NAVIGATING THE NEW NORMAL:
ACCELERATING LEADERSHIP SUCCESS IN ASIA

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Center for Creative Leadership®

Based on the collective wisdom of CHROs in Asia

Organizations continue to deal with perhaps the biggest existential crisis. The combined social, economic, and health crises due to the Covid-19 pandemic continues to stress-test organizations, forcing them to stare at the potential reality of bankruptcy. While leaders at exemplar companies tackle numerous business challenges every day to keep their operations afloat, they continue to focus on developing talent to get them ready for the 'next normal' business environment, however much tougher and potentially riddled with ambiguity and disruption it turns out to be. While businesses want future-ready leaders – and fast – HR teams toil to align their leadership development initiatives with dynamic business strategies, the glut of available technology options, and evolving internal processes. This paper, based on in-depth interviews with 37 heads of HR/ chief HR officers (CHROs), articulates how the current disruption has reframed the leadership development model and approach in organizations, and what lessons organizations have learned as they strive to develop their cadre of future-ready leaders.

Riding the Covid Storm

Unexpected events, such as the one the world is living through, require the majority of organizations to continually pivot their businesses, realign their operations, rewire their processes, and adapt their focus. The last two years, 2020 and 2021, have witnessed unprecedented changes to business models, customer expectations, and leadership practices. None of the professional life experiences that leaders may have had pre-Covid could have prepared them for the scale of volatility, uncertainty, and complexity that they have encountered working their way through the crisis. "Leaders need a new compass to navigate through the crisis towards recovery and beyond," noted a CHRO. Survival instinct pushed some organizations to morph their business into a different version of itself, while others that have thrived during the crisis are on a steep growth curve. Both sets of organizations may want leaders with adjacent yet different skills,

developed at a much faster pace than before. The onus lies on HR teams to fulfil business demands around next-normal-ready leaders.

Most organizations have come a long way on leadership development since the Covid virus hit Asia in early 2020. "We have had to undergo a complete mindset shift on how to approach leadership development," shared a senior HR leader. "We used to do leadership development in a very traditional way; we had a leadership development academy and we used to send people there to get trained by external expert faculty," she added. The organization, like most others, has since converted all its leadership programs to an online mode [Figure 1.1]. "Then Covid happened, and it was a blessing in a way, because there was no other way to train, and no other way to learn; we had a lot of nay-sayers initially, but eventually people embraced the digital learning model."

FIG 1.1 **From Physical to Virtual Development**
Scalability versus Impact Paradox

LEARNING ACADEMY → ONLINE PROGRAMS
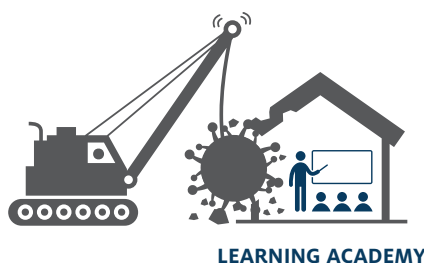
- More leadership development activity
- More openness to virtual learning
- Active budget reallocation
- But, compromised impact

Interviewee HR leaders shared four trends at play as organizations realign their leadership development initiatives to the 'next normal.'

More leadership development activity. Most leaders the research team interviewed shared that they have continued, even increased, their leadership development activity during the crisis period in order to gain competitive advantage, deliver on business strategy, and improve their chances of attaining organizational goals. Organizations also stepped up their learning initiatives to keep the workforce engaged as they worked from home, away from their peers. As business generally ebbed during the early phase of the Covid crisis setting in, learning and development (L&D) activities provided the much-needed fillip to keep workforces gainfully employed. CHROs highlighted that the number of requests for leadership development have increased on account of businesses wanting to re-skill and repurpose their teams and build newer capabilities around emerging themes such as wellness, empathy, diversity, digital, anticipation, etc. Organizations have also significantly increased their coaching interventions. "In lieu of our senior leader program that we called off last year, we have invested in executive coaching, especially helping executives deal with transition and change," commented a leader.

More openness to virtual learning. "For the first time, we have a chance to go wide and deep with our leadership development initiatives, thanks to people being more accepting of online development," shared an HR leader. Never before have people been so embracing of online leadership development as they have been since Covid brought all face-to-face leadership development activity to a halt. "Leaders don't feel cheated anymore if they are nominated for online programs," shared an ex-chief learning officer (CLO) of a large telecom company. "Within the same budgets, organizations can get a lot more leaders through the programs offered by reputed partners and business schools," she added. While in pre-crisis times, virtual development was not very popular, during crisis and ensuing lockdowns, organizations had no other choice. "We did not have any pushback to virtual leadership development because we had no other option," shared a leader at an insurance company. She elaborated that since insurance is sold through agents and they could not step out during lockdown, all business came to a grinding halt for a brief period. The organization therefore had to turn online-friendly despite discomfort.

So, when the L&D team came up with online learning programs, business leaders were not surprised.

Active budget reallocation. Since virtual programs have no associated costs such as travel, stay and venue booking, only a few organizations fully utilized their leadership development budgets in 2020. Organizations that were severely hit withheld development budgets, while most routed those to other related initiatives. "We no longer have to worry about logistics-related costs around physical programs, so we can scale up our leadership development, which is mainly virtual," shared a CLO at an Asia-headquartered technology company. "We also put aside some dollars for employee engagement initiatives." Other organizations spent money on buying better collaboration, learning technology and content for leadership development.

Compromised impact. "Ninety-five percent of our development is delivered online, the number of people benefiting has increased, but training hours have dropped, and while people are attending programs, I can't say convincingly they are engaged," shared a CHRO rather disappointedly. While there have been scaling benefits using online or blended learning modes, leadership development impact in most organizations has been somewhat compromised. "While, from an organization standpoint, rolling out leadership development was more efficient, there was a dip in impact," shared one talent head. She added: "The interpersonal interactions around face-to-face trainings, which are a very critical aspect of peer learning, are missing in the online mode; also, people often fail to see a clear connect between the trainings and their roles." The leader explained that physical interactions build connectedness and trust, and it takes six to seven times the number of virtual interactions to build an equivalent level of trust. Also, since it is tiring and distracting to sit in front of the screen for long hours, virtual programs often spread over an incremental number of days. "You cannot do 8 am to 5 pm virtual sessions; it is just not humanly possible," commented another HR leader. One

chief talent officer at a global multinational corporation (MNC) highlighted that experiential learning comprising rotations, which was a key aspect of their development journey, was non-existent in the past 18 months. "We believe that relocating people in a different environment gives them breadth of perspective, and exposes them to different cultures, human behaviors, businesses and markets; it is a must-have as we develop leaders for senior roles," he explained. Since moving people from country to country was very difficult during the Covid lockdowns, due to travel restrictions, governmental guidance, and visa restrictions, using relocations and rotations as a developmental tool was missing from development journeys. While curating 'virtual pats', namely traditional expatriate roles with the responsibilities of another country or region while being based in the home country, is possible for some functions and roles, it cannot be a universal strategy to put leaders through regional or global experiences. "We have been trying to get a leader in China to go to Vietnam as a country head for the past several months but have consistently failed to make it happen due to travel restrictions and procedural delays," shared a regional CHRO.

Scalability versus Impact Paradox

" Technology has helped us scale up leadership development interventions that were earlier constrained by budget and time. It needs a lot more effort, however, to ensure adequate impact of online programs. "
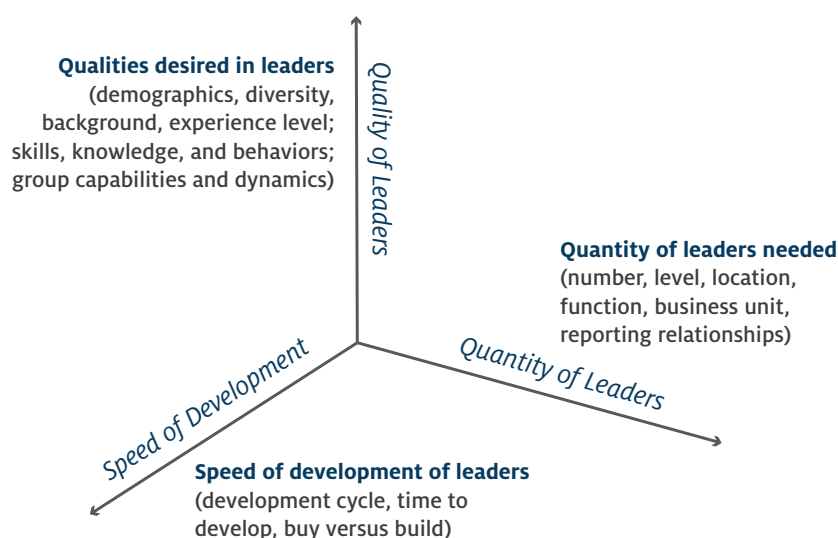
The Third Vector of Leadership Development Strategy

As businesses continue to evolve and pivot during the crisis, business leaders expect leadership development to be more dynamic than ever before. Leadership strategy in organizations has therefore been in the spotlight. The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) defines leadership strategy as a map that aligns investments in leadership development with the strategies, goals, and aspirations of the business. Creating a leadership strategy requires taking a comprehensive approach to identifying both the 'quality', demographics and skills portfolio of individual leaders and collective teams and the 'quantity' of leaders needed across the organization. As Figure 2.1 shows, a leadership strategy makes explicit how many leaders are needed, what kinds are needed, where they're needed and with what skills – both individually and collectively – to achieve the desired outcomes.¹

In addition, businesses also want leaders with newer skills such as agility, empathy, and digital, to survive in the next normal or leverage current business opportunities that the crisis may present. "We are quite used to projecting the volume of leaders various businesses need and their must-have capabilities and qualities to plug in the talent gaps; however, now there is also demand from business to speed up the development process," shared a CHRO of a regional bank. She added: "Our chairman runs leadership development like a business – he invests, and needs to get returns on his investment, and fast." HR leaders shared that since volatility is high, businesses are seeking short-term results, and this sentiment is driving them to push the leadership development function, to develop leaders at a much faster pace.

FIG 2.1   **3 Key Elements of Leadership Development Strategy**

Qualities desired in leaders
(demographics, diversity, background, experience level; skills, knowledge, and behaviors; group capabilities and dynamics)

Quality of Leaders

Quantity of leaders needed
(number, level, location, function, business unit, reporting relationships)

Quantity of Leaders

Speed of Development

Speed of development of leaders
(development cycle, time to develop, buy versus build)

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1. How to Create a Strong Leadership Strategy | CCL

Organizations that are on the growth curve triggered by the pandemic are even more impatient to have leaders who are ready to hit the ground running. "Just understanding the fundamentals of supply chain is good enough as I recruit leaders; there is very little patience to train someone for 2 to 3 years," shared a CHRO in a logistics company. While she acknowledged that wanting leaders who can deliver results quickly may be detrimental to the organization's traditional promote-from-within policy, and may compromise skills development, she added that business just cannot wait as her company is on an aggressive growth path. She explained that her organization aspires to have a much higher market share during the crisis, so leaders have turned from maintenance mode to growth mode. "While watering a plant more will not make it grow faster, the business is looking at us to find a hack around this," she added.

"We are not magicians so we cannot develop leaders quickly, but we can certainly tweak a few things and intensify our efforts," shared a senior L&D leader at a global technology company. She shared an instance when those steering the business asked the learning function to pare down the journey to become a senior leader from nine months to three months. "Business thought nine months is too long," she added. While the learning function squeezed all the theory and knowledge components into three months, the program still had a long tail of coaching and on-the-job projects. "There are trade-offs: while we can complete all the theory component upfront, businesses have to be patient on other learning components that do take time," she explained. "If we fit all the content into three days, leaders may get only 10 per cent of it," she warned.

In order to get the right balance across quantity of leaders, the qualities and skills that leaders must have, and their speed of development, HR must ensure that leadership development aligns along four planes – culture, business, technology and process.

Doing the Impossible

" While watering a plant more will not make it grow faster, the business is looking at us to find a hack around this. "
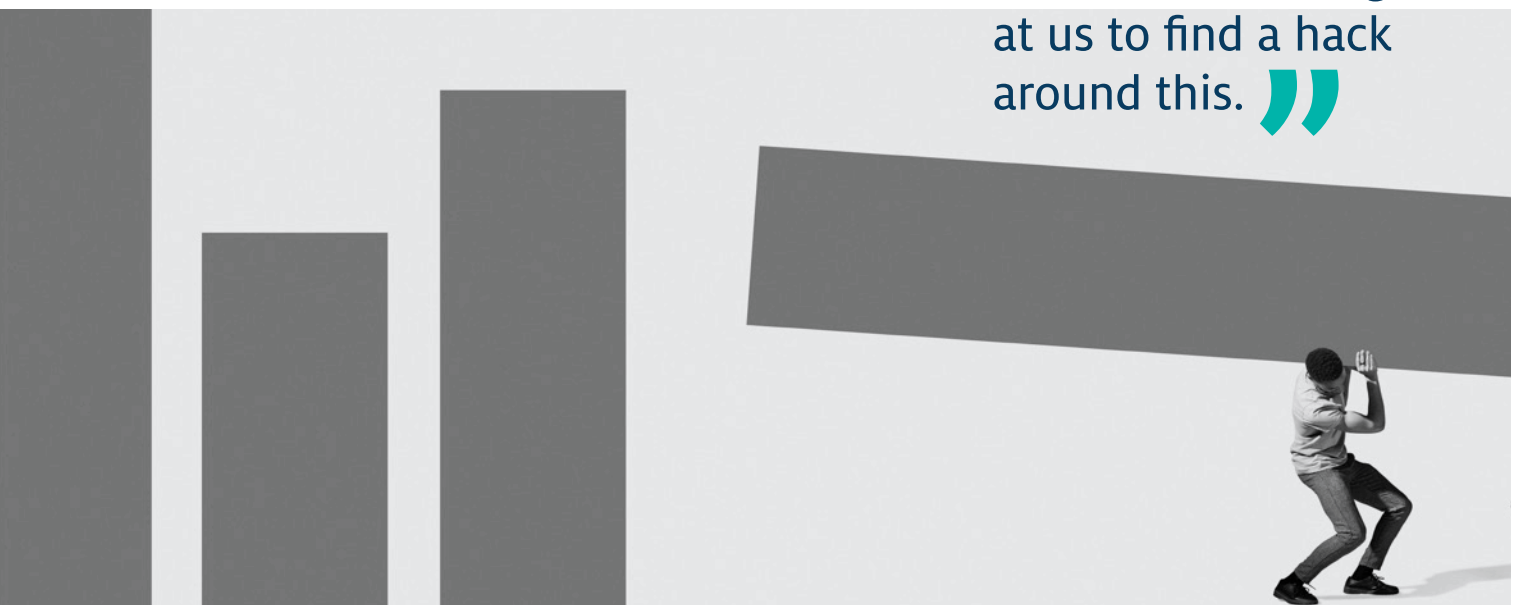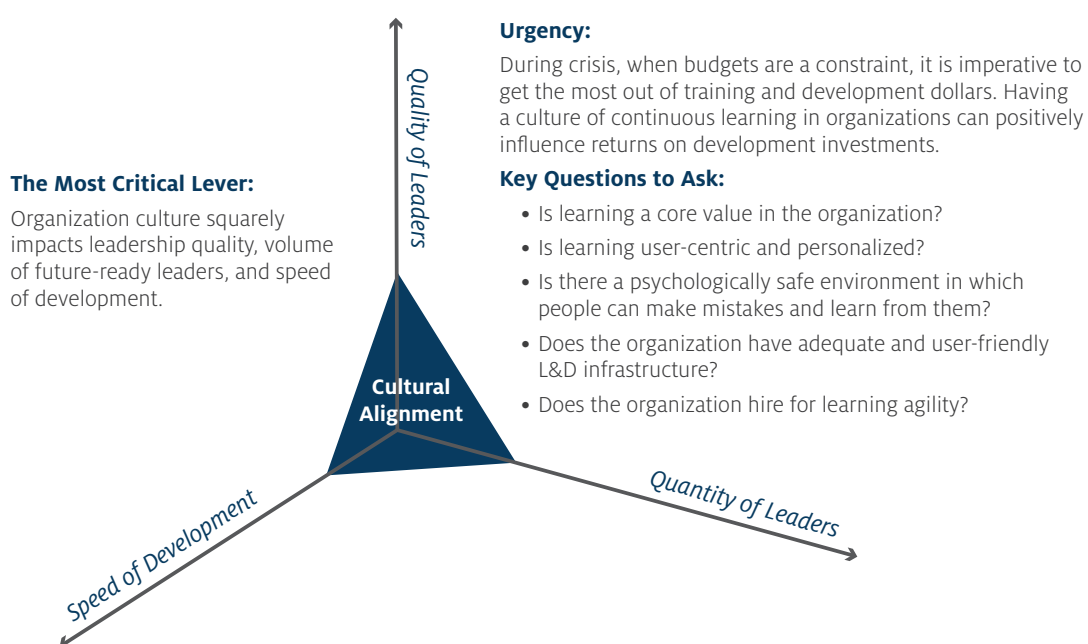
Cultural Alignment: Making Learning the Core

Cultural alignment is at the heart of building a workplace context that encourages employees to develop and learn. More than ever before, organizations must invest in curating a culture of learning to bring focus back on development, as shown in Figure 3.1. This is especially critical where the majority of people are working from home, dealing with multiple distractions and being pulled in different directions; there is the risk that L&D may get lost in the quest to survive or grow exponentially. Also, owing to incremental scrutiny on investments, businesses must see the value in putting resources into learning and leadership development and get a tangible return on that investment (ROI).

The onus lies on business and HR leadership to not let the focus on development get fuzzy during the crisis period. "What makes a difference in the learning culture is pull or push towards learning," shared a CLO of a technology company. He added:

"If you are developing learning programs because HR wants to do so, that is not learning culture; learning culture is about leaders wanting to learn." Another leader clarified that ROI from leadership development interventions has very weak correlation with the amount of budget allocated toward learning. "You could spend 4 per cent of your budget on training and development or clock 60 to 80 learning hours per employee, and yet have no tangible returns," explained the leader. "We believe training and development should be two-way; I [HR] will give [deliver trainings], but you use it properly [for making an impact on business]," explained another CHRO, emphasizing that a continuous learning culture is hard to curate as employees may see development as entitlement, or a reward, or time off from work. Development is an investment, and organizations with a compelling learning culture will see that, rather than viewing it as a privilege or a benefit.

FIG 3.1 **Continuous Learning & Development Culture at the Core**

The Most Critical Lever:
Organization culture squarely impacts leadership quality, volume of future-ready leaders, and speed of development.

Urgency:
During crisis, when budgets are a constraint, it is imperative to get the most out of training and development dollars. Having a culture of continuous learning in organizations can positively influence returns on development investments.

Key Questions to Ask:
- Is learning a core value in the organization?
- Is learning user-centric and personalized?
- Is there a psychologically safe environment in which people can make mistakes and learn from them?
- Does the organization have adequate and user-friendly L&D infrastructure?
- Does the organization hire for learning agility?

Quality of Leaders

Cultural Alignment

Speed of Development

Quantity of Leaders

FIG 3.2 **Elements of Learning Culture**

"Learning culture shows if workers are instilled with a growth mindset, if their willingness to learn and get better at whatever they do increases. People not only want to learn and apply what they've learned to help their organization, they also feel compelled to share their knowledge with others."

"There is a lot of acceptance of failure, and tolerance for mistakes is much higher."

"Learning culture means that I am flexible as an individual; if I say I know everything, then I am not a learner, but if I have 15 years of experience in a field, and then a new idea comes in and I embrace it, that is learning culture."

"I don't see it in terms of activity in learning itself. If there is a mindset around teaching what you have learned or bringing back stuff you know to your co-workers or community, that to me is a good learning culture."

"Learning culture values knowledge and skills acquired and applied in the workplace to get results; It motivates employees to seek out self-directed learning opportunities."

"The organization must not have silos and boundaries to have a culture of learning; good learning culture is collaborative, connected and boundary-spanning."

"The curiosity of the team defines the learning culture; if no one is asking questions and team members come and deliver on the role like robots, that to me is poor leaning culture."

"How can we have a learning culture if people are scared to give or seek feedback or do not trust their colleagues?"

As Figure 3.2 shows, having a continuous learning culture is about having the right mindset: being curious and risk-taking, willing to learn and to teach, open to collaboration and motivated to implement learnings, and able to sieve out learning from all experiences, especially failures. "There is a correlation between culture and innovation; continuous learning culture will make leaders appreciate diverse opinions and willingness to experiment," shared a talent head in a mid-sized services firm.

What can organizations and leaders do, especially during volatile and uncertain times, to curate and continue to nurture a learning culture? Figure 3.3 highlights a few tips or critical actions that organizations can take to develop the right level of learning culture in teams.

Hire for learning agility. A CHRO at a Philippines-based company shared how the demand from businesses is more and more around leaders who are learning agile; agility is even more critical than

core skills that leaders can pick up on the job. As a proxy for learning agility, the company has built what it calls a 'curiosity score' in its hiring process. HR is tasked with screening candidates and assigning each a curiosity score, which it does through questions around previous experiences where candidates picked up new skills. The clear mandate from businesses is: "We want people who are curious about the future and agile to pivot basis opportunities available," elaborated the CHRO.

Build learning in the talent evaluation process. One organization, an Asia-based multi-billion-dollar IT firm, has an 'ideapreneurship' culture that automatically makes L&D a core value. The ideapreneurship culture encourages leaders to go above and beyond customer engagements, even expressing the incremental value added in monetary terms and getting clients to sign off on that. The culture rests on annual evaluation of whatever new capabilities the leaders have learned during the previous year. "What have you learned in the past one year?" or "What can you do now,

that you couldn't a year ago?" is a regular question asked during annual reviews. "Leaders therefore automatically embrace a learning and development culture, often proactively reaching out to HR with requests to facilitate technical and non-technical learning and development," shared the talent director at the company. With the IT industry getting highly competitive during the crisis, and owing to incremental stress on the top line, there is high pressure on leaders to embrace new learnings with more energy.

Incentivize learning. While most or all of L&D has moved online, and there are a lot of modules and courses available for leaders to benefit from,

organizations are still facing challenges when it comes to motivating leaders to sign up for and go through leadership development modules. People are distracted and anxious, and online or virtual programs are spread over longer periods (as compared to face-to-face programs), thereby needing more time and commitment. Organizations have devised simple yet effective ways to reward L&D, ranging from competitions – awarding individual and team points that can be monetized at coffee shops or departmental stores – to regular monthly raffles drawn from the names of those people who completed a threshold number of learning hours.

Make learning more collaborative. A professional services firm has initiated communities-of-practice sponsored by senior leaders; people are encouraged to share their knowledge based on modules they have completed (or, simply, a new thing they have learned), in bi-weekly (once in two weeks) online meetings, thereby helping them solidify key takeaways from virtual L&D programs. In another company, an ASEAN bank, there is a practice of 'Active Saturday Off', wherein the day is meant for reflection, coaching and learning, culminating in a sharing session at the end of the day, where leaders are invited to 'teach' each other their learnings and key takeaways.

Contextualize learning. "Managers must focus on conveying the 'why' of learning during crisis times when the connect between employees and their departments and teams may not be as strong since most people work remotely," shared a learning leader in a large Asia-based company.

By driving the urge to learn and develop new skills, business and HR leaders can help push the mandate of learning culture. HR and learning teams in some organizations are also going the extra mile to personalize learning plans to make them more contextual and learner-centric. A leader at a global technology company explained how the organization is using artificial intelligence to provide in-the-moment learning on new-to-leader challenges, as they contextualize, customize and scale leadership development simultaneously. "If someone has a direct report who went on mental illness leave, for instance, the system is automated to support the leader, who may be facing this situation for the first time, with tools and resources," she shared. "The system tracks triggers or signals around mental illness such as unplanned leave, physical relocation, change of status on social media platforms, etc.; the system may even prompt the leader in advance to be on look-out," she explained.

5 Tips to Improve Cultural Alignment

- ✅ Identify learning as a core value.
- ✅ Hire for curiosity.
- ✅ Reward learning.
- ✅ Encourage knowledge sharing.
- ✅ Curate user-centred learning.

FIG 3.3

Create a psychologically safe environment. For a culture of learning to evolve, employees need to learn how to effectively give and receive feedback. Psychologically safe environments are a must-have for exchange of true and honest feedback. "It is especially critical to create such a safe environment in current times when several organizations have witnessed headcount reductions, and people are generally anxious and concerned about their physical, mental and financial well-being," shared an HR leader at an organization that witnessed a significant headcount reduction due to the ongoing crisis.

Invest in learning infrastructure. Better learning infrastructure helps encourage leaders to embrace individual and team development. A lot of interviewee organizations used budget savings, due to there being lower logistical costs associated with online L&D, to invest in learning technologies, tools, coaching programs, and related infrastructure. While most organizations have invested in collaboration and delivery platforms, and content aggregation offerings, some have gone all the way to buy learning-experience-enhancing platforms.

Better Communication Helps

❝ Managers must focus on conveying the 'why' of learning during crisis times when the connect between employees and their departments and teams may not be as strong since most people work remotely. ❞
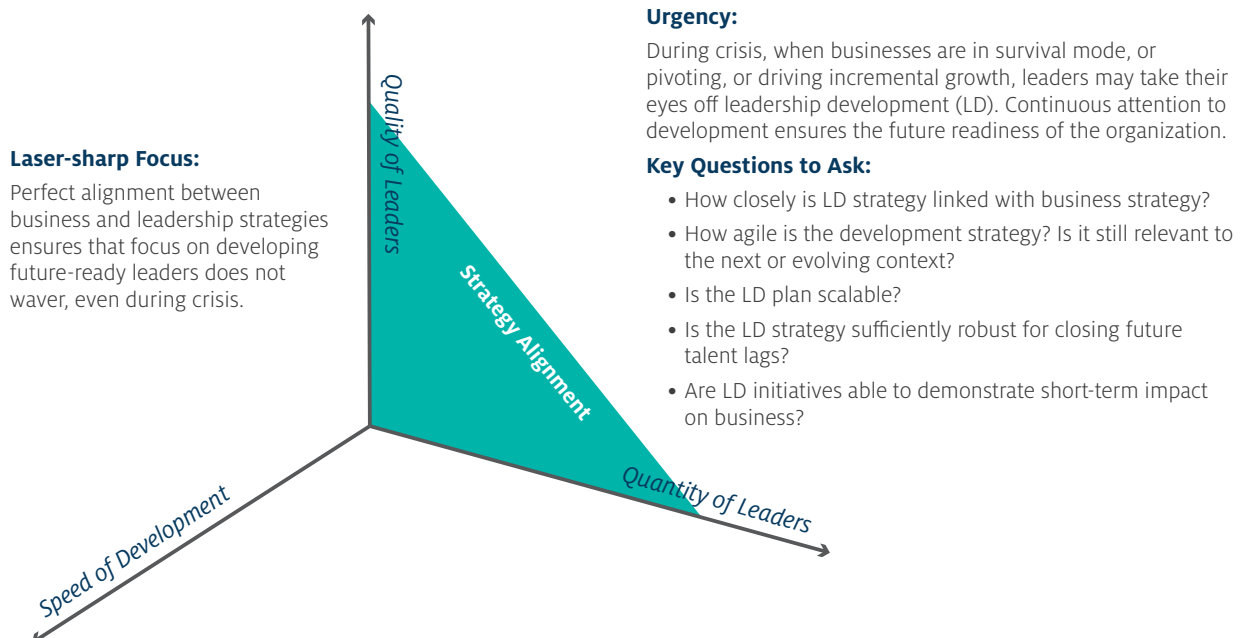
Business Strategy Alignment: It Takes Two to Tango

During a crisis, businesses morph and mutate. Crisis-hit organizations are busy firefighting, while others benefiting from the crisis are climbing steep growth curves. Either way, many assumptions around markets, skills, products and customers are being redefined. Leadership development therefore may not get the business leader mindshare it deserves. Conventional wisdom suggests that organizations should audit the bench strength of their leaders (experience, competencies, knowledge) to evaluate their leadership needs, to fulfil current and future strategic initiatives. However, during a crisis period, there is seldom the luxury of sufficient time for assessing the leadership bench; and the fact that the assessment criteria can often evolve, owing to newer capabilities becoming required, does not help. A senior L&D leader at a global tech company, which has experienced a huge surge in business through the crisis, commented: "A huge portion of our leaders are new leaders, and they are managing businesses which are much bigger than before; they are also stressed due to the business pressure of growing the market." Figure 4.1 highlights questions that HR leaders must ask as they align leadership development with business strategy.

FIG 4.1 **Strategy Alignment to Get the Right Quality & Quantity of Leaders**

Urgency:

During crisis, when businesses are in survival mode, or pivoting, or driving incremental growth, leaders may take their eyes off leadership development (LD). Continuous attention to development ensures the future readiness of the organization.

Key Questions to Ask:

- How closely is LD strategy linked with business strategy?
- How agile is the development strategy? Is it still relevant to the next or evolving context?
- Is the LD plan scalable?
- Is the LD strategy sufficiently robust for closing future talent lags?
- Are LD initiatives able to demonstrate short-term impact on business?

Laser-sharp Focus:

Perfect alignment between business and leadership strategies ensures that focus on developing future-ready leaders does not waver, even during crisis.

3 Tips to Elevate Context in Learning Journeys

- ✓ Encourage learners to bring a **micro-challenge**, and work on it during the learning journey through very specific actions to address the challenge.

- ✓ Unpack the **context and culture connect** and understand what leadership success looks like in the 'changed' culture.

- ✓ Elevate the skill development from **'horizontal'** to **'vertical'**, focusing on developing a sophisticated mindset rather than just adding skills.

FIG 4.2

"Leaders are busy dowsing fires, and they want talent ready as of yesterday with new skills," shared a talent leader.

"It is a tough world out there for L&D folks." Besides, in a lot of organizations there remains a constant scepticism around the efficacy of LD interventions. This is much more the case during crisis times when, in worst-case scenarios, L&D expenses may be 'frowned' upon. A CHRO lamented: "2020 was the worst time to reach out to business heads for L&D budgets, even though businesses wanted leaders to build incremental skills more than ever before". "Leaders are not very convinced about the 'what', 'why' and 'how' of leadership development," added another HR leader.

Progressive leaders, however, realize that leadership development cannot stop. Organizations just need to figure out newer ways to develop leaders. In the past 18 months, most organizations have adopted the online/virtual route to develop leaders as most employees have been working from home. "Learning cannot stop so we needed to train people on how to deal with the changing context, build much-needed skills, and we did that virtually," shared an HR leader rather proudly. "We created a learning strategy closely aligned to the growth strategy; it recognizes the fact that as a multi-speed business, we learn also at multiple speeds," shared another leader at an organization that witnessed rapid growth during the crisis.

So, what do businesses want from LD initiatives to keep pace with strategy? Interviewee CHROs suggested that businesses want newer skills with which to map changing contexts, and development programs that are wide, deep and fast-paced.

Focus on being context-smart rather than behaviorally skilled.

One CLO shared that businesses are increasingly looking for LD around contextual dimensions as against programs structured on behavioral-weighted dimensions alone. "Today, leaders are solving for volatility in context; understanding megatrends and complexity is more important today than ever before," explained the CLO. "Earlier, leaders would have focused on behavior change; today, they focus more on re-strategizing go-to-market." So, HR leaders are gradually witnessing this shift from competency to contextualization. "If we are looking at environmental sustainability, then I'd invest in my leaders getting smarter on circular economy, rather than related softer skills they can very well learn through experiences," he further clarified. While context may be central, unpacking that to understand how it may change the culture of the organization, and what leadership success in the new culture may look like, is critical. Context-centric LD programs do it in multiple ways – encouraging leaders to bring their professional challenge to the program and helping them move the dial on that through the program journey, or focusing on a combination of horizontal and verticle development approaches. While horizontal development is adding skills, verticle development is about improving the sophistication of thinking so that leaders can better deal with the challenges they may face in the new context. Figure 4.2 highlights three tips to make context central in LD journeys.

6 Tips to Bring Teams Along

Successful senior leader interventions and journeys ensure that teams are not left behind...

- ☑ Work on the **Direction-Alignment-Commitment** of the group.
- ☑ Invest in **transition coaching** to help leaders and/or teams move from one state to another.
- ☑ Embrace the **each-one-teach-one** approach to cascade learning to the team level.
- ☑ Encourage senior leaders to lead **mentoring circles**, where each senior leader works closely with six to eight other leaders.
- ☑ Curate **compressed learning journeys** for the team based on leader priorities and inputs.
- ☑ Facilitate **public learning**, town halls, etc. to disseminate key messages to the broader organization.

FIG 4.3

Talk about outcomes, not competencies. A head of HR shared how their business has rapidly moved to outcome-based asks for L&D, rather than competency-based frameworks. "We used to work on building competencies of leaders to demonstrate capabilities in knowledge, skills, and behavior, while in the last two years we have rapidly moved to outcome-based learning, which involves understanding the final desired outcome of the program, and then unpacking it layer by layer to define the outcome of each module and session," she shared. "Lack of patience to develop leaders over many years of leader career is the key driver," she added. Some interviewees also pointed out that L&D teams are facing more pushback than before as they seek budgets for expanding their LD programs. "L&D is not the middle and center of the key priorities business leaders may have; often, this is not because they do not know how powerful L&D can be, but due to a failure of L&D initiatives to show tangible outcomes or business results," elaborated a leader, highlighting that HR and business need to collaborate closely to ensure that development initiatives lead to successful and desired outcomes. Focus on outcomes often starts with investing adequate time in in discovering 'the problem behind the problem' as LD journeys are curated. This may involve running a diagnostic, or engaging in leader conversations to identify challenges that the development journey must address. In addition, investing efforts in measuring the impact of development journeys and tying those back with the outcomes assumes importance.

Show business metrics. Another HR leader pointed out that business leaders want better and more business-relevant metrics to enable them to evaluate the efficacy of LD initiatives. "Metrics such as pre- and post-program surveys are not convincing enough," stated a leader. Most progressive organizations ensure that LD programs are geared to solve a particular business problem through talent development; they measure the efficacy of the program by how much the envelope moves towards solving the business problem the program set out to address. A talent leader in a global IT company shared that they have a practice of asking leaders what skills they want on their teams' CVs two years from now and use that as the basis of the business evolution in those departments. HR teams then go back and design programs to build the aspired-to skills; they use the 70-20-10 approach to ensure that leaders are good enough on those aspired-to skills to include them in their CVs in two years. "Because we are solving for something aspirational, yet measured in a tangible manner, it seems more compelling to business," commented the talent leader.

Shift the focus to team development. In order to scale development, businesses are increasingly seeking team development (as against purely individual leader development), or extending individual LD to impact broader teams. Figure 4.3 highlights six tips for aligning leader journeys with appropriate experiences for the team to create a common language of leadership. A CLO at a technology company shared how they have integrated individual and team development. While historically the company has been driving individual development, it has lately begun to shift its focus towards development of teams, and that is driven by the realization, especially during the crisis, that great work happens due to great

teams, not superstars. "Especially now in a Covid environment as people work remotely, the team, their support, and capability development for them is even more important," shared the CLO. The company has a program for its senior-most leaders, but as they put these leaders through individual development journeys to build their capabilities for the future, they do not want to leave their teams behind. They have therefore curated a team journey that follows and aligns with the leader journey. It happens at the tail-end of leader workshops; the team journey is integrated with leaders' action learning projects. "You learn about team habits in the workshop, continue the dialogue in coaching sessions and get to understand where your team is, and then you prepare for a 'team sprint' with the coach," explained the CLO. "Each team workshop is up to four hours, followed by a coaching conversation, and then in the following four to six weeks the plan is to drive team action," he elaborated.

CCL research shows that for leadership to happen within a team, work-group, task force, division, department, community or entire organization, three conditions must be met:

- Direction: Agreement on what the collective is trying to achieve together.

- Alignment: Effective coordination and integration of the different aspects of the work so that it fits together in

service of the shared direction.

- Commitment: People who are making the success of the collective (not just their individual success) a personal priority.

Teach how to lead in a hybrid environment. Businesses also want to drive capabilities in hybrid leadership, or leading in a hybrid world, because, for most organizations, partial work-from-home (WFH) may continue post-Covid. Key challenges that leaders are likely to face in the hybrid world are likely to be around lack of trust, inclusiveness, and adequate feedback, which may lead to frequent conflict and a dip in employee motivation. So, business leaders are asking what they need to do to thrive in a partial WFH model. "We have tweaked several of our development programs to include a module on 'leadership in a hybrid world', particularly focusing on growth mindset, empathy, trust, and working across silos," shared a leader.

To be successful in a hybrid world, leaders must learn to think differently – have a growth mindset that also spans boundaries, and embrace 'virtuality' (approach remote and distributed work with intention around connection and engagement, viewing it as a new norm); polish skills such as learning agility, trust and resilience; and take specific actions to manage polarities, drive inclusiveness and embrace vertical development (see Figure 4.4).

Leading in a Hybrid Environment

To lead effectively in a hybrid environment, leaders must inculcate new...

- ☑ *Mindsets* – Growth, virtuality, boundary spanning

- ☑ *Skills* – Learning agility, trust, resilience

- ☑ *Actions* – Manage polarities, drive inclusiveness, embrace vertical development
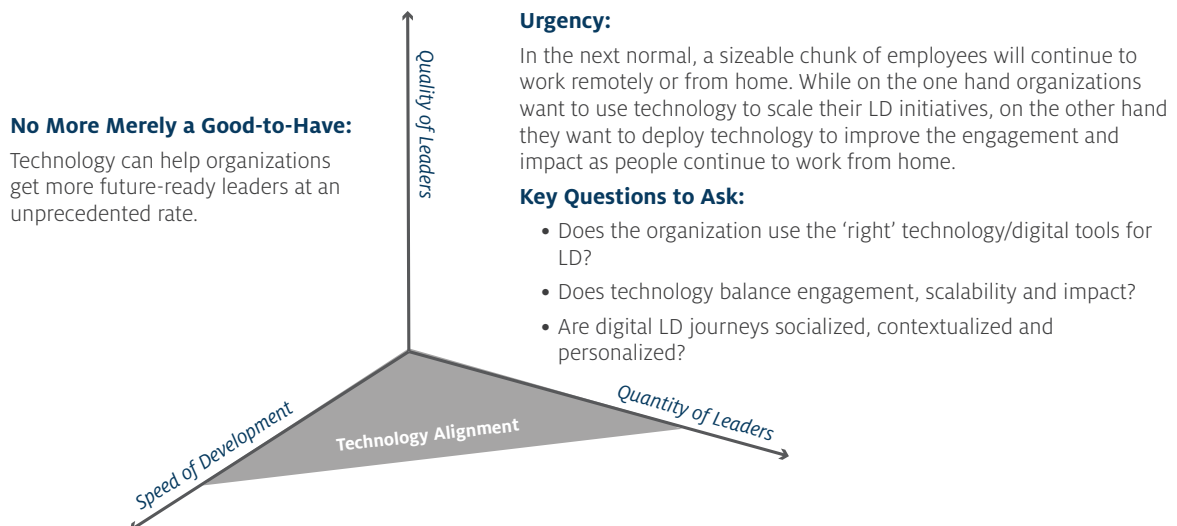
FIG 4.4

In particular, interviewee leaders suggested four actions that HR must take to deliver 'realistic' results during the current crisis. One, be sure, more than before, to be a part of the strategic meetings in order to align talent development with business needs. "HR must fully understand what the business wants as it navigates through the current crisis," shared a leader. Two, HR must make business realize that L&D cannot solve everything, especially wrong hiring decisions, as businesses hire in haste to get incremental skills for the 'next normal'. Three, HR must not stress about closing today's talent lag immediately. "If we buckle under pressure and focus too much on today, we will create a lag for future readiness, and we may end up always playing catch-up," warned an HR leader. L&D teams must look forward, past the horizon, and build for the future, while empowering and supporting the business to close the 'lag of today'. And four, L&D must refine its partnership with business leaders by establishing a formal or informal governance structure that enables both groups to share responsibility for defining, prioritizing, curating and funding LD programs.

Technology Alignment: Form Must Follow Function

When the Covid crisis hit, and as the world started to go into lockdown, organizations scrambled to get their virtual learning systems in place. As WFH was adopted by almost all companies, making remote working the new norm, organizations did not have any option. This almost-overnight shift to the virtual world resulted in virtual classrooms being used for upskilling and LD. Leaders pointed out several advantages of virtual learning, including learners being able to access their courses anywhere or anytime, flexible learning plans, and in-the-moment feedbacks and assessments. Technology invariably became key as organizations rushed to continue operations in the virtual world. Technology became the backbone of LD initiatives. Figure 5.1 indicates questions that leaders must reflect on as they plan LD–technology alignment.

FIG 5.1 **Developing Leadership at Scale through Technology Alignment**

Urgency:

In the next normal, a sizeable chunk of employees will continue to work remotely or from home. While on the one hand organizations want to use technology to scale their LD initiatives, on the other hand they want to deploy technology to improve the engagement and impact as people continue to work from home.

No More Merely a Good-to-Have:

Technology can help organizations get more future-ready leaders at an unprecedented rate.

Key Questions to Ask:

- Does the organization use the 'right' technology/digital tools for LD?
- Does technology balance engagement, scalability and impact?
- Are digital LD journeys socialized, contextualized and personalized?

Quality of Leaders

Speed of Development

Technology Alignment

Quantity of Leaders

Technology is the backbone of LD. HR leaders must ensure that they have either the appropriate learning technologies in place or a roadmap for acquiring such technologies. The reality is that while the majority of organizations will eventually embrace a partial work-from-office model as the Covid situation settles down, there will be a sizeable remote working population. Since in-person programs may be a rarity in the short-term future, virtual L&D will be critical. While most leaders interviewed shared that their 'learning toolkit' included a basic learning management system (LMS) and collaboration and video conferencing platforms, they are still in the process of evaluating what else to invest in on the technology front. "There are so many technology options that vendors are trying to push, sometimes it is very confusing to differentiate between technology needs and technology wants," shared an HR leader. A leader in a tech company warned of 'technology fatigue' as organizations lean more on it. She shared that while virtual program sign-ups were at an all-time high in early 2020, since the start of 2021 the organization has been witnessing a much slower uptake. While technology is the backbone of LD in organizations, HR must figure out how much technology is 'too much'. "We thought virtual or online programs would be a short-term quick-fix till the lockdown ended and the world got back to normal," mentioned a CLO, talking about early 2020. As organizations realized that it was shaping up to be a

long-term journey, they also felt the urge to keep innovating learning experiences through technology. "A few months into the lockdown we could sense Zoom-fatigue; I could see attendees signing out during programs," shared another leader. Replicating in-person programs online, moved to e-learning, virtual instructor-led, and finally to collaborative online learning. "I think it is a breadth and depth issue; virtual learning technology is good for breadth, but collaborative online learning goes a step further," pointed out yet another leader, highlighting the evolution of digital learning.

Guard against a 'Netflix' approach to LD "What I have noticed is that, for the past two years, consultants have been trying to sell a 'Netflix' approach to learning," shared a CHRO referring to vendors selling leadership content platforms positioning them as a silver bullet response to lack of in-person development. "I may be happy to spend 40 minutes at home on Netflix, surfing channels, but at work, if I have 40 minutes, I should be able to access something meaningful that helps me do my job better," she explained. "I also find some companies trying to 'recreate Google' or an online university, mainly a trend towards heavy duty curation." Interviewee CHROs opined that the need of the hour is to drive more contextual learning at scale using technology, and to develop processes to tie learning back with talent management processes. "We developed curator groups to sieve through all the content platforms and align relevant content by roles," shared an HR leader as she talked about their approach to driving structured development internally. She cautioned that deep transformational learning may be hard to drive if leaders are given a completely free hand in curating their development journey. "We put several thousand digital assets on the site and created a compelling taxonomy to help organize the content; we further junked a lot of obsolete content and curated the rest by functions, levels and roles," she explained. "We busted the myth that more content equals more learning." A semi-structured approach may suit most organizations as they think through LD in the new world, with specific modules mapped to leader level and role,

content aligned with leader needs, and assessment based on diagnostics and other measures. This should be alongside leaders being given the option to upskill/reskill based on their interests.

There is no standard learning technology hack. The learning technology architecture and complexity vary by organization, depending on industry, learning culture, learning needs and LD strategy. Conventional wisdom suggests that an LMS is a bare minimum for all organizations, almost a learning technology 'hygiene' in enterprises, and over that, organizations must build stacks of other technologies such as content creators/aggregators, all the way to learning-experience platforms (LXPs). However, there is no 'right answer'. "Form follows the function in terms of learning technologies," commented a CLO. One young technology company shared that they do not even need an LMS in place, while another telecom company explained why they needed an LXP to drive an 'intelligent' learning system. "We wanted a platform that could host varieties of online content, offer a great learner experience, and be easily accessible by all the employees across the globe, while also using artificial intelligence to curate learning journeys for our employees," shared a leader on why they decided to adopt a full stack LXP. An LMS has been the standard tool used in training for years already, while LXPs are becoming more and more popular as 'next generation LMSs' that not only administer and host courses but also provide a learner-centric approach to development.

Think collaborative online learning. "While video-conferencing solutions are not driving engagement or learning impact, a self-directed learning journey through LXP may not result in deep learning," commented an experienced thought leader. He pointed out that collaborative online learning technologies will be the future of learning, since they enable rollout of LD programs, scaling of onboarding, sales team training, etc. Such tools create engaging and effective experiences since users connect with and learn from peers, managers and mentors, through purposeful practice and application, coaching and mentorship, and group collaboration.
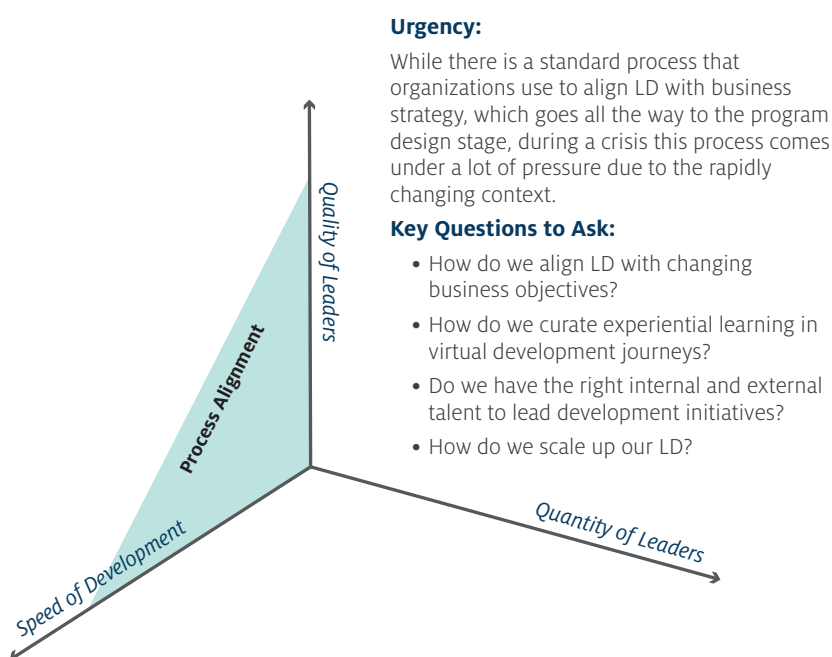
Process Alignment: Maximize Bang for the Buck

"Leadership development is not entertainment, and it won't happen just because you have infrastructure and content readily available," commented a tenured HR leader in a global MNC. Leaders must be deliberate in aligning programs and interventions with the learning processes within a company, right from aligning with business objectives, all the way to measuring the impact of development initiatives. Figure 6.1 highlights questions that leaders must reflect on as they align LD with internal L&D processes.

Here are the internal LD process steps and how organizations need to view them differently.

FIG 6.1 **Drive Quality & Speed of Development through Process Alignment**

Urgency:
While there is a standard process that organizations use to align LD with business strategy, which goes all the way to the program design stage, during a crisis this process comes under a lot of pressure due to the rapidly changing context.

Key Questions to Ask:
- How do we align LD with changing business objectives?
- How do we curate experiential learning in virtual development journeys?
- Do we have the right internal and external talent to lead development initiatives?
- How do we scale up our LD?

Quality of Leaders
Process Alignment
Speed of Development
Quantity of Leaders

Identify moving goalposts. During times of crisis, organizations may pivot, or scale up or scale down certain businesses, or simply go on a growth overdrive to leverage the changing context. LD initiatives must be informed and cognizant of the constantly moving pieces and changes to the business objectives. These may range from increasing revenue or productivity, to maintaining customer experience or organizational culture. "I had to have a seat at the business table to understand what my organization 2.0 will look like; I just cannot continue on the leadership development agenda that we had pre-Covid since the world-view has changed and so has our business strategy," highlighted a CLO. As businesses morph, it is also crucial that L&D leaders question earlier assumptions and traditional ways. Figure 6.2 highlights actions that leaders can take as they align LD with internal L&D

processes. A learning leader shared that her team has adopted a practice of looking at all programs with three lenses – business case, format, and interactivity. She explained: "We scrutinize each training to evaluate if it is even necessary or are we doing it for legacy reasons; rather than converting all face-to-face programs to virtual instructor-led, we are looking at the e-learning option, especially for programs that are not practical content heavy; we are focusing on curating the connection and camaraderie element in all virtual programs."

Define what success will look like. Leaders must define what needs to happen on both the business front and the talent front in order to achieve their business objectives. For instance, if customer centricity is an objective, then repeat business and reduced

complaints may be good indicators of success. "Remember we are getting into the new, volatile world, so what would normally be looked at once every few years must be evaluated and tweaked, if necessary, on a six-monthly basis," explained a leader highlighting that business objectives and success criteria may evolve in current times, and leaders must appreciate that.

Shortlist roles and competencies to be evaluated. The fairly standard task of identifying roles, knowledge and capabilities that will help the organization be successful may become quite complex in crisis times, since some roles may disappear, and some new ones may be introduced, and some new-to-L&D-function skills may become necessary. "Several roles have changed, and some new roles have been created; also, some skills that we never worried about in the past are must-have today," shared a leader about how dynamic the critical roles identification criteria can be.

Set and communicate LD goals. HR leaders must then quickly identify key skill gap areas that may stall the current and future success of the organizations, focusing on those specific roles and capabilities that are most often evolving. "We must constantly assess where we are on the new skills the business wants, and where we must be; it is a constant struggle to buy and develop qualities that the business wants in order to be future ready," shared an HR leader. Also, leaders must clearly communicate the importance of achieving these learning objectives, and how their achievement will enable employees to make a meaningful contribution to business strategy. Interviewees reiterated that sharing the 'why' of learning objectives always helps get internal leader buy-in.

Design and develop LD journeys for the new context. "A lot has changed in the past 18 months on what compelling program designs look like, what qualities ace facilitators must have, how long the programs can be due to the WFH digital mode, and how to make programs interactive online," commented an HR leader on how some fundamental assumptions on program design have changed due to the Covid crisis. "The hybrid model of learning is what is emerging as a winner in impact terms," shared one leader. At a high level, hybrid learning involves synchronous lessons taught simultaneously through multiple modes – in-person and online. It is a version of blended learning that bridges physical and virtual learning spaces. "We have successfully replaced our senior leadership programs with online video-based coaching with tremendous success; with coaches anywhere in the world accessible via online, we could negotiate good contracts," said another. "From a content perspective, we have seen some success with bite-sized, in-the-moment leadership development," shared yet another leader. CCL's prepare-engage-apply model – a powerful way to make learning stick, by priming leaders for learning, then engaging them in an instructor-led session, and finally giving them tools to continue the development journey beyond the classroom – is one such framework for leadership programs, both physical and virtual. Interviewees mentioned several principles that learning departments must keep in mind while curating a compelling live-online program, namely duration (usually, not more than two hours per day), interactivity, collaboration, media diversity, content volume, technology/tools, etc.

Identify LD talent. CCL research indicates that progressive organizations must identify an external partner to help them along the way as they reset LD to suit the future agenda. They must further engage the 'right' internal team to champion their LD agenda.

5 Tips for Better Process Alignment

- ✓ Identify moving goalposts on strategic objectives.
- ✓ Define what success may look like in the next normal.
- ✓ Design virtual programs from the ground up.
- ✓ Identify internal and external LD talent.
- ✓ Measure impact in business terms.

FIG 6.2

Scale up development initiatives. "Now is the opportunity to scale up leadership development, thanks to the digital learning mode," pointed out a leader highlighting the opportunity that technology has presented for creating a common leadership language in an organization, across regions, levels, geographies and time zones. Several factors have helped organizations scale up in crisis times and beyond, technology being the biggest of them all. Savings due to absence of logistics and related costs for in-person programs have also resulted in those budgets being spent on nominating more leaders for digital programs. "We are collaborating with a top-notch business school, and it isn't cheap; however, now with online being a tad more affordable, I am able to get a lot more leaders through their programs," commented another leader. Due to the downtime owing to business slowdown, one company got a lot of its top leaders certified as internal coaches and trainers, through the train-the-trainer programs of its learning partner. "We have taken our leaders-teaching-leaders initiative to the next level during Covid," she added. Another organization, a global MNC, which historically deployed global rotations to develop leaders for key roles, has started what it calls 'virtual visits', where the organization replicates rotations in four day online business visits in a particular market, having meetings with the country leadership on strategic review and with thought leaders on the regional and country economic landscape and future. The approach, while it cannot exactly match in-person experience, is quite scalable.

Measure impact creatively. Accurate measurement of LD is not simple; the majority of organizations interviewed still rely on traditional impact metrics such as learning-program satisfaction and completion scores. Exemplar enterprises, however, are focusing on outcomes-based metrics such as impact on individual and business performance. "The purse-strings for development budgets have tightened over the past year; businesses want to be convinced that they are getting the ROI on what they are spending," shared a leader, elaborating that while businesses are wanting more evidence of the benefits of development initiatives, L&D teams are still trying to figure out the best way to measure the impact of online LD, often beyond standard participation rates. One organization measures the impact on corporate culture, while another measures the impact on engagement scores. Yet another organization evaluates innovation and new idea incubation activity as a measure of the efficacy of LD initiatives. Overall, nothing much has changed on the metrics front since the onset of virtual learning initiatives. Some organizations pointed out that, in addition to the usual outcome-based metrics, they are also tracking the efficacy of the online delivery format and platform, and the level of interactivity.

Tough Going for L&D

> " The purse-strings for development budgets have tightened over the past year; businesses want to be convinced that they are getting the ROI on what they are spending. "

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What Does the Crystal Ball Tell Us?

If the world had a magic crystal ball, what would that say about how leadership development will evolve over the next few years?

Organizations will continue to invest in people. The learning model may change, the tools may be different, the mix of in-person and virtual development may readjust, the underlying skills may evolve, but the investment will continue. "Since the onset of Covid-induced lockdown, we have gone from 20 to 100 per cent digital. Now we are back to 10 per cent face-to-face. It is not yet stabilized, but I doubt we will ever go back to 80 per cent face-to-face leadership development," shared a leader about the LD journey her organization has witnessed over the past 18 months.

"The way to make better leadership happen is to have a blended model; we cannot go to 100 per cent in-person programs or 100 per cent online," shared another leader. The future of LD will center on a blended learning mode. "If people have to travel for every module, then there is a lot of disruption, and, in hindsight, a lot of unnecessary dollar investment, so I am pretty sure we will settle somewhere in the middle, and that middle is the blended learning model," she elaborated. "The pendulum has swung to one extreme in terms of virtual development," she added. "I am sure we will stay on the side of virtual learning, and it will only increase as technology improves, but for senior-level leadership development, we need to swing the pendulum back just a little bit to do some in-person programs."

FIG 7.1 **Scaling Leadership Development While Riding the Covid Wave**
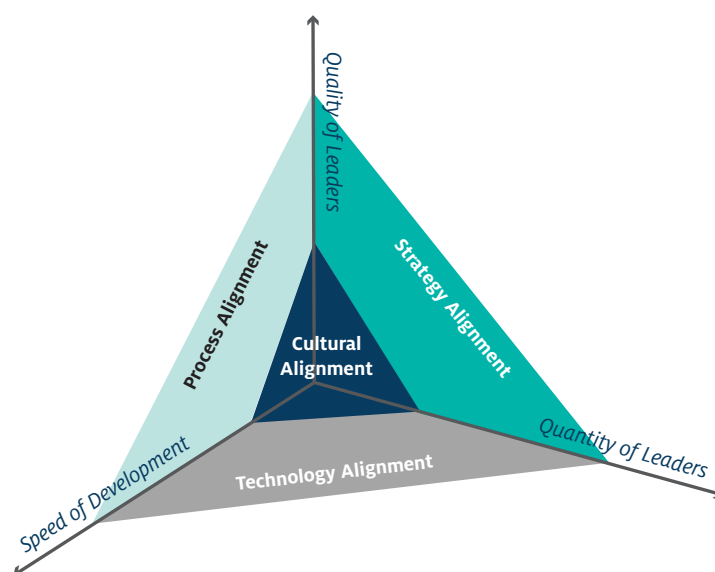
Following the 70-20-10 model of learning, lessons of experience will continue to play a central role in LD. Some aspects of experience-based learning, such as owning projects and initiatives, will be more prevalent as compared to cross-country and regional rotations. Some organizations are experimenting with 'virtual pats.' "In the earlier world, we had people who would rotate to LATAM, EU, US, to learn global leadership; we have now pivoted to virtual expat assignments," explained an HR leader. "Someone sitting in China is now managing a team in Brazil, doing work out of China." The initiative, though still in the pilot stage, has already expanded the available global talent pool in the company.

One thing is for certain: the ask from L&D teams and of LD initiatives will only increase. Businesses may squeeze budgets, but they will continue to ask for leaders with future-ready skills, a higher volume of future-ready leaders who can hit the ground running quickly. 'Better' leaders, 'more' leaders and 'quick' development will be the agenda that L&D teams will continue to strive to accomplish in the future. L&D teams must therefore align with business strategy, available technology and a myriad LD processes to have even a chance of fulfilling this seemingly impossible task (see Figure 7.1). "What has not changed is that to transform leaders, we need to sprinkle them with leadership content; now, thanks to digital, we have a 'water hose' so we can sprinkle more," shared a leader as she reflected on the leadership quality versus development speed paradox. "We all need to understand that while L&D teams will continue to strive to develop better-quality leaders fast, you cannot force the plant to grow faster just because you are sprinkling more water," she summed up.

READY TO TAKE THE NEXT STEP?

Now more than ever, leadership never stops, and leadership development cannot wait.

It is tough for organizations to define their leadership strategy while navigating this ever-changing, unpredictable time. However, the risk of waiting is not something that many organizations can bear.

So, how do organizations take the next step? It is not as simple as charging ahead with one model. However, with the enhanced technology capabilities that are available, we can now scale Leadership Development to suit leaders we are aiming to support and nurture.

In fact, we now have the capabilities to truly develop leaders across all levels.

To learn more about building leadership capacity in your organization, visit **ccl.org/leadership-solutions** or email us at **ccl.apac@ccl.org**.

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