
RESEARCH INSIGHTS

IT'S YOU, NOT THEM.

Why emerging leaders need
your support to succeed.

10K+ participants
across 28 countries

A global research study from the
Center for Creative Leadership



WHAT CAN ORGANIZATIONS DO TODAY TO SUPPORT THE LEADERS OF TOMORROW?

While serving as Superintendent (President) of the U.S. Naval Academy, I would sometimes visit classrooms and ask, “Who in this room wants to be a leader?” Invariably, every student would enthusiastically raise a hand. Later, as Chancellor of a large public system of higher education, I would ask students the same question. Typically, very few hands would go up.

The young people in both institutions were smart, talented, and determined. What explained the difference in their reactions? **I’ve come to believe it had a great deal to do with both expectations and opportunity.**

From their very first day at the Naval Academy, students are groomed to be leaders inside and outside of the classroom, and their opportunities to lead increase substantially and systematically throughout their 4 years there. At many other institutions of higher education, however, leadership development is less consistent and accessible. The result: young people think that leadership roles are unattainable or not worth pursuing. That is a terrible waste of potential, and it’s a common situation around the world.

At the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®), we’re currently engaged in a global research project focused on emerging leaders between the ages of 18 and 30. We’re exploring their attitudes about leadership and their hopes and dreams for the future. **Perhaps most significantly, we’re carefully examining what organizations can do to nurture the next generation of leaders.** This report offers many practical suggestions on what team leaders and entire organizations can do on that front — and it’s intended to be read and acted on by anyone, at all organizational levels, who works with emerging leaders.

The more young people throughout the world who are prepared to lead, the greater chance we have of building a thriving global community committed to growth, equity, and impact for all. This report aims to help advance that conversation — and we’re grateful that you’re part of it!

Warm regards,

John R. Ryan
President & CEO
Center for Creative Leadership

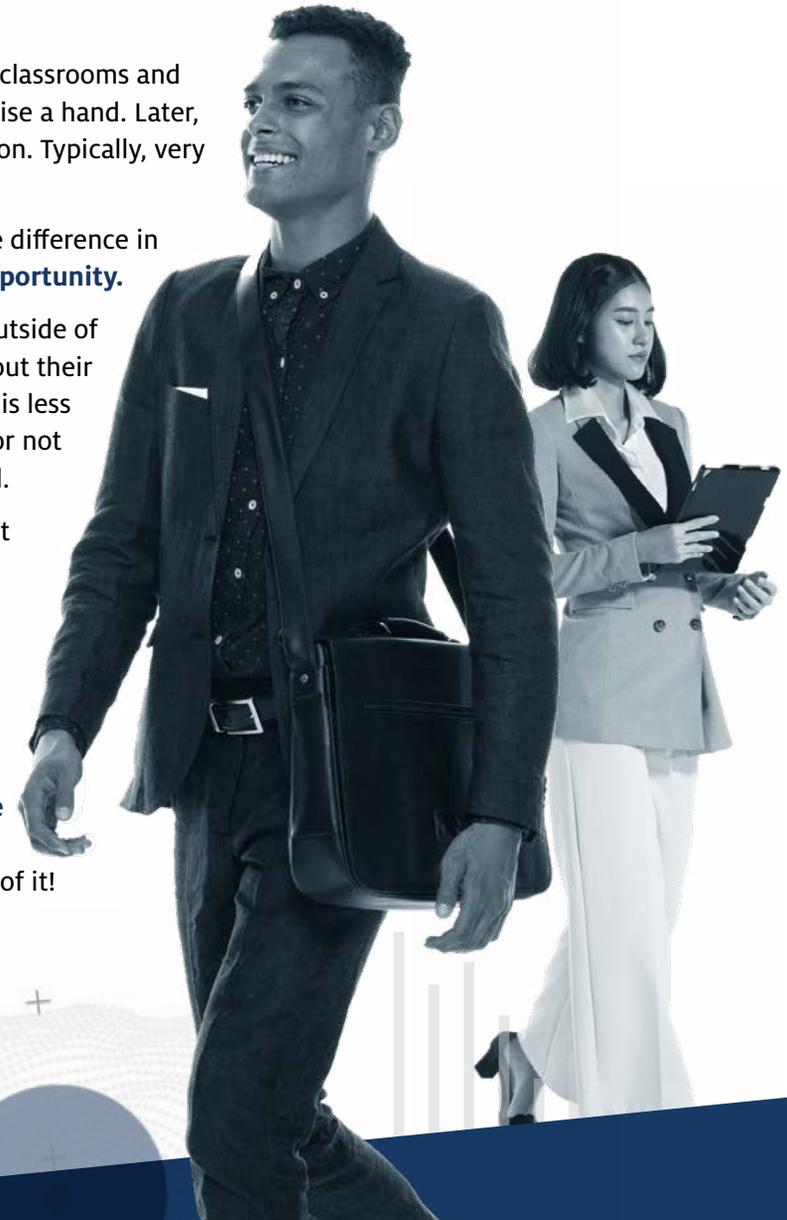
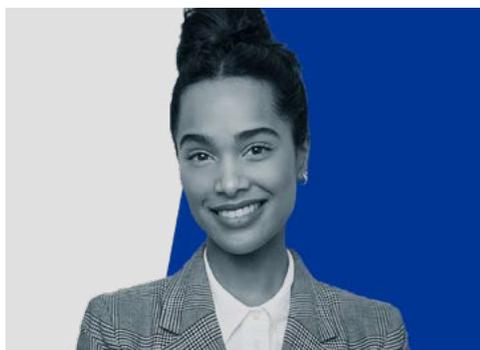


TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: A RESEARCH-BASED CALL TO ACTION | 4

Our research on emerging leaders, what these findings mean for your organization, and an overview of the 3 recommended strategies to engage them



REDUCE & REFRAME BARRIERS | 6

Pave a smoother path to leadership

ALIGN VALUES | 12

Help emerging leaders connect their larger purpose to their work



SUPPORT EQUITABLE ACCESS | 18

Think and act in ways that promote inclusion

CONCLUSION | 24

INTRODUCTION: A CALL TO ACTION

What would your organization look like if emerging leaders felt fully supported — able to make decisions, make a difference, and have their voices heard?

Recruiting and retaining talented employees is critical to organizational success. Unfortunately, though, it's harder to do today than ever before. With increasing globalization and digital fluency, next-generation workers are free to explore a broader range of opportunities. But they're also faced with upheaval on both the job and personal front, from the challenges of working from home during a global pandemic to the struggles involved in finding their voice in an increasingly diverse and divided society.

To develop a deeper understanding of emerging leaders and their concerns, researchers at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) have launched a broad, ongoing study¹ that includes initial data from

more than 10,000 Gen Z and Millennials ages 18 to 30. An additional 6,000 responses have followed to date.

Participants come from **28 countries around the globe** and reflect varying social identities and work experiences. Some are first-time leaders, whereas others have already moved up through the ranks. Some aspire to become future leaders, whereas others are uninterested in formal leadership or see it as unattainable.

Our study explores the “whys.” Why do some young people aspire to leadership while others avoid it? Why are some able to take on increasingly greater leadership roles while others are not?

The data we've collected through surveys and interviews points to 3 strategies that can help your organization attract, retain, and support emerging leaders — building the skills critical to success:

01. REDUCE AND REFRAME BARRIERS.

Personal, structural, and cultural barriers can keep young professionals from achieving their full potential or from choosing to engage in leadership at all. Breaking down barriers or reframing them as opportunities can help you expand your talent pool and develop young leaders who feel supported and empowered.

02. ALIGN VALUES. Young professionals are more likely to step into leadership and to

feel empowered in that role if they perceive that doing so is important, relevant, and worthwhile. By helping emerging leaders connect their work to their greater purpose in life, you can achieve new levels of commitment and alignment.

03. SUPPORT EQUITABLE ACCESS. Some of the most consistent comments we've heard from the young people in our study involve the lack of equitable access to leadership opportunities and development. Your organization can set itself apart by thinking and acting inclusively and by expanding your equity and diversity initiatives beyond gender and race. It's clear that a true culture shift is needed, with a commitment to sustained, structural changes — not “one-and-done” initiatives.

In this report, we'll take a deeper dive into each of these 3 strategies — complete with suggested action steps and research-based resources that can help you fast-track change.



ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Data drawn from both surveys and interviews

Survey Sample

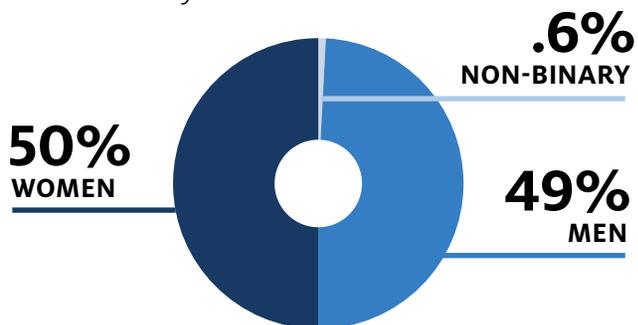
Sample Size:

10,386
YOUTH

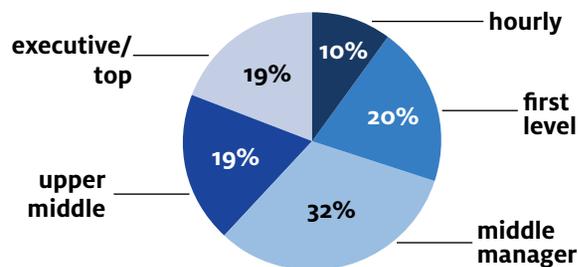
Age:

18-30

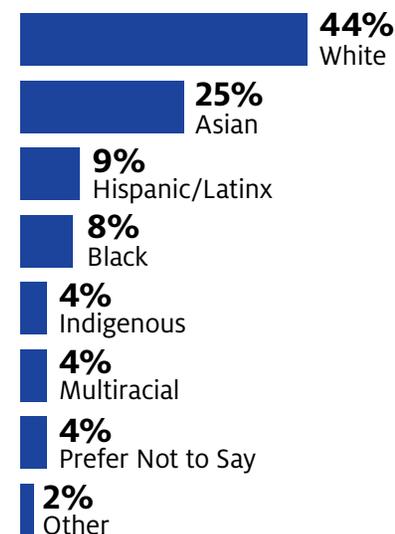
Gender Identity:



Leader Level (for current leaders):



Race:



Generational Status:



Country: **5% sample from each G20 country** (including EU)*

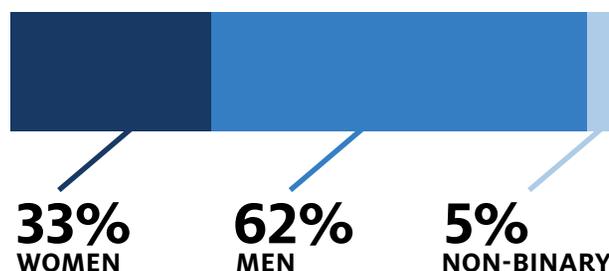
Launched in 2020 and ongoing

Interview Sample

Sample Size:

21 YOUTH

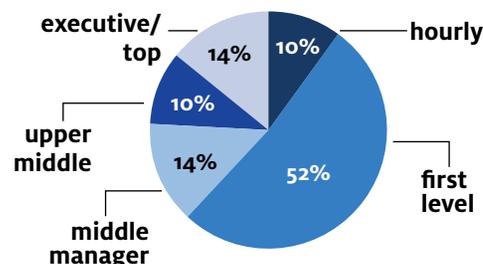
Gender Identity:



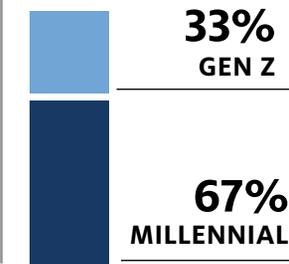
Age:

18-29

Leader Level:



Generational Status:



01.

**REDUCE &
REFRAME BARRIERS**



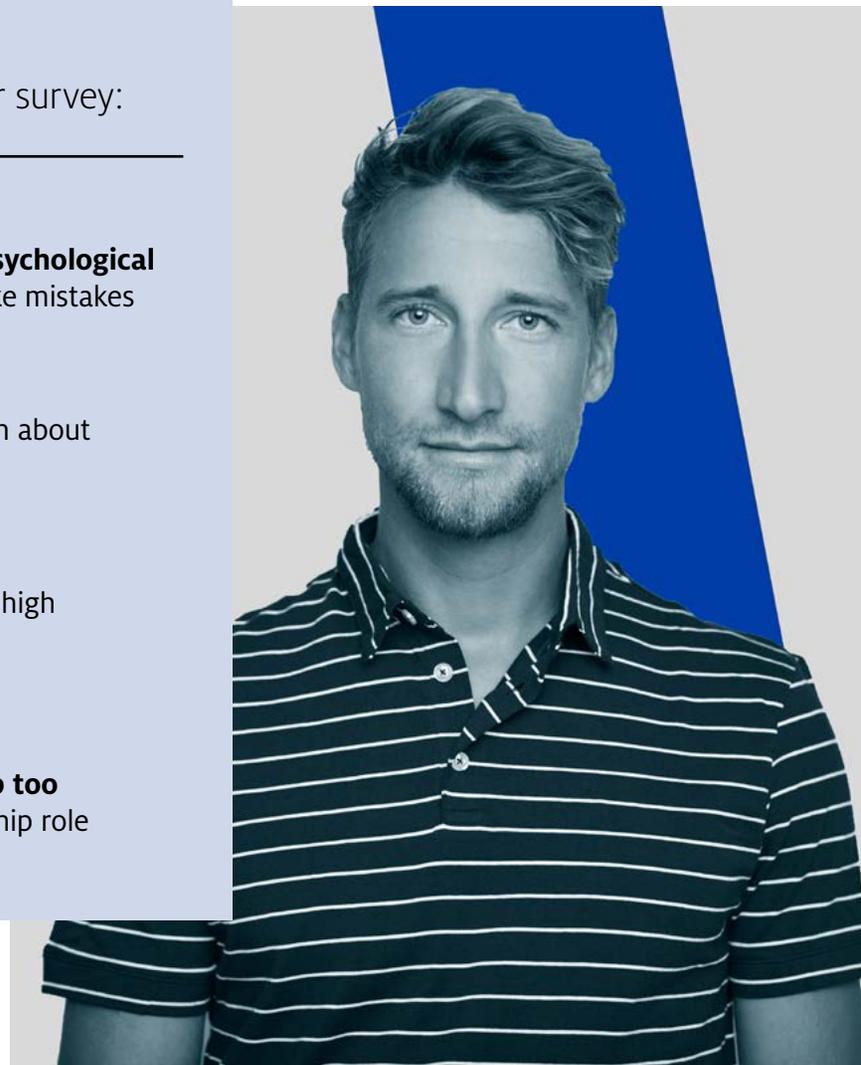
RESEARCH INSIGHTS

STRATEGY 1: REDUCE & REFRAME BARRIERS

Our research suggests that personal, structural, and cultural barriers can discourage young professionals from stepping into a leadership role. Among the challenges we've identified are a lack of intergenerational trust, as well as a lack of confidence and initiative on the part of young people themselves. Those who haven't yet stepped into leadership often worry about potential stress, work-life balance, and having to give up other activities they value. By reducing and reframing barriers and teaching coping strategies, you can expand your talent pool by leveraging the power of your emerging leaders' full potential.

BY THE NUMBERS

Among the aspiring leaders in our survey:



ACTION STEPS FOR ORGANIZATIONS:



01. FOSTER RESILIENCE.

To help emerging leaders manage and reduce the stress leadership can bring, encourage them to balance high-activity and high-intensity times with periods of rest, reflection, and recovery. Tactics might include helping young workers nurture a broad network of relationships both inside and outside the office. You might also encourage regular exercise and time for mindful reflection. At the organizational level, consider adoption of best practices that support resilience, with regular reinforcement to establish new norms. Most importantly, lead by example. For instance, consider “walk and talk” meetings that marry business with exercise. Set a daily “out of office” email reply for after-work hours — making it clear from the top down that team members are not expected to be on call 24-7. By endorsing and practicing these types of resilience behaviors yourself, you can encourage their spread across the broader organization.



02. PROMOTE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY.

A psychologically safe workplace encourages young professionals to make meaningful contributions. They feel they belong and are accepted for who they are, including those characteristics and perspectives that make them different from others, such as social identity, religion, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. They’re encouraged to learn and to grow by asking questions, giving and receiving feedback, experimenting, making mistakes, and learning from the outcomes — without fear of repercussions.

To reduce stress and promote a psychologically safe workplace, consider having your senior leaders share stories about risks they’ve taken and mistakes they’ve made. This transparency can make it clear that missteps aren’t a career-breaker, but instead are an opportunity to deepen learning. Other tactics to consider: You might start meetings by asking team members to share a win for the week, a challenge, and something they want to change. Or match your emerging leaders with accountability partners who can help them reframe mistakes and address challenges. Make it a practice to ask open-ended questions that invite dialogue and then listen intently to the responses. Embrace candor and express gratitude. Ask for help when needed and give it freely when asked. By taking steps like these to promote psychological safety, you’ll be helping your emerging leaders to understand their own role in making your organization a better place.

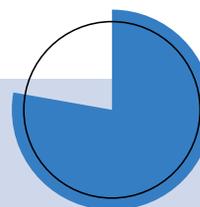
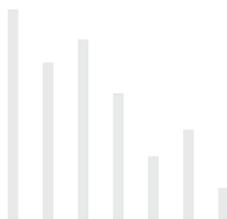




03. OFFER SCAFFOLDED DEVELOPMENT.

Make certain emerging leaders get the right development opportunities at the right level of challenge, with appropriate supports in place. Pay special attention to first-time managers who have been newly promoted based on their individual contributions as a technical or functional expert. They may lack the skills to manage people. Meet them where they are and help them learn to communicate, work through others, and give feedback. Instead of one-off training programs, provide learning continuity so new managers can grow over time and put what they learn into action. There are a number of practical tools and resources you might incorporate, including coaching, learning networks, accountability partners, and 360-degree feedback to build self-awareness. Your emerging leaders might also benefit from peer

mentoring systems, where new leaders have a same-level colleague to learn from and to use as a sounding board. This can be especially helpful for those who might be reluctant to turn to their manager for support.



78%

OF THE YOUNG PROFESSIONALS WE SURVEYED **HAVE PARTICIPATED IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES.**



04. BREAK DOWN SILOS.

In today's fractured world, the ability to build bridges has never been more important. Successful leaders must know how to work effectively across boundaries both inside and outside their organization. As a result, it's important to help your young leaders view boundaries not as barriers, but as frontiers for emerging opportunities and for new ways of working and collaboration. Help them understand the social aspects of their role and how to work through and with others to achieve results, regardless of age, gender, culture, ideology, geographic location, or rank on an organizational chart. One example: It can be useful to create opportunities for open dialogue. You might set aside a regular time for team members to share their varied life/work experiences and stories, including how their background influences and enriches the way they engage in their work.

QUICK TIPS:



01. FOSTER RESILIENCE

With Your Team

Demonstrate work-life balance by setting daily “out of office” email replies for after-work hours.

In Your Organization

Promote a healthy meeting culture by implementing “no-meeting Fridays.”



02. PROMOTE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Start meetings by asking team members to share a win for the week, a challenge, and something they want to change.

Use company-wide meetings or newsletters to share “failing forward” stories from senior leaders to encourage risk taking.



03. OFFER SCAFFOLDED DEVELOPMENT

Set first-time managers up with mentors they can learn from and use as a sounding board.

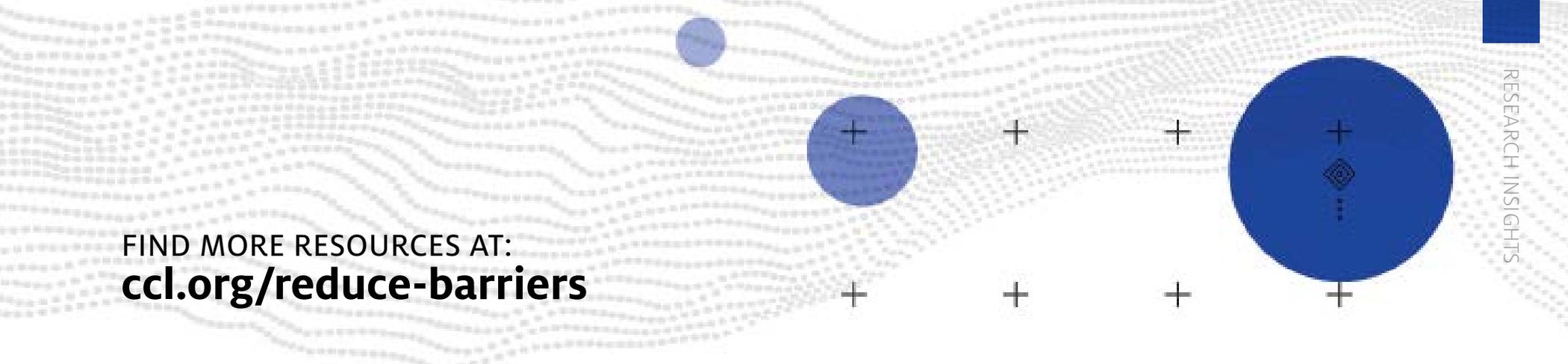
Provide emerging leaders with courses targeted to the needs of new managers in the format that makes the most sense for them.



04. BREAK DOWN SILOS

Encourage “colleague coffee breaks” — either virtual or in person — for your leaders to connect with others in the organization.

Rotate featuring different departments at your company-wide meetings to share updates and successes.



FIND MORE RESOURCES AT:
ccl.org/reduce-barriers

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS:

[3 Evidence-Based Strategies to Help Leaders Cope with Pandemic Stress](#)

[What Is Psychological Safety at Work?](#)

[12 Challenges New Managers Must Conquer](#)

[Develop Leaders, Not Just Bosses](#)

[How to Foster Resilience & Prevent Burnout](#)

[Make Learning Stick: Improve Learning Transfer to Get the Most Out of Leadership Development](#)

[Why You Should Collaborate Across Boundaries](#)

GET STARTED TODAY

Help your emerging leaders avoid burnout and instead burn bright. Our online program [The Resilience Advantage](#) is science-based, with practical tools that can be applied right away. Or, give your future leaders the skills to manage others and build bridges with our first-time manager training program, [Maximizing Your Leadership Potential](#).

02.

ALIGN EMPLOYEE & ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES



RESEARCH INSIGHTS

STRATEGY 2: ALIGN EMPLOYEE & ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES

A significant number of the young adults in our survey do not see moving into a leadership role as useful to their everyday life or as an important part of who they are. They fail to see alignment between their personal values and those of their organization or field of expertise. To help potential leaders find personal meaning in leadership roles, it's important to help them reflect on their "why" and on how leading in your organization might relate to their personal goals, sense of identity, and greater purpose.

BY THE NUMBERS

22% of the young adults in our study say they **don't plan to pursue a leadership role**. Of those:



see leadership as an **important part of who they are**



see leadership as **useful to their everyday life**



see leadership as **useful to their future career**



ACTION STEPS FOR ORGANIZATIONS:



01. DEFINE AND ARTICULATE PURPOSE.

An important step in recruiting and retaining the young professionals your organization needs is to become purpose-driven and transparent about your mission, vision, and values. Clearly define and communicate what your organization stands for and what makes it different, and involve next-generation leaders in the process. Your mission and values can then be used to guide strategies and decision-making up and down the organization. Most importantly, make certain each team member understands how they can make a difference in bringing that purpose to life.



02. BUILD EMPATHY AND HUMAN-CENTERED LEADERSHIP.

Workplace empathy can help you cultivate young leaders and boost your organization's performance. One proof point: When CCL analyzed assessment data from 6,731 managers in 38 countries, we found that empathy in the workplace is positively related to job performance². Managers rated as empathetic by subordinates were also rated as high-performing by their bosses.

To promote human-centered leadership, let your managers know that empathy and compassion matter, and reward supportive behaviors. Address human-centered leadership in your professional development programs, leadership objectives, annual reviews, and incentive programs. For example, you might teach listening skills and techniques for drawing out varying perspectives — equipping your managers to work well with people from varying teams, departments, countries, cultures, and backgrounds. Above all, make certain each leader understands that one of their most important responsibilities is to understand, care for, and develop others.





03. PERSONALIZE DEVELOPMENT.

Learning to lead is an intensely personal experience. As a result, it's important that you support your emerging leaders with tools and assessments that will provide context for their personal development journey. For example, using 360-degree feedback surveys can help young leaders become more self-aware and learn how they stack up in competency areas that are important to your organization. They can achieve a clearer understanding of what the organization needs, how their performance compares to their peers, and which improvements they need to make to support your organization's success. They then can build a personalized development roadmap for their own leadership journey.



A RECENT STUDY FROM UDEMY³ FOUND THAT YOUNG WORKERS VALUE **WORKPLACE DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES MORE THAN FINANCIAL REWARDS.**

04. LISTEN TO AND ELEVATE EMERGING LEADER VOICES.



Speaking up can feel risky, especially for those who are in the early stages of their career. So take steps to show that you value the thoughts and perspectives of even the youngest members of your team. Have meaningful discussions — especially about sensitive issues like diversity, equity, and inclusion. Walk the talk by listening to voices from all corners of your organization. For example, you might invite emerging leaders to executive team meetings, set up employee resource groups to articulate and voice opinions, or practice reverse mentoring. It's important to pay attention not only to the facts you uncover, but also to the underlying feelings and values those discussions reflect. When you do, you'll get a more accurate picture of your team and of both the challenges and opportunities faced.

QUICK TIPS:



01. ARTICULATE PURPOSE

With Your Team

Find out what passions your team members hold and find ways they can bring those to the job (through committees, ERGs, etc.).

In Your Organization

Publicize and incorporate your company's core values into day-to-day operations.



02. BUILD EMPATHY

Watch for signs of overwork in your team members before burnout becomes an issue.

Equip your leaders with the skills to listen for facts, feelings, and values and respond empathetically.



03. PERSONALIZE DEVELOPMENT

Ask your emerging leaders what types of professional development they're interested in, and create a track for implementation.

Consider training programs that include 360-degree feedback surveys to improve self-awareness in your future leaders.



04. ELEVATE EMERGING LEADER VOICES

Offer multiple formats for feedback and idea sharing on your team, including anonymous options.

Set up formal reverse mentoring programs that can help elevate the contributions of all employees.

FIND MORE RESOURCES AT:
ccl.org/align-values

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS:

[5 Truths About Millennials in the Workplace](#)

[Why Employees Want to Leave \(or Stay With\) Their Organizations](#)

[The Importance of Empathy in the Workplace](#)

[The Most Important Leadership Competencies](#)

[How to Have Conversations About Race: 3 Critical First Steps](#)

[What's Reverse Mentoring, and How Can It Help Me?](#)

[How to Practice Authentic Communication in a Virtual Space Through the Power of Listening](#)

GET STARTED TODAY

Our human-centered, research-based, highly [individualized leadership development programs and solutions](#) can meet your future leaders where they are and take your organization where it needs to go.

03.

SUPPORT EQUITABLE ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES



03

STRATEGY 3: SUPPORT EQUITABLE ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES

Multiple studies have shown that diverse teams are more resilient, more innovative, and drive better business performance. Yet one of the most consistent themes in our research centers around inequitable leadership and development opportunities for young people. Building a more inclusive and equitable workplace can help your young leaders and your broader organization thrive.

BY THE NUMBERS



60% of the young people in our study feel that **leadership opportunities for youth are inequitable**



42% feel that young adults **don't play an important role** in leadership in their country



52% feel that their country **doesn't support young adults in leadership roles**



ACTION STEPS FOR ORGANIZATIONS:



01. ANALYZE YOUR RECRUITMENT AND PROMOTION PRACTICES.

Review the systems and policies you use to recruit, hire, and promote talent. Ask tough questions that challenge the status quo. Is your organization applying different standards to some people or groups? Are job descriptions worded in ways that unintentionally limit the diversity of the applicant pool? Who has access to on-the-job learning and to key assignments? Who receives coaching, mentoring, and sponsorship? What does representation look like across all leader levels? To get started, you might conduct an internal audit of leadership representation and of whether varying voices and perspectives are included when important decisions are made. Consider engaging a diverse cross-section of young employees in your analysis to broaden your perspective. Once your review is complete, you'll be poised to take informed, proactive steps to level-up access and to make your talent management processes a lever for change.



02. BROADEN YOUR EQUITY AND DIVERSITY INITIATIVES BEYOND GENDER AND RACE.

Though gender and race are both critical aspects of our social identity, they're not the only things that make us who we are. As you build your equity and diversity initiatives, consider the broad range of differences that can set people apart, including gender, race, sexual orientation, financial stability, ability status, and varying cultural, social, and life experiences. Take active steps to overcome systemic and structural barriers that might stand in the way of networking opportunities, stretch assignments, and promotions for emerging leaders and others in your organization. Among the potential focal points for action: Examine leadership representation, recruit diverse voices, and create culturally relevant development opportunities. Pay special attention to unspoken norms and to the ways both conscious and unconscious bias can creep in. Build awareness of the corrosive power of small stings, barbs, thoughtless actions, and unintentional harassment.



03. DEMOCRATIZE ACCESS TO LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Flexible development options can help your organization broaden access to learning for your young leaders at each point in their career journey.

Experience shows the most effective development programs offer continuous support throughout an individual's time with your organization. Consider online courses, workshops, conferences, webinars, on-demand tools, and online resource libraries. Offer both formal and informal development opportunities for both first-time managers and experienced staff — from traditional face-to-face classroom programs to virtual courses, conferences, coaching, sponsorships, rotational programs, on-the-job learning, and mentoring. To bring learning to life and ensure that it sticks, offer a combination of challenging experiences and assignments, developmental relationships, and formal coursework and training.

Help your future leaders navigate these expanded development choices by providing clear guidance on what capabilities will be needed at each point in their career continuum.



OUR RESEARCH SHOWS THAT INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS **ARE MOST LIKELY TO BE EFFECTIVE IF THEY ADDRESS EQUITY AND DIVERSITY BROADLY**¹.



QUICK TIPS:



01. ANALYZE RECRUITMENT & PROMOTION PRACTICES



02. TAKE EDI BEYOND GENDER & RACE



03. DEMOCRATIZE ACCESS TO L&D

With Your Team

Ask your team about their recruitment experience. Did the job description or how it was shared unintentionally limit the applicants to a certain demographic?

Help your team members better understand their social identity with the exercise included in our article, [Understand Social Identity to Lead in a Changing World](#).

Ask team members to define and own a leadership competency they would like to enhance over the year. If possible, provide them with budget to research and pursue appropriate training.

In Your Organization

Conduct an internal audit of job descriptions, leadership representation, or inclusion in decision-making conversations.

Consider which social identity groups do not often interact in your current work structure and arrange opportunities for connection (projects, social events, retreats, etc.).

Consider which formats of development are most accessible to segments of your workforce and provide different options (virtual, asynchronous, in-person, etc.).

FIND MORE RESOURCES AT:
ccl.org/provide-access

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS:

[5 Powerful Ways to Take REAL Action on DEI \(Diversity, Equity & Inclusion\)](#)

[Understand Social Identity to Lead in a Changing World](#)

[The Power of Respect](#)

[Inclusive Leadership: Steps Your Organization Should Take to Get It Right](#)

[Empathy & Inclusion in the Workplace: Imperatives for Your Diversity Initiatives](#)

[Mentoring at Work: How \(and Why\) to Implement It in Your Organization](#)

[The 70-20-10 Rule for Leadership Development](#)

GET STARTED TODAY

Our [equity, diversity, and inclusion solutions](#) can help your leaders shift mindsets, behaviors, and practices so everyone in your organization attains their full potential.

CONCLUSION

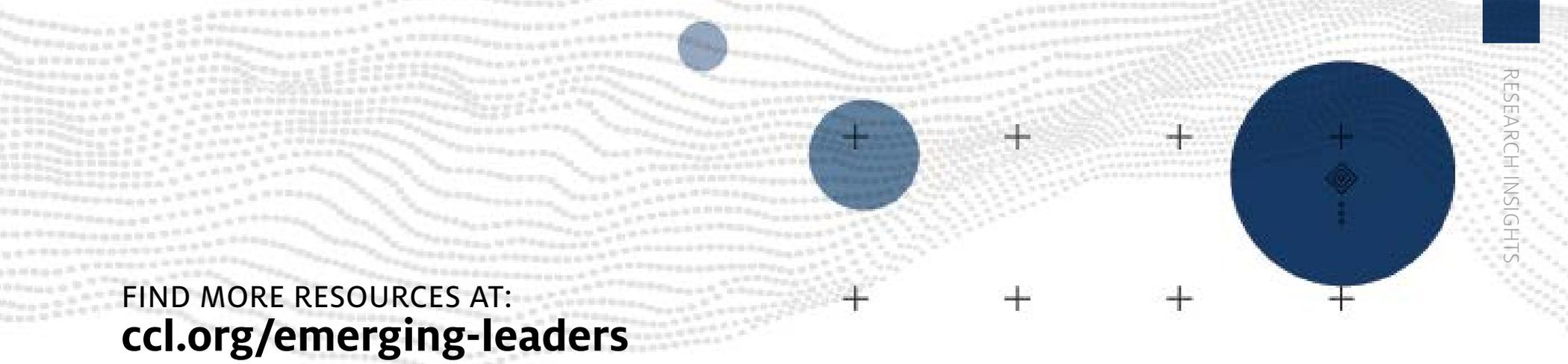
Without question, the COVID-19 pandemic has altered today's workforce in ways that will have a ripple effect for years to come. **Though it can be tough for emerging leaders to navigate this new normal, unprecedented challenges afford opportunities for unprecedented change.**

The time is ripe to revisit our beliefs about what leadership looks like, who can become a leader, and the support needed to help them succeed.

Our global study on emerging leaders has given them a voice. They've spoken up and offered clear guidance on what it takes for them to feel engaged and empowered in the workplace. But they can't reach their full potential on their own. **They need the support of your organization to help them reduce and reframe barriers, connect their personal values to their work, and ensure they have equitable access to opportunities.**

The data from our study can serve as a springboard — helping you shift your culture and take better-informed steps to recruit, develop, and retain the young professionals your organization needs to succeed. By acknowledging their unique experiences and values, you can create workplaces where they feel invested in their role and empowered to help you move your organization forward.





FIND MORE RESOURCES AT:
ccl.org/emerging-leaders

GET STARTED TODAY

Our suite of [new manager development solutions](#) can give your emerging leaders the support they need to reach their full potential and take your organization into the future.

REFERENCES

¹ Wormington, S., Pearsall, S., Fernandez, K., & Hoole, E. (2020) [Building Bridges and Breaking Down Barriers: Young Adults' Insights on the State of Leadership and Empowerment in G20 Countries](#)

² Gentry, W., Weber, T., & Sadri, G. (2016) [Empathy in the Workplace: A Tool for Effective Leadership](#)

³ UdeMy Business (2020) [Reimagining Leadership Development for a Multi-Generational Workforce](#)

CCL LOCATIONS

Americas

+1 336 545 2810

ccl.org

Europe, Middle East, Africa

+32 (0) 2 679 09 10

ccl.org/emea

Asia Pacific

+65 6854 6000

ccl.org/apac

Greater China

+86 21 6881 6683

ccl.org/china



The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL)[®] is a top-ranked, global, nonprofit provider of leadership development. Over the past 50 years, we've worked with organizations of all sizes from around the world, including more than 2/3 of the Fortune 1000. Our cutting-edge solutions are steeped in extensive research and our work with hundreds of thousands of leaders at all levels.