disruption. One message came through clearly: Leadership development is returning to the spotlight, often with new investment and renewed executive sponsorship, even in organizations that had been pulling back

on these resources. In the following sections, we discuss three themes that showed up consistently across those conversations, revealing what's broken in the old model of development and how forward-thinking organizations are rewriting the playbook.

We've Over-Indexed on Technical Skills and Under-Invested in Human Leadership

Many organizations have prioritized technical or functional expertise in leadership development, but today's most urgent need lies in the human elements of leadership. Across the discussions, several points surfaced repeatedly, particularly around the core capabilities organizations are actively building:

Building a change-oriented mindset.

Previously, transformation efforts were considered to have an end date. Today, organizations are seeing change as a constant that requires a renewed mindset (not just tactical behaviors). One global pharmaceutical and health solutions company leader shared how they are supporting leaders in moving from "waiting for the light at the end of the tunnel" to "rolling with punches continuously." The focus is not only on adaptability (e.g., taking in new information, adjusting direction, and bringing the team along for the journey)

but also on a new outlook for building solutions that requires less reliance on a playbook and more confidence in wading through unfamiliar, rapidly evolving situations. This shift matters because leaders who treat change as an ongoing operating condition, rather than a temporary disruption, are better able to make sound decisions amid ambiguity and sustain momentum without waiting for certainty. Over time, that mindset strengthens organizational resilience and helps teams respond to disruption with greater confidence, speed, and consistency.

Turning data into stories and action. Simply collecting and analyzing data is now table stakes. The real differentiator is how leaders turn insights into decisions and narratives that guide action. A global airline talent leader described it best: “The goal is to move from simply reporting the weather to forecasting it and preparing for what’s coming.” When leaders can turn data into a compelling story, they make it easier for others to see what matters, why it matters, and what to do next. That leads to faster, more aligned decision-making and increases the likelihood that insights translate into coordinated action rather than sitting unused.

Rewarding customer and employee experience. Some organizations, especially those with large frontline teams, see AI and other advanced technologies as an opportunity to focus leaders on what matters most: creating a more delightful experience for customers and employees alike. One U.S. hospitality group ties leadership performance directly to customer retention and employee engagement metrics to reinforce this focus. Linking leadership performance to customer and employee experience helps ensure that operational decisions translate into outcomes people can

actually feel. In turn, organizations are more likely to build loyalty, strengthen engagement, and reinforce the everyday leadership behaviors that drive long-term performance.

Leadership Programs Have an Expiration Date and We Don’t Move Fast Enough

Technical skills no longer age gracefully; their half-life keeps shrinking in the age of AI. As a media company, CHRO put it: “By the time we build a program, the skills have already shifted.” In another example, frontline teams at a financial company are seeing decision-making slow down because their training includes compliance information that’s already outdated. And even when programs are strong, scale becomes a barrier. One financial services leader described “shadow” learning functions popping up simply because there aren’t enough seats in HR-led enterprise leadership programs.

Organizations that are ahead of the curve are responding by redesigning how learning is built, delivered, and scaled so that it can keep pace with constant change:

Applying a minimum viable product (MVP) approach. Rapid piloting and iteration keep learning relevant, scalable, and continuous, helping organizations avoid the trap of perfectionism that often delays progress. This kind of MVP thinking also reinforces a broader principle: Leadership development doesn’t need to be over-engineered or overhauled to be effective; small, simple adjustments or reframing shifts are often

more usable than new, elaborate interventions. “Our leaders don’t want to complete a ‘retrospective’ meeting,” one leader at a global pharmaceutical organization shared. “But if I ask them to check in with their team at the end of a project, it’s no big deal.” An MVP approach increases the odds that leadership development will actually be used because it meets leaders where they are and fits more naturally into the flow of work. That makes it easier to build momentum, learn quickly from what works, and improve impact over time rather than waiting for a perfect solution that arrives too late.

Using AI to accelerate creation.

Organizations are increasingly turning to AI to speed up learning design and keep content fresh and responsive to business needs. For instance, the CHRO of a U.S. grocery chain shared that they are using tools such as Arist for curriculum development and Synthesia for video-based microlearning, enabling teams to build and update courses in days. Using AI this way helps organizations shorten the gap between emerging business needs and the learning solutions designed to address them. That speed not only keeps content more relevant but also enables leadership development teams to respond more strategically and at a pace that better matches the rate of change.

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Over the years, one thing has become very clear to me: Senior leaders rarely learn much from being talked at. They learn through engagement with one another. When you bring leaders together, the most valuable resource in the room is their collective experience and so the goal becomes candid peer exchange. When leaders from different backgrounds and perspectives sit down together in person, share what’s truly unfolding within their areas, and push each other’s thinking, that’s where meaningful leadership development genuinely takes shape.”



Larry Emond, Senior Partner,
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Designing for future skills. Forward-thinking companies are also beginning to build development around future roles, not just the ones that exist right now. One financial services firm, for example, is mapping future skills as it defines future responsibilities for the role driven by AI and automation. Reflecting earlier themes, this work places greater emphasis on programs that highlight the unique things only humans can do (e.g., empathy, direction-setting), even at its most junior levels. This helps organizations avoid developing leaders for roles and conditions that are already becoming outdated. In turn, it strengthens talent readiness, preserves the relevance of leadership investments, and builds capacity for the distinctly human capabilities that will matter most as work continues to evolve.

Peer Learning and Shared Experiences Drive the Deepest Impact

Traditional leadership programs (especially the content-heavy ones) often struggle to produce the behavior change and ultimately the performance outcomes that organizations are hoping for. The “one and done” problem is still real in today’s leadership development world: Leaders attend a program, feel inspired, and then return to work with limited reinforcement and few real chances to

practice. What we consistently heard is that the deepest growth happens when leaders learn with and from each other through shared experience, real-world application, and experimentation.

Re-emphasizing in-person experiences. After years of virtual learning, many organizations are returning to in-person development for its more profound impact. A pharmaceutical and health solutions company, for example, now brings together 9,000 leaders for a 1.5-day offsite focused on practice and experimentation, a success made possible only by the CEO's, CFO's, and CHRO's sponsorship. That investment reflects the fact that some leadership capabilities are built more effectively through shared experience, real-time practice, and deeper interpersonal connection than through virtual formats alone. When done well, in-person development can strengthen commitment, accelerate learning transfer, and create the kind of collective momentum that is hard to replicate online.

Building networks, not capstones. Many leaders told us that the most valuable learning they've recently observed comes from moments shared with peers facing similar challenges. Companies are replacing one-time programs with smaller peer groups and simulation-based experiences that encourage connection, reflection, and real-time application. The primary driver of the impact is reducing anxiety that comes with being disconnected from similar leaders and helping them see they are not alone in their challenges. Some organizations are even extending this idea externally, sponsoring opportunities for leaders to build networks beyond their companies to learn new approaches to problems and benchmark their own executive presence. These experiences matter because

they make leadership development more sustaining, not just memorable, by creating support systems that leaders can continue to draw on after the formal program ends. That ongoing connection can increase confidence, reduce isolation, and improve leaders' ability to apply new ideas in real time with greater perspective and accountability.

Scaling coaching with insight. While coaching can sometimes be overused and misused (e.g., relied on as a catch-all solution or to deflect accountability for development), the right approach can unlock remarkable value. One financial services company found a powerful way to scale its impact: A network of external coaches who provide individual support and meet quarterly with the CEO and CHRO to surface organization-wide themes, turning coaching into a strategic pulse-check on leadership health. When coaching is structured this way, it does more than support individual leaders; it gives the organization a sharper view of the patterns shaping leadership effectiveness at scale. That makes coaching a more strategic investment, helping leaders grow while also giving senior executives insight they can use to address both systemic and individual issues.

Concluding Thoughts

What it means to lead is changing, and leadership development must change with it. The organizations that win will be those that invest in human-centered leadership, move fast enough to stay relevant, and create immersive learning experiences that genuinely shift behavior. At Modern, we partner with clients to build next-generation leadership capabilities.

We've supported organizations preparing for the roles they expect to need in the years ahead. Recently, we partnered with a financial services company with approximately 55,000 employees to build future-focused success profiles and launch a technology-enabled assessment program that evaluated more than 50 executive leaders against the capabilities required by tomorrow's executive roles. The effort yielded sharper development priorities and strengthened the organization's pipeline for future needs.

We've also carried the abovementioned lessons into the Modern CHRO Academy, a global, cohort-based experience designed for senior HR leaders stepping into enterprise-wide responsibility. Rather than a conventional program delivered by firms such as Deloitte or WTW or universities such as Cornell, Cambridge, or Wharton, the Academy unfolds as a nine-month development journey rooted in real-world work. Each participant receives monthly one-to-one executive coaching, works within a six-person cohort on a live leadership challenge, and uses structured reflection to turn insight into everyday leadership habits. The experience also includes a three-day in-person convening where a distinguished group of retired CHROs joins the cohort as mentors, sharing practical perspectives

shaped by years in the role. Participants test ideas with peers, learn directly from experienced CHROs, and connect their development to action learning closely tied to their business context. Over time, the cohort becomes a community of practice, helping modern CHROs navigate complexity, lead with humanity, and carry their growth into clearer decisions, stronger influence, and meaningful organizational impact. The stakes have never been higher. What separates the organizations that thrive is their ability to handle today's pressures without losing tomorrow's possibilities. The ones that intentionally develop leaders who can orient and empower people, make sense of complexity, and mobilize progress through disruption won't just respond to the future; they will shape it!



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