RESHAPING LEADERS FOR THE WORKPLACE OF THE FUTURE

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT TRENDS 2021 & BEYOND

StratX ExL

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

LEADERSHIP | COMMERCIAL STRATEGY | INNOVATION

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INTRODUCTION

The world health crisis has fundamentally changed our lives. We are facing a business environment that has become even more volatile. Organizations are looking for better ways to prepare current and future leaders to stay agile and relevant and engage stakeholders by building trust and value. Our "new normal" has certainly a mass of oncoming threats and obstacles but on the brighter side has a lot of opportunities to capitalize on as well.

To be able to help businesses come to grips with the new challenges, we have identified the biggest trends that will impact leadership and consequently, leadership development programs over the coming years.

This white paper covers the following trends in detail and explores how StratX ExL can help and partner with companies to better address these key points.

The Top Leadership Development Trends:
1. From Remote to Hybrid Work Model as "New Usual"
2. Shifting to Flatter Organizational Structures
3. Upskilling & Reskilling Self & Others
4. Increased Focus on Diversity, Equality & Inclusion
5. The Right Blend of Hard & Soft Skills
6. Critical Role of L&D
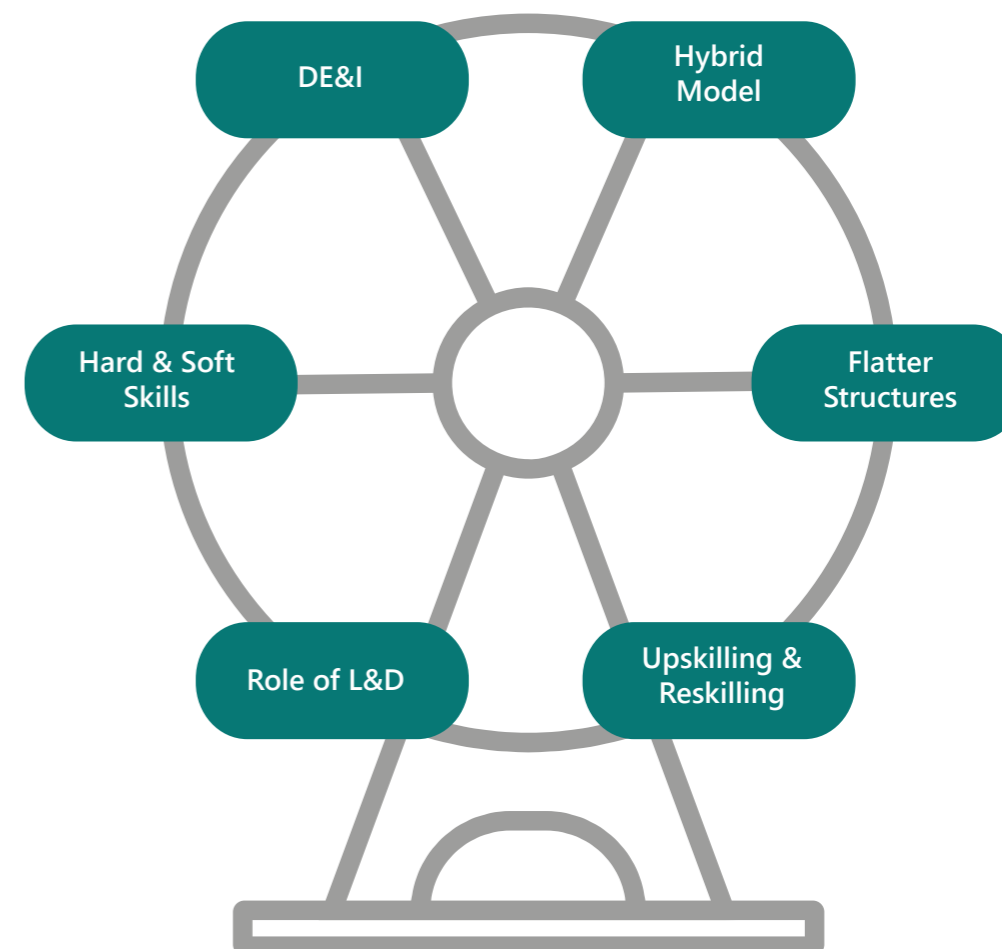
FROM REMOTE TO HYBRID WORK MODEL AS "NEW USUAL"

When the pandemic struck in 2020, leaders and their teams had to reorganize abruptly to welcome a new way of working; that is away from office desks and within one's home sweet home. By 2021, trends have shifted to a more hybrid model, bringing the best of both worlds. But, more challenges are to be expected as businesses will have to accept hybrid as being the norm and not just an easy interim solution. Is it remote-first, office-sometimes or the other way around? Should hybrid working culture be part of the leadership team's priority plans?

Where's the Boss

If the plan is to go hybrid, it should be across the board for a new and real culture to come about. Leaders must plan, establish and communicate the ideal set up early on with clear expectations and best practice that speaks for all. As Hailey Griffis, co-host of MakeWorkWork podcast, puts it,

> **«A big part of successfully running a hybrid model is determined by where the leadership team spends their time.»**

This means that leaders should equally embrace the same hybrid culture and not choose or create another one that they feel most comfortable with. Consistency is key. This will help avoid pitfalls such as inequalities around recognition, barriers to inclusion and unconscious biases.

What's the Pull Factor

Once the new culture is on the agenda, leaders should find ways to reimagine the hybrid workspace to ensure a positive, experience for everyone, no matter where people are. What holds teams together, motivates employees, and keeps individuals on the rise? Make the physical space and time in the office an avenue for collaboration, creative process, critical thinking and not just a place to work. Avoid replicating what employees could have done virtually and individually from home. A good recent example was Dropbox when the company made it official that their office space would be intended for team-based projects, with ideation and creation as priority. This approach encourages more social interactions and active engagement among teams during in-person office time. On the other hand, remote days can be dedicated to specific solo tasks and project reflection, with higher individual productivity targets in mind.

People-First

> **The new hybrid world calls for extended flexibility to the company's best resource - its people.**

Could we finally see the days of a true work-life balance? HubSpot, which ranked #4 on Glassdoor's Best Place to Work 2021, has brilliantly shown the value of giving people a real choice with their @office, @home, @flex working options. Leaders should eliminate unnecessary friction tied to where-are-you-today questions. Everyone is responsible and accountable. Focus should veer more towards the quality of interactions while teams are physically together and the brighter opportunities that can be seized beyond four walls.
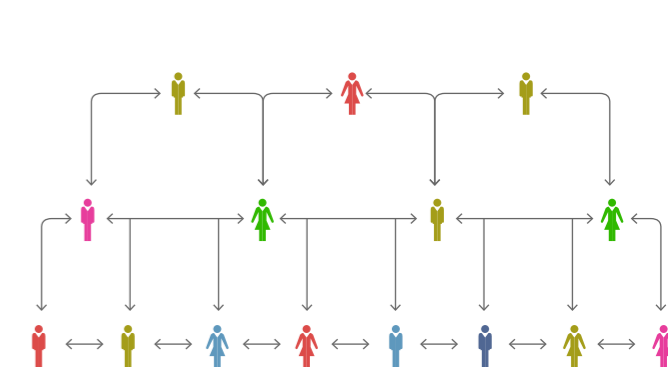
SHIFTING TO FLATTER ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

HIERARCHICAL ORGANIZATION
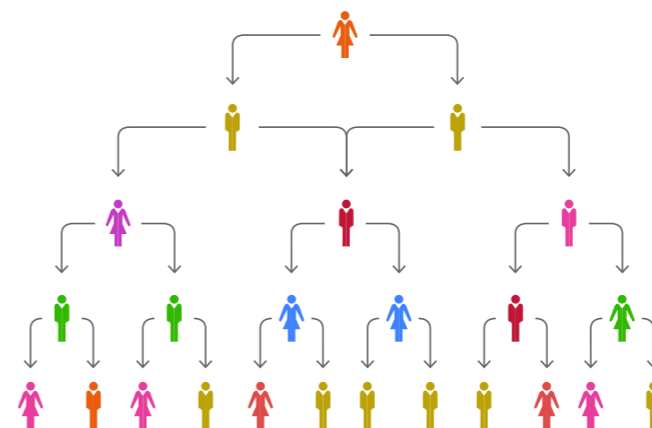
FLATTER ORGANIZATION

More and more organizations are adopting flatter structures as today's business leaders believe this will lead to lower operating costs, improved communication, and increased employee motivation given the changing nature of the workforce and the workplace. Since businesses will have wider spans of control and less centralized authority, expertise and knowledge will be dispersed across a broader base than most leaders managed in the past. Thanks to technological developments, information flows are changing from moving up and down hierarchies neatly along reporting lines, to leaders and their teams freely interacting with one another and outside subject matter experts.

In addition, most organizations are coming to grips with a "VUCA" (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) world where:

> **No one individual can know everything and be able to single-handedly lead their teams and organizations.**

The Changing Face of the Leader

Because of these factors, the image of what a leader is supposed to be is changing. The individual "hero" leader, or "the smartest person in the room" who must know everything and micromanage his or her direct reports is a thing of the past. Flatter structures call for collaborative, agile, well-networked, and cross-functional leaders who can nimbly adjust to complex, ambiguous situations. These new leaders must be able to work with others who have expertise in areas that they do not and are smarter than themselves.

> **The role of a leader is to articulate a compelling vision to align and inspire teams to achieve a common goal.**

To be successful, a leader must be able to listen to their team members, understand their drivers, encourage growth, and relate and coach, as necessary.

UPSKILLING & RESKILLING SELF & OTHERS

The breadth of available information and the speed at which it flows will likely continue to increase over the coming years. Combined with the unstoppable evolution in technology, businesses will need to be prepared to outsmart post-Covid competition.

Continuous learning in the workplace will be necessary to not only stay ahead of competition but to respond to skill gaps needed for the future.

In addition, upskilling and reskilling teams will help organizations to become more agile while also boosting employee productivity and motivation - which will be even more necessary as employees spend more time working from home. But this will need to be driven by the leadership team. Direct reports whose managers constantly tell them they need to develop in certain areas are starting to question why the "leaders" are doing little to visibly develop themselves.

Leaders of the future will need to be self-aware and seek to develop themselves while empowering their people to do the same.

The Self-Aware Leader
Leaders need to become more introspective and mindful, reflecting on how well-equipped they are for the challenges they face and what gaps in knowledge and skills they need to address moving forward, continuously augmenting their own capabilities without being instructed to do so by their own supervisors.

The Empowering Leader
In addition to being held accountable for their own development, leaders must encourage the continuous development of their teams. Consequently, these same leaders must ensure that the resources are available for direct reports to take charge and drive their own development. This will require long-term investments, but these efforts will lead to more engaged, productive, and happier employees.

INCREASED FOCUS ON DIVERSITY, EQUALITY & INCLUSION

Organizations are putting increasing emphasis on the need to work towards greater gender, ethnic and cultural representation within their leadership teams. Companies are doing this not only because it is the right thing to do, but because it is increasingly seen as good business sense. A study by a global consulting group found that:

Companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity are 35% more likely to have better financial returns than their non-diversity and inclusion industry competitors. And, companies in the top quartile for gender diversity are 15% more likely to have improved financial returns.
Diversity Matters, McKinsey

As well as having a positive impact on the financial results of an organization, diversity is widely reported to boost innovation.

Implementing Inclusion
Achieving a more inclusive leadership team requires proactive efforts to not only achieve greater diversity representation among senior positions but to change mindsets in the organization. Organizations will primarily achieve this by implementing the right policies and creating an inclusive environment that is supportive of development. Leadership development programs for high potential candidates from diverse backgrounds, however, will also play a crucial role. Such initiatives can help delegates recognize their own effective leadership behaviors and unique style that may differ from what is considered "normal" in their company. A business project component in an initiative can provide participants with high-visibility opportunities to demonstrate their acumen and suitability for senior and executive positions. Furthermore, such initiatives can also address diversity and inclusion by building awareness and uncovering and addressing unconscious biases in an organization.

THE RIGHT BLEND OF HARD & SOFT SKILLS

The trend for hybrid skills was already in the talks among organizations years before the pandemic. True, the definition might not be as clear-cut then but data-driven companies like Burning Glass Technologies carried out a study in 2015 and before long saw that

focus on:
1. Digital tools and digital technology
2. Analytics and data
3. Business acumen and management
4. Design and creativity

«though technology is an important part, it is not the only driving force..»

As the workplace changes and will continue to do so exponentially, it is the right blend of hard and skills aka the hybrid skill set that is the most important.

The Big Four
In these times of changing routines and continuous uncertainty, leaders of the future require a combination of the right brain and left brain thinking to succeed. Corporate HR expert, Josh Bersin, in the report "The Hybrid Job Economy" identified f our broad skills areas, covering both soft and hard skills, that leaders should

Continuous learning is paramount to get to the ideal blend.

And this doesn't happen overnight. Brenda Nemastil, Microsoft Knowledge & Insights leader, mentioned during a recent Learning Technologies event that the current workforce could and would spend about 24 minutes per week on average on training development – be it personal choice or company-led. A certain minimum should be promoted across the organization and at all levels to instill a true learning culture. Leaders should invest hours to "sharpen the saw", navigate in the unknown, develop their hybrid skills, apply new competencies back to the job, and allow team members to also reskill for present and future disruptions.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF L&D

The new hybrid requires organizations to retool and reboot the workplace. L&D has a crucial role to play in making an effective retrofit of the workforce happen. To ensure a more robust and resilient business at large, new ways of learning are called for. Simply shifting learning environments will no longer make the cut. Our post-Covid reality demands learning experiences that are more human-centered, inclusive, collaborative, and most importantly, create a positive and lasting impact.

Igniting Learner Engagement through Gamification

Digital fatigue, lack of motivation and solitude can easily undermine any (great) development program. However, having the right dose of an immersive, active learning component with clear business objectives can help boost one's level of engagement. Dan Hunter highlights in his book *For the Win: The Power of Gamification and Game Thinking,*

> **«If you can wrap up a process inside some kind of game elements, then people will do the most amazing things.»**

Create a Gamified Community Feel
The pandemic situation has allowed gamification to be adapted quicker as learning teams look for new ways to deliver programs

outside the box. Gamification helps people to interact and acquire skills differently as it taps into human's nature to compete, achieve, and have fun. However, adding a simple "game" factor that is not tied to critical skills gap identification or strategic business goal will not grant desirable results.

One concrete example is the use of business simulations, integrated into leadership journeys to mimic a true-to-life workplace scenario, where leaders can test both business and human skills on crisis and change management, agility, resilience, and diversity, to name a few. Many studies have proven that quicker and more sustainable skills acquisition can be achieved through this method as it considers cognitive and emotional dimensions throughout the learning experience. Infuse collaboration in the process through peer-to-peer learning and team reflections to create a true community feel.

Example of a Learning Journey
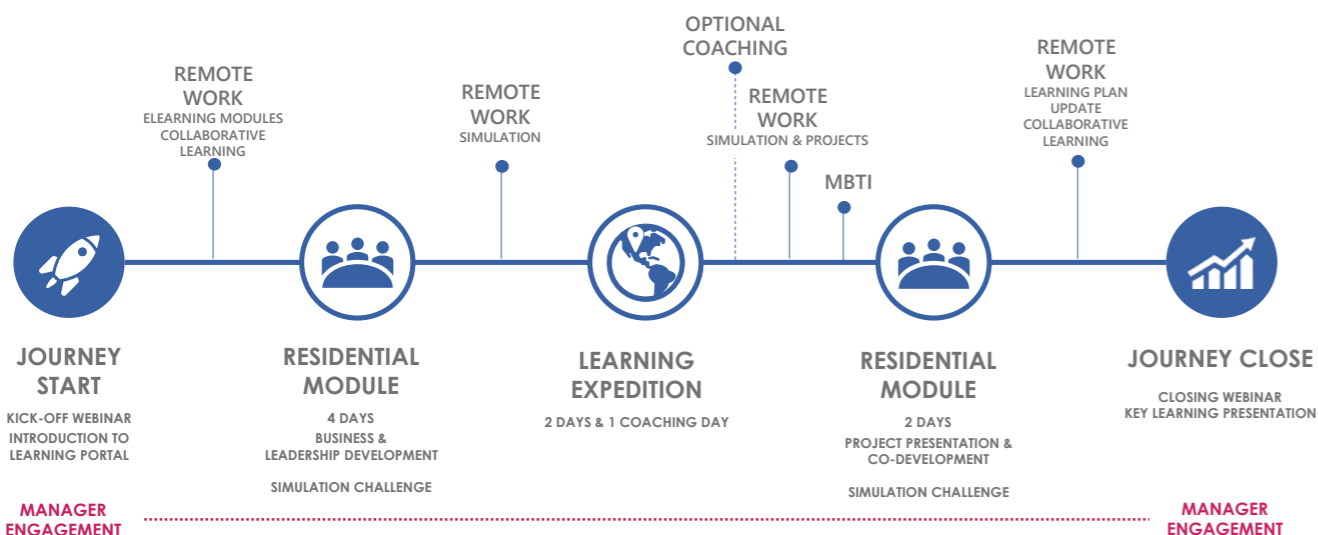
Investing in a True Experiential Approach to Leadership Development

The ways that organizations consume content have fundamentally changed. To ensure effectiveness and ROI, learning teams must double down on providing relevant training themes as well as appropriate formats and methodologies based on new preferences or changed learning styles. A recent survey by Financial Times showed that *«Leadership was the top learning priority identified for executive education, cited as important by 82 per cent of respondents.. In a sign of the issues brought to the fore during the pandemic, the need for training around resilience, well-being and remote or online collaboration were also cited by many.»*

With the core topics and needs in mind, the trend towards experiential learning as the best how-to is seen more and more as it brings major advantages such as :
- ✓ opportunity to reflect in a safe psychological space
- ✓ absence of judgement
- ✓ catalyst for meaningful relationships
- ✓ ownership of one's learning

> **Experiential learning is the ultimate ticket to the future of workplace learning.**

Capitalizing on Experience-Learn-Apply can bring out greater retention, better engagement and commitment and improved organizational performance. And to breed long-term success, repeated application must be everyone's second nature.

Leeds Beckett of Skills for Learning said, *«To learn from our experiences, it is not sufficient just to have them.»* Application is vital.

Experiential Knows No Boundaries
Experiential learning is the present and the future. There is a growing realization that it can be further adapted to various situations, formats and modalities required by the distributed, new world. From classroom to digital and now with the hybrid space, the use of experiential learning remains on a sound and vibrant ground.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Effective leadership is key to driving business success. In an ever-changing business environment, leaders will have to adapt to more uncertain and ambiguous situations by developing relevant skill sets, creating meaningful and collaborative interactions and empowering teams to thrive. Can we be ready for even more "VUCAness"? Continuous learning is an imperative for all. There is a crucial opportunity for L&D teams to strengthen the workplace and shape its future. Quick fixes in learning content and formats might have worked in the past; the new hybrid world requires a more thorough understanding of people – what they want to learn and how they learn best.

StratX ExL works with Fortune 500 clients to empower high-performing teams and co-create solutions to prepare current and future leaders for the challenges of today and tomorrow. As L&D partners, we value and employ our unique Experience-Learn-Apply approach that challenges leadership teams to practice hard and soft skills in a collaborative, realistic, and fun business environment. We create and deliver experiential learning initiatives ranging from short, impactful half-day programs to learning journeys spanning several months to accompany major transformations.

For more information about how we can support your organization, contact us today at stratx-exl.com.

> **FREE CONSULTATION**

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