Learning to lead:

Training beyond the title

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Introduction

The verb 'to lead' is rich in complexity. It can mean to guide someone forward along a path. But it can also mean to leave someone behind on a racing track. As a noun, it refers to someone who "goes first" and takes risks. But it also refers to someone who issues commands for others to test out. It applies to someone steering a group towards a common goal. But it also applies to someone in a starring role who stands out from the crowd.

In short, it's full of contradictions.

Many of these contradictions extend to the concept of leadership in the workplace. For some individuals and organizations, leadership is about empowering, inspiring, and indirectly influencing. For others, it means outrunning, overshadowing, and directly controlling. Both leadership models exist today. And to some extent, both have a role to play. But the balance is shifting.

A privilege for the few

A few years ago, if you asked, "What is leadership in the workplace?" most people would have provided the same answer. They'd have described a traditional, top-down, command-and-control framework ruled by a small, select group of senior employees. Short on collaboration and creativity, and long on structure, stability, and certainty, leadership within this framework meant making decisions at the highest level. And then ensuring they were followed, without question, by those lower down the chain. Motivation and outcomes centered around achieving fixed organizational goals. While also boosting (existing) leaders further up the career ladder.

A shared responsibility, a shared opportunity

Ask the same question now, and a different picture of leadership emerges. Gone is the rigid, hierarchical approach described above. In its place, most organizations have applied a more fluid, collaborative, and open-ended model. Within this model, leadership is seen as a shared responsibility and a shared opportunity. And all employees (not just those in formal roles of authority) are seen as potential leaders.

So, why the change? The answer lies outside the office door.

A brave new world of work

The modern workplace doesn't exist in a vacuum. More now than ever, it's constantly buffeted by outside forces. Open the door, and the winds of change blow in. From shifts in generational and societal expectations to globalization and ongoing technological advances, standing still isn't an option in the modern workplace. To survive in an increasingly competitive and fast-moving world, businesses need to be able to pivot quickly. They need to be able to innovate and adapt at speed at all levels of their operation. But still maintain high standards and a good ROI. They also need the unwavering support of a loyal, empowered, and engaged workforce.

Transpose the image of a traditional leadership model onto this brave new world of work, and the lines don't match up. A rigid

chain of command, poor cross-collaboration, lack of empowerment on the ground, and carefully controlled decision-making are the hallmarks of traditional leadership. And they all weaken the defenses of the modern workplace where vision, innovation, engagement, dynamism, and a universal sense of ownership are essential tools for success.

A case for leadership development for all

Whether it's your C-Suite execs, a team leader in the office, a new hire learning the ropes, or a manager on the shop floor, the modern workplace needs leaders at every level. Devolved or distributed leaders enable organizations to adapt, grow, and thrive in a competitive environment. Which makes

leadership development a key priority for long-term success.

And this is where we pick up the narrative. From this starting point, we'll ask (and answer) the following questions:

- How can organizations nurture a culture of effective leadership across all levels?
- What are the benefits and potential pitfalls of encouraging all employees to develop their leadership skills?
- What role do hard skills play in leadership of the future?
- And what are the key components of a successful leadership training program?

But let's start with a vision of what it's all about—effective leadership.

What does effective leadership look like?

As part of a study into toxic work culture in tech companies, we asked employees if their manager knew how to lead a team. Sixty percent of them said 'no'. This simple statistic prompts several interesting questions. Firstly, why don't most managers know how to lead? Secondly, why should they need to? Finally, what does it mean to "lead" instead of "manage" a team? Let's dig deeper.

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The difference between leadership and management

The further we travel away from a traditional leadership model, the greater the gap between the perceived role of managers and leaders. At its earliest point, the two were almost interchangeable. Years ago, organizations had a handful of senior figures ("leaders") who would make major strategic decisions. And then communicate them to the workforce. But, in general, leadership was seen mainly as a function of management. Why? Because managers had more ongoing visibility. They also had authority, accountability, technical expertise, and control over their teams. All these factors contributed to the perception that anyone in a management position was, by default, a leader.

But this doesn't sync with our modern view of leadership.

To "lead" vs to "manage"

Managers still have an essential role to play in the modern workplace. But their focus is different from our contemporary view of leadership. Managers need to keep day-to-day operations functioning and flourishing. They're zoned in on the present. And on workflows, processes, tasks, efficiencies, and immediate outcomes. Leaders take the long-term view. Their actions and approach are motivated by a vision for the future and, more often than not, by guiding change.

That said, while leadership and management are distinct, they're also complementary. Both work together to support the success of an organization—leadership sets the direction, and management ensures that the direction is followed effectively. Leadership

and management aren't mutually exclusive, either. Great leaders may also be, or have been, successful managers. But what's more common (arguably more important) is that almost all great managers apply leadership characteristics to their role.

Eight characteristics of effective leaders

So, what are the characteristics of effective leaders? Here, opinions vary. Some characteristics might be more important in certain industries, business environments, or operating models. For example, startups may need leaders who stand out as adaptable risk-takers. Healthcare and non-profits might benefit from authentic and emotionally intelligent leaders. Tech companies often thrive under visionary and innovative leadership. As an extension of this, most leaders often lean more toward certain characteristics, behaviors, and styles than others. By understanding the specific needs of their industry, leaders can align their personal characteristics with the unique demands of their business segments or types.

The following list details the main characteristics associated with effective leadership. To be effective, leaders don't need to master all of these (or at least not all at the same time). But rather use the list to identify gaps and strengths and prioritize areas for development according to time and circumstances.

1. Vision

Leaders look ahead. They inspire others by co-creating and communicating a vision for the future. And they guide others toward a common goal by emphasizing the importance of positive change, innovation, and agility within their organization.

2. Inspirational communication

Leaders can't exist in isolation. They can't manifest their vision alone. The intrinsic value of their role is based on the ability to connect with and inspire others. Great leaders achieve this through tactics designed to elicit ongoing engagement, sustained commitment, and a strong sense of purpose from everyone involved. They offer their own ideas while also seeking out others' perspectives. Then, they integrate these into their own original thinking. They also observe and listen to others to understand their values, motivations, and fears. And use this knowledge to impact the behavior of those around them. By doing all of this, they grow relationships built on trust. And establish a credibility that inspires and encourages people to follow them. Being able to communicate with impact is vital to this. Effective leaders can articulate ideas clearly and inspire others through words and actions. They know how to motivate their team and build and sustain enthusiasm and engagement for a shared goal.

3. Innovation and risk-taking

Architects for change, effective leaders support the mantra: "Failure is success in progress". They create workplaces where new ideas have room to breathe. For example, by adjusting the flow of resources or by facilitating shorter, more agile working cycles. If those ideas prove their worth, they encourage them to take root and grow. If not, they'll learn from the process and try something different. By demonstrating and encouraging a culture of curiosity, openness, and empowerment, they make it possible for

anyone to reimagine the status quo. Or to challenge long-held beliefs, assumptions, and approaches.

4. Empathy and emotional intelligence

Great leaders connect meaningfully and emotionally with people around them. They do this by learning more about the feelings, priorities, needs, and challenges of others. And by recognizing their own feelings and how they relate to other people. Using all of these insights, they're able to manage their own emotions and those of others. And, by doing so, foster a more supportive and nurturing environment where people feel safe and seen.

5. Integrity and authenticity

According to 75% of employees, "integrity" is the most important attribute of a leader. In a separate study, 67% voted for "high moral standards". Why such a strong response? When power and accountability combine, integrity acts as a vital safety valve. It ensures leaders remain honest, ethical, and true to themselves and their team despite the pressures their position may place on them. With integrity grounding them, leaders can be trusted to do the right thing. To make decisions that stem from strong moral values. And to take responsibility for their actions even when it's difficult. Without integrity, trust is lost, and employees are left feeling vulnerable and exposed.

6. Resilience and adaptability

Effective leaders aren't just effective when things are going well. They're effective when setbacks set in. Being able to recover from failure, recalibrate, adjust strategies, and stay focused and positive is easier than it sounds. But it's the hallmark of great resilience. And, combined with adaptability, one of the key attributes of great leadership.

7. Decisiveness

In today's fast-moving world of work, leaders must react quickly when changes or challenges occur. That doesn't mean being rash or thoughtlessly reactive. They may not have all of the answers, but they use everything at their disposal to make informed, strategic, and timely decisions. Effective leaders quickly assess situations from the outside in, from the perspective of all stakeholders. They're able to deconstruct complex problems by analyzing information, pinpointing the root causes, and then combining all of this with experience and judgment to make clear, next-step choices.

8. A growth mindset

Great leaders are both humble and aspirational. Open to feedback, they're aware of their limitations. But they're also committed to self-improvement—in terms of their own personal growth and the development of others. They understand that leadership is about serving others. And fuelled by a growth mindset, they actively seek to improve their capabilities to support their teams and wider organizational goals. Based on a TalentLMS survey on the Growth Mindset in the Workplace, we see that 96% of leaders believe they have a growth mindset. It's this very commitment to growth that acts like a strong heartbeat. It unleashes an energy that drives success across teams and individuals.

Chapter 1.

Let's recap this chapter:

Leadership and management are distinct but complementary. Leadership sets the direction, and management ensures that the direction is followed. They aren't mutually exclusive. Great leaders may also be, or have been, successful managers. But, great managers almost always apply leadership characteristics to their role. What are those characteristics? They range from vision, inspirational communication, innovation, and risk-taking to emotional intelligence, integrity, resilience, adaptability, decisiveness, and a commitment to continuous learning. Do all leaders need all of these characteristics? No. Some are more important in certain industries, business environments, or operating models. Do all leaders have all of these characteristics? Again, the answer is no. Most leaders lean toward certain characteristics, behaviors, and styles than others. The key to success is to adapt or expand individual preferences to suit business needs.

Chapter 2.

Beyond managers and executives

In 2020, the World Economic Forum compiled a list of the top 10 job skills it anticipated would be most in-demand in the workplace in 2025. Leadership made it on the list. As did innovation, emotional intelligence, influence, innovation, and resilience. If these sound familiar, it's because they're all attributes we've already associated with effective leadership. Eighty-three percent of enterprises agree that leadership is required at all levels for success in today's world of work. And that the associated skill sets need to evolve to match. The message here is clear: Leadership development shouldn't be limited to the few but available to the many.

Leadership at all levels: From entry-level to senior positions

But what does this new reality look like in practice? Let's explore how a foundational set of self-leadership skills can be applied at different levels within an organization.

Senior-level roles

Executives such as CEOs, CFOs, COOs, CTOs, and department heads are responsible for driving organizational change. Plus, the attainment of long-term goals. They also play a key role in shaping company culture and making high-stakes decisions. At this senior level, leadership becomes heavily weighted towards strategy and influence.

Top 3 skills:

- **VISION**
  Articulates the company's mission, values, and goals. Uses compelling communications to clarify purpose and inspire the workforce to achieve it. Ensures every team member understands their role in achieving that vision.

- **INTEGRITY AND AUTHENTICITY**
  Lives by their personal and professional values. Demonstrates transparency in their decision-making. And holds themselves accountable to the same standards they set for others.

- **RISK-TAKING**
  Empowers their teams to take ownership and make decisions. For example, a senior VP of Operations might give department managers the autonomy to implement their own process improvements, fostering innovation and accountability throughout the organization.

Mid-level roles

At this stage, employees have some experience and are often tasked with managing projects, teams, or specific functions. Leadership at this level involves more formal responsibility for guiding others and influencing broader team outcomes.

Top 3 skills:

- **COMMUNICATION AND INSPIRATION**
  Keeps team members engaged and informed about projects and initiatives. Shares success stories and demonstrates how to learn from failures.

- **GROWTH MINDSET**
  Mentors junior colleagues and peers, providing guidance and helping them grow professionally. Opens up insights and resources across the organization. Undertakes their own personal development.

- **DECISION-MAKING AND INNOVATION**
  Sources the right information at speed to make informed and timely choices when faced with uncertainty or emerging situations. Takes this one step further by engineering innovative solutions to address an emerging need.

Entry-level roles

Employees embarking on a career are unlikely to leap straight into a leadership mindset. Instead, they focus on learning the basics of their role, executing tasks assigned to them, and familiarizing themselves with their new workplace, colleagues, and culture. But once they've settled in, there are clear ways they can demonstrate leadership practices and potential.

Top 3 skills:

- **INNOVATION AND INITIATIVE**
  Evaluates existing processes, systems, strategies, and workflows and suggests improvements. For example, a junior marketing associate might proactively suggest new social media strategies based on research trends.

- **EMPATHY AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**
  Helps others, demonstrates active listening, and promotes a positive team dynamic.

- **ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESILIENCE**
  Demonstrates a strong work ethic, meets deadlines, and responds well to setbacks and constructive feedback.

The impact of grassroots leadership on organizational culture

Let's stick with this example of entry-level employees for a while. Entry-level employees who demonstrate leadership capabilities are good news for organizations. Unlike mid-level managers, they sit outside the typical leadership framework and have no formal authority. Their levels of financial remuneration are also, typically, far lower than other employees because of this. Yet, without waiting for a formal leadership role, they assume leadership capabilities. They also adopt growth mindset practices that significantly benefit the wider organization. Often referred to as "non-positional" or "grassroots" leaders, these self-motivated individuals work creatively to achieve their own goals and broader targets.

They may even set and smash different ones by suggesting new ways of working or exploring new initiatives. Here are 10 ways they benefit organizations.

1. Promote a culture of empowerment

Grassroots leaders are role models for empowerment. They show that leadership isn't just for those with titles. And that anyone can make a difference, advocate and implement change, and be recognized for this. This creates an environment where all employees feel empowered to bring ideas forward and drive improvements.

2. Boost engagement and morale

When leadership comes from within teams, employees benefit from a sense of strength and community that can't be replicated elsewhere. Grassroots leaders better understand the issues impacting their peers—particularly those relating to well-being and diversity. They often advocate for change or improvements that directly address their needs and concerns. This increases overall engagement and morale. In many companies, employee-led resource groups (ERGs) create platforms for underrepresented groups to voice their concerns and propose actionable solutions. This grassroots leadership improves employee satisfaction and helps create a more inclusive and supportive culture.

3. Drive innovation and creativity

Grassroots leaders are typically more attuned to day-to-day operations and the challenges faced by their teams. As a result, they are often the source of practical, innovative ideas that can lead to process improvements, new products, and operational efficiencies.

4. Foster a collaborative culture

By stepping up, grassroots leaders set themselves up in a collaborative role. They signal that they care about the greater good. And by involving others in decision-making and problem-solving, they become advocates for collective action. This, in turn, cultivates a culture where teamwork and shared responsibility are valued.

5. Encourage adaptability and change

Driving change from the bottom up, non-positional leaders help organizations become more flexible and adaptable to external pressures and internal challenges. Teams can pivot more quickly because they have proactive individuals at ground level, identifying risks and spotting opportunities.

6. Improve communication and trust

Grassroots leaders bridge the gap between upper management and frontline employees. Typically seen as more approachable and trustworthy by their peers, they open up channels of communication that may previously not have been available. By doing so, they help grow transparency throughout an organization.

7. Uphold organizational values and mission

When entry-level employees voluntarily take on an unsolicited leadership role, they align themselves with an organization's values and mission. This helps sustain and spread the organization's core principles among their peers and promotes the brand externally, too.

8. Develop leadership capabilities across the organization

Grassroots leaders demonstrate potential early on in their careers. This creates a rich pool of internal talent organizations can tap into when required. For example, when there's a movement within teams or across departments. By encouraging employees to take the lead from where they are, organizations develop future leaders and create a culture of leadership development at all levels. Which, in turn, reduces churn and recruitment costs.

9. Support sustainable organizational growth

Distributed leadership fosters a culture of shared responsibility. This helps organizations adapt to challenges and scale more effectively because more employees are invested in its success. And ready to support this as and when required.

10. Increase inclusivity and diversity of thought

Unconventional leadership allows diverse voices from all levels of the organization to be heard. It fosters an inclusive culture where individuals with different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives can shape an organization's future.

Five examples of non-positional leadership

These unconventional grassroots leaders don't fit the traditional leadership mold or have many of the "traditional" traits. Yet, they exhibit leadership through their actions, innovations, and influence. Let's meet some of them:

Ash, a customer service representative in a large enterprise organization, goes above and beyond to resolve a complex issue for a frustrated customer. Taking ownership of the situation, he uses empathy and emotional intelligence to help the customer. He reaches out to other departments to seek a solution, applying resilience and a problem-solving approach when faced with roadblocks. Once sorted, he shares lessons learned with colleagues.

Simone, an IT technician in a small start-up, notices increased cybersecurity threats within the company. With no formal processes in place, she takes a long-term, proactive approach rather than just fixing immediate technical issues. By conducting training sessions, sharing best practices, helping to draft policies, and researching tools, she helps the organization prevent future problems and foster a culture of security awareness.

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River, an overworked administrative assistant, introduces new tools to streamline office scheduling. By taking the initiative to solve a practical problem, they improve overall team productivity. They're also recognized within the wider department as influencers of change.

Sofia, a new hire in a warehouse, identifies a series of safety hazards in her team's working environment. Taking responsibility and showing initiative, she reports this and suggests new safety protocols and training for the team to improve the work environment.

Mo, a call center employee, notices that his colleagues are duplicating work and becoming stressed. He develops a more efficient way to handle customer queries and shares it with the team. By improving customer interactions and opening up his approach, he positively influences the overall performance of the team.

Chapter 2.

Let's recap this chapter:

According to research, all employees (not just those in senior roles) will need skills associated with leadership to succeed in the workplace of the future. The traditional organizational hierarchy doesn't preclude this. Whether at a senior, mid, or entry-level, all employees can demonstrate leadership skills within their existing roles. However, entry-level employees who strive to embody leadership are particularly good news for businesses. Often referred to as "non-positional" or "grassroots" leaders, these self-motivated individuals work creatively to achieve their own goals and broader targets. They may even set and smash new ones by suggesting new ways of working or exploring new initiatives.

Chapter 3.

The dark side
of leadership training for all

In the previous chapter, we listed 10 positive benefits of grassroots leadership on organizational culture. So, what happens when companies build on this grassroots movement by providing formal, company-wide leadership training? The positive benefits we've outlined (engagement, collaboration, innovation, agility, and diversity of thought) take root and grow strong across the organization. This, in turn, boosts performance and productivity levels, reduces churn, elevates the employer's brand proposition, and cultivates a rich talent pipeline. Sounds good, right? However, there are drawbacks that need to be considered.

1. High costs and resource investment

Offering leadership training to every employee can be expensive and resource-intensive. The cost of training materials, facilitators, and time away from work all add up, particularly for large organizations. There's also no guarantee that the investment will yield a direct return for every participant.

2. Overloads employees with non-essential skills

Not every employee needs leadership skills for their current role. Some positions may have a strong emphasis on technical expertise or routine tasks. In this case, leadership training may, at best, lead to frustration on the part of the employee and, at worst, prove a distraction that jeopardizes the quality of work.

3. Dilutes the impact of leadership training

When leadership training is offered to everyone, its depth, focus, and credibility may be diluted. High-potential individuals may miss out on advanced or specialized development and feel uninspired or lacking in challenges. Similarly, the general perception may be that if all employees are offered leadership training, it isn't as valuable or worth striving for.

4. Creates unrealistic expectations

Offering leadership training to everyone might lead some employees to expect rapid promotions, other opportunities for advancement, or access to senior-level roles that aren't available. This can lead to disappointment and disengagement.

5. Power struggles and lack of clarity

When all employees receive some level of leadership training, there may be confusion about authority and decision-making. This can lead to disorganization, workflow inefficiencies, and operational bottlenecks. In some cases, some employees may overstep boundaries or clash with formal leaders, resulting in power struggles and workplace toxicity.

6. Disengagement

Not all employees want leadership training. Some may not see themselves in leadership roles at all or at a particular stage in their career—employees nearing retirement, for example. Others may simply be happy in their current positions. Forcing leadership training on unwilling participants can create resistance or disengagement.

From darkness into the light: Strategies for leadership training success

So, how can businesses maximize the benefits of providing leadership training for everyone while minimizing potential issues? Here are some targeted strategies that address the drawbacks and support an effective leadership training program.

1. Customize training programs

✳ **THE CHALLENGE:** One-size-fits-all leadership training may not be relevant to all roles, leading to wasted resources or disengaged employees. It may also be seen as a tick-box exercise. Thus reducing its impact.

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✔ **THE SOLUTION:** Provide leadership training tailored to specific roles, levels, or departments. For instance, employees in technical or specialist roles may benefit from leadership skills related to project management or influencing without authority. Whereas, aspiring managers may require more advanced training in people management. Use specific organizational goals, mission, and values to create a meaningful connection between leadership training and its purpose / targeted impact. For example, if innovation is a business priority, focus on modules around agility and leading creativity. And continuously gather feedback to refine and improve the content, delivery, and structure of the training to reflect changes in organizational strategy or industry trends.

✴ **THE BENEFIT:** Providing bespoke training linked to an employee's current role and career trajectory boosts engagement and effectiveness. By tying leadership training to organizational goals, employees are more likely to see the relevance of the skills and apply them in a day-to-day context.

2. Offer choice

✳ **THE CHALLENGE:** For some employees, leadership training isn't something they want (or feel the need) to pursue.

✔ **THE SOLUTION:** Make (some) leadership training voluntary, or offer it as part of a career development pathway. Employees who want to grow and assume leadership roles can opt in, while those who prefer to focus on technical skills can prioritize other forms of development.

✴ **THE BENEFIT:** This reduces resistance among employees who may not see the need for leadership training. It also ensures that those who participate are genuinely invested in their growth.

3. Provide training in diverse formats

✳ **THE CHALLENGE:** Delivering company-wide leadership training can be resource-intensive and disruptive to business operations. Using the same format for all learners may not suit individual learning styles or preferences.

✔ **THE SOLUTION:** Use short eLearning modules employees can complete at their own pace. On-demand training could also include drop-in workshops or leadership labs that employees can access based on their schedules and development needs. Pair leadership training with mentorship or coaching programs. Employees can work with more experienced leaders to apply the skills they've learned in real-world situations. This hands-on approach helps bridge the gap between theory and practice.

✴ **THE BENEFIT:** Microlearning empowers learners. It's flexible and efficient, reduces operational disruption, and supports leadership development training at the point of need. Mentorship and coaching reinforce leadership development for both parties (the coach and the mentee). They support a one-to-one, personalized approach and foster ongoing learning, all of which help employees apply their new skills effectively.

4. Identify and nurture employees with high levels of interest and potential

✳ **THE CHALLENGE:** Offering leadership training to everyone can dilute the impact on those who are more passionate about this area of development and eager to progress into a more senior role.

✔ **THE SOLUTION:** Use training sessions to pinpoint employees with high potential and high levels of interest in expanding their leadership capabilities. Offer them follow-on opportunities for more advanced development programs.

✳ **THE BENEFIT:** This provides a meaningful balance. All employees are offered basic training and the same opportunities. But, those who demonstrate extra potential and higher levels of enthusiasm receive the additional resources and attention they need to move more quickly into a leadership role.

5. Set and share clear expectations about career progression

✳ **THE CHALLENGE:** Universal leadership training may lead some employees to expect rapid promotions or a fast move into a leadership role, which may not always align with organizational needs.

THE SOLUTION: Clearly communicate that leadership training is part of personal and professional development, not a guarantee of promotion. Set realistic expectations about career progression and ensure that leadership roles are based on training and demonstrated performance over time.

✳ **THE BENEFIT:** This reduces the likelihood of employees feeling entitled to leadership roles after training. And helps clarify how leadership progression works within the organization.

6. Measure impact and ROI

THE CHALLENGE: Ongoing investment in leadership training for all may be at risk if there is no tangible evidence that it delivers a good ROI.

✔ **THE SOLUTION:** Set up metrics to measure the impact of leadership training. These could include improvements in employee engagement (use an annual all-staff survey to measure this), productivity, collaboration, retention rates, and new product feature launches. Track how trained employees apply leadership skills and how this affects team and organizational performance.

✳ **THE BENEFIT:** Measuring the return on investment (ROI) gives L&D professionals the evidence to show senior stakeholders and investors how and where leadership training yields positive results for the organization. It also pinpoints areas for improvement.

Chapter 3.

Let's recap this chapter:

Leadership training that transcends all employees has its downsides. These range from cost, credibility, and compatibility with certain roles to a lack of clarity around control and accountability. Combined, these can lead to employees becoming passively disengaged or actively resistant. However, there are targeted strategies businesses can use to address these drawbacks and support an effective leadership training program. Choice, customization, and effective communication all feature highly within this framework.

Chapter 4.

Do hard skills matter in modern leadership?

We started this guide by examining the general characteristics of effective leaders. Most of these characteristics are rooted in soft skills such as communication, collaboration, and emotional intelligence. Because of this, they support the premise that leadership is something all individuals—regardless of professional background—have the foundational knowledge to embody.

So, where do hard skills fit in?

Hard skills in the workplace are knowledge sets directly related to specific tasks, professions, or roles. They're typically obtained through a combination of education, training, and practical application. And are assessed using assignments, examinations, projects, or through regular course attendance. A formal qualification is usually awarded once the required learning outcomes and competencies have been demonstrated. This makes hard skills easier to evaluate and measure during the hiring process and internally as part of an employee's ongoing professional development. Examples of hard skills include:

- **Technical skills**
  (coding, data analysis, software proficiency)

- **Professional skills**
  (accounting, project management)

- **Language skills**
  (fluency in foreign languages)

- **Industry-specific skills**
  (engineering, medicine, design)

- **Mathematical or analytical skills**
  (financial modeling, statistics)

Traditionally, most team leaders or managers would have been appointed to their roles of responsibility by virtue of their hard skills and experience within a specific field. Now, though, there's an agreement that effective leaders (whether in a formal or informal capacity) don't need to meet that criteria. Given that, we ask the question:

Does technical expertise still have a role to play in effective leadership? Or is it a relic of a bygone era?

When leaders benefit from being experts in their field

Turns out, there's no right or wrong answer here. The role of hard skills in workplace leadership is a nuanced topic. Modern leadership models may have moved away from the rigid trajectory that links technical experience with effective leadership. But, having a core set of hard skills relevant to a specific industry or organizational function can still enhance a leader's effectiveness—particularly in the following three areas.

1. Credibility and trust

Leaders with a deep and up-to-date understanding of their field gain credibility and respect from their team. Employees are more likely to trust and follow someone who understands their work's technical challenges and nuances.

HERE'S AN EXAMPLE:
A leader in a software development team who can write code or understand the intricacies of programming languages will be seen as more credible and relatable by their team of developers. This technical expertise allows them to guide decisions, provide meaningful feedback, and help troubleshoot complex problems.

2. Informed and timely problem-solving and decision-making

In high-pressure industries like IT, healthcare, or manufacturing, technical issues must be addressed quickly and accurately. Leaders with specialist knowledge and expertise can

jump in to solve high-stakes or complex problems when necessary, without delay. Their expertise enables them to make informed decisions at speed with little input from others. Meanwhile, leaders who lack technical knowledge might rely too heavily on others for input, leading to delayed decision-making and an increased potential for miscommunication or misunderstandings.

HERE'S AN EXAMPLE:
In cybersecurity, a leader who understands network security protocols can respond rapidly to a cyberattack, making informed choices and directing their team with clarity and expertise.

3. Mentorship and development

A strong portfolio of hard skills within a particular field means leaders can also act as mentors and develop individuals within their team. By sharing their knowledge and helping others optimize their technical abilities, they can create an environment of learning and growth. While also raising the level of proficiency across their team.

HERE'S AN EXAMPLE:
In a healthcare setting, a senior surgeon with deep expertise in specific proce-dures can mentor junior doctors, guiding them through complex operations and helping them develop advanced skills.

When hard skills fall short

A mastery of hard, technical skills can be an asset for leaders—particularly grassroots

leaders or those in mid-level leadership roles. However, at higher levels of leadership, focusing on day-to-day technical details can put broader strategic thinking at risk. What matters more in this context is the ability to set a vision, inspire a team, and align efforts toward long-term goals. Effective delegation has a big role to play in supporting this. Leaders don't need to be technical gurus if they have active and engaged subject-matter experts within their team and know how to empower, encourage, motivate, and trust them. Which is where soft skills come in. From the art of persuasion and active listening to empathy, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution, a solid portfolio of soft skills can nurture SMEs. And build supportive, resilient, and enthusiastic teams.

The hard truth about soft skills

In practice, an element of technical proficiency can be helpful in a leadership role. But if hard skills are missing or not on point, effective leaders can (and will) always find ways around this. What they can't do is look to others to fill the soft skills gap. They can't rely on others to provide vision, inspiration, cohesion, and collaboration across their team. This is why soft skills are arguably more important than hard skills in leadership. Yes, technical expertise establishes credibility. But a leader with exceptional soft skills can establish credibility and trust in other, more meaningful, and deep-rooted ways. They can harness the potential of their team. They can create a positive work culture. They can also guide employees through complex challenges and fast-evolving situations.

Chapter 4.

A recap this chapter:

Proficiency in a specific field can be an asset to leaders, particularly regarding fast decision-making and problem-solving. The hard skills that come with this technical expertise also make it easier to establish credibility early on. But none of this is essential. Powered by a sophisticated set of soft skills, effective leaders can navigate around this to harness the potential of their team. By doing so, they can guide employees through complex challenges and fast-evolving situations, establishing credibility and trust along the way.

A growth mindset: A model for the future of leadership

Great leadership usually starts quietly. It doesn't begin center stage, announced by a fanfare and bathed in spotlights. More often than not, it starts on the sidelines. And, through small steps, emerges from the wings to take on a more powerful role. But that progression doesn't happen on its own. Employers and employees must work together to find a path to navigate the leadership landscape. Employers need to support a culture of continuous learning and empowerment at every level of their organization. Employees need to open themselves up to new experiences, opportunities, and risks. **Having a growth mindset is the foundation of all of this.**

Believing that (almost) anything is possible, people with a growth mindset call on specific strategies, characteristics, and capabilities to improve performance and overcome setbacks. Using these, they break complex challenges down into achievable steps. And they keep applying this approach to ensure continuous learning and progression. Organizations play a key role in underpinning a growth mindset through ongoing training, vision, and values. By doing this, they create an environment where leadership skills are universally nurtured, whether it's a new hire starting their first role or senior executives with years of experience behind them.

We started this guide by discussing the ambiguity around the verb "to lead." Let's end with clarity: Leadership in the workplace is an opportunity for the many, not a privilege of the few. By redefining and resetting the markers around this, businesses can build resilience for the future and give all employees the chance to shine, whatever their role or position. **And that is a growth mindset at its best.**

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TalentLMS makes it easy to provide the right training for any team and context while giving expert guidance and support every step of the way. Backed by Epignosis, a global leader in learning technologies, TalentLMS is on a mission to democratize training, serving over 70,000 organizations worldwide.