

7 INSIGHTS INTO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN A VIRTUAL SETTING



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HERE ARE THE SECRETS WE'VE LEARNED

1. **Boosting Completion Rates:** According to the research on virtual training, one of the biggest downsides is that people can get distracted by work deadlines, side-tracked with personal issues, and lose focus during the virtual course. Completion rates can be abysmal. We addressed this head on by creating a robust staff who track participants, send regular reminders, and notice if anyone begins to fall behind. We then reach out to foundering participants to find out why they have fallen behind and help them get back on track. Participants become friends with their course 'sherpa' and are incredibly grateful for the helping hand. Many companies believe virtual training is a low-cost option because it's autonomous—no staff needed. That may be true for simple check-the-box courses, but significant measurable results for leadership development requires a more high-touch approach - even on a high-tech platform.
2. **Increasing Engagement:** We realized early on that participants tend to hold back and stay quiet in virtual discussions. Everyone feels invisible online, and few people want to be the first to speak. An incredibly effective solution we found is to invite people ahead of time to be featured speakers in the next session. For example, our course staff will ask individual participants to be prepared to summarize an assigned reading. Others are asked to share their experience taking 'action steps' from the last topic we discussed.



This part of the process has several important benefits. First, these folks arrive prepared to talk, so they have something cogent to say—not just rambling commentary. Second, their example inspires others when they hear how much this participant gained from the reading, action steps, etc. If other listeners did not complete their assignments, they may be inspired to go back and leverage that resource. Third, once a few people start talking, it is much easier for others to join in - we get lively discussions going! We choose different participants to engage for each discussion, which ends up personally touching most of the participants at some point throughout the program.

3. **Embrace a Variety of Learning Styles:** When we designed our first program, we carefully chose each assignment on every topic and created an ‘ideal’ curriculum to be completed in a certain order. It was difficult, however, to accept the reality that participants were not doing everything we assigned and/or not completing the material in the right order. When we followed up with the lagging students, we often heard how much value they were getting out of the course despite not crossing every T or dotting every I. We began to acknowledge that people have different learning styles - and it is okay to offer a variety of ways to consume the information and ideas. Some people like to read, some people like to talk, and still others like to journal. One of the side benefits of having the learners report out on the readings is that certain people will primarily only listen to the ‘book reports’ and rarely do the readings themselves; yet they stay on track, get the insights they need, and keep moving forward. As course designers, we learned not to limit



the course to what everyone will do, but rather make the progression flexible enough that participants can do it in their own way...and get the growth opportunity they need.

4. **Prioritize Live Interaction:** We expect a lot of live interaction and discussion in our virtual classes. We see back-and-forth as a critical success factor for keeping people from tuning out during our Webex sessions. To achieve this goal, we use all the features of our meeting technology: video cams, polling, breakouts, chat, etc. If you haven't seen this multi-media approach before, it can look like a three-ring circus – but it is very effective. We have a slide deck on screen as the discussion topic unfolds, speakers are seen on video cam in another window, below that, participants offer feedback in the online chat – all at the same time. In every discussion we have at least one breakout in which 3-5 participants can have their own, more personal conversation about their takeaways or action steps. We've heard participants point to a peer suggestion in a breakout as the practical solution that allowed them to implement a new technique at work. We do not provide “Webinars” that are merely one-way lectures with Q&A at the end. Sure, that can be a great format for a guest speaker or another kind of meeting. But developing leaders--providing new insights and fostering new behaviors—requires participants to be all in, not sitting back.
5. **Manage the Discussion Size:** Our programs are entirely scalable—from under 100 people up to several hundred in a program cohort. However, 100+ people in a single virtual meeting space is no longer a discussion. So, we offer multiple time slots for each discussion topic and keep each group at a manageable level. This has the added benefit of giving people options on their calendar. The live attendance is much higher when participants have a choice of times.



If a conflict arises, they can switch session times. Once again, our staff plays the critical role of following up and making sure that everyone is signed up for a class option for each unit. With consistent communication, we usually have over 90% live attendance for each topic!

6. **Don't Advertise the Recorded Option:** We do provide recordings for the small percentage of participants who miss the live discussions. We don't advertise that option ahead of time—the only people who hear about recordings are those who need them. We don't want to plant the idea that missing the live discussion doesn't matter because there is a recording. Busy people who know there is a recording will often choose to listen later rather than participate in the live discussion. We know from our research that this is a far less effective way to engage with the material.

Another improvement we made is to ask the learner who needed the recording to share three insights with us after watching. One definition of a conscience is: "You know someone is watching." Having our staff asking questions and following up gives participants a conscience - and they get more out of the course.

7. **Additions for Even More Engagement:** Because we've been doing this year after year, we keep upgrading the experience. We added small team assignments: groups of 4-5 people that meet monthly by phone or in person to discuss their action steps, provide accountability, and support each other's growth. Graduates of our courses are invited to come back and join these small teams as "Peer Coaches" and offer their perspective of experience. We have an alumni association that includes all of the graduates from all of the



participating companies and sustains the development long after the course ends.

When we set out to create virtual experiences, we had the goal to make them ‘as good as’ the live, fly-in programs we had been offering. To our surprise, the virtual courses turned out to be better! When you “fire-hose” people with tons of information all at one time, they tend to rapidly dismiss anything that doesn’t appear immediately relevant to their particular situation. In our virtual programs, participants have the time to sit with a concept, roll it around, hear how others used it, and really consider its value. One participant described the experience as “an eco-system for learning.”



The logo consists of a dark blue circle with a white border. Inside the circle, the word "BLUE" is written in white, bold, uppercase letters.

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