

# Best and Emerging Practice in Leadership Development

At CATALYST4, we aspire to blend best and emerging practice. Best practice reflects what research confirms has a positive impact on developing leadership, while emerging practice captures the innovation trends (i.e., looking to add additional value but are as yet unproven).

## Best Practice

In 2017, a major review of leadership development programmes was published. It provided a meta-analysis of 335 leadership development studies across 26,573 individual programmes using the global best practice Kirkpatrick Four Levels. This revealed the underlying drivers in leadership development programmes that impact Reaction, Learning, Transfer and Results (Lacerenza, C. N., Reyes, D. L., Marlow, S. L., Joseph, D. L., & Salas, E. (2017). Leadership training design, delivery, and implementation: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 102(12), 1686-1718).

This research confirmed that well-designed and well-delivered leadership development programmes are substantially more effective than previously thought (and more effective than popular press articles suggest). Leadership programmes lead to improvements in all four Kirkpatrick levels, including the all-important transfer to workplace practice and organisational results.

The conclusions from the research are outlined in Table 1. They show the key practices for the different types of outcomes (learning, transfer, and results) have similarities AND differences.

This research confirms the importance and effectiveness of the underlying design principles of CATALYST4's Leadership Development approach namely:

- Incorporates multiple methods for development (information, demonstration, practice).
- Multiple opportunities to receive feedback. Individual needs are addressed through a strong emphasis on picking two behaviours based on their 360 feedback.
- Participants typically apply, and minimum expectations for contribution are explicit from the beginning (addresses the voluntary and mandatory attendance components).
- Multiple sessions spread over time (vs. a single, block course) – as longer programmes are more effective.
- Face to face workshops led by an external expert (vs. being self-administered, online).

- Is weighted to the softer skills (interpersonal and personal skills) recognising that while business skills are easier to learn and transfer, softer skills have a more significant impact on organisational and staff outcomes.

Outcomes	Listening	Transfer	Results
<b>Definition</b>	<b>What people can do following training due to a change in knowledge</b>	<b>What people will do following training (what is put into action).</b>	<b>The impact on organisational and/or staff outcomes.</b>
Research Proven Best Practice	Use multiple delivery methods (information, demonstration, practice).  Conduct a needs analysis.  Include hard skills (i.e., business skills).	Use multiple delivery methods.  Conduct a needs analysis.  Provide feedback.  Use a face-to-face setting (vs. virtual development).  Make attendance voluntary.  Have multiple sessions that are separated by time rather than a single, massed training session.  Include hard (business skills) and soft skills (personal and interpersonal skills).	Use multiple delivery methods.  Require mandatory attendance.  Have multiple sessions.  Provide as much training as possible (longer programmes are more effective).  Include soft skills (personal and interpersonal skills).  Hold on-site.

Table 1

In looking at best practice, it can also be helpful to reflect on what DOESN'T work. Two recent published reflections on what doesn't work are summarised in Table 2.

Anthony Mitchell Bendelta Consulting Australia	Nick Petrie Center for Creative Leadership
Take on too many development areas within insufficient time on each.	Wrong focus: Too much time spent on delivering information and content and not enough on the hard work of developing the leaders themselves. Most leaders already know what they should be doing; what they lack is the personal development to do it.
Have too little participant time spent materially outside their comfort zone.	Lack of connectivity: While the content of programs may be very interesting, it is too often disconnected from the leader's work. When the leader returns to the "real" world and is overwhelmed by tasks, it is too hard to convert what was learned in a programme into actions that address real problems.
The behavioural feedback either being too little, too infrequent or low quality.	The leader in isolation: Most programs fail to engage the leader's key stakeholders back at work in the change process. As a result, leaders not only miss out on the support, advice, and accountability of colleagues but are also more likely to experience resistance from stakeholders who are surprised and disrupted by changes leaders make in their behaviour.
Have primitive approaches to evaluation which provide no insight into how well the intervention is working or how it could be improved.	Too short: The programmes are designed as events rather than as processes over time. Programmes give leaders a short-term boost but not the ongoing follow-up to solidify new thinking and behaviours into new habits.

Table 2

## Emerging Practice

The bulk of emerging practices in leadership development are driven by technology – with a primary emphasis on “**more ‘snackable’ learning**”. Digital delivery and the operating rhythm of organisations is driving increasing flexibility about what to learn, and also how to engage with the learning (e.g., choice of modality and timetable). While organisations must provide the menu and make it visible and compelling, there will be far more emphasis on the participant to select what they need and get the most out of it.

The challenge is ensuring that “snackable learning” still leads to desired outcomes. As outlined earlier, the research does not yet show that this development is effective. Further, our conversations with large organisations who are investing this way have found that **uptake is still very low – particularly at middle and senior executive levels** (17% for the one NZ DHB we talked to, and lower for another large NZ organisation we met with). Experiments are primarily conducted with front and middle management layers (mostly driven by cost and reach factors). There is little experimentation or confidence that leadership development for senior people is best done through technology driven snackable options.

We recognise that technology has the potential to transform leadership development even further over the next five years. The rapid evolution in areas such as sensors, biometrics, real-time brain scanning (e.g. of neurotransmitters and neural pathways), VR-based avatars and M2M systems means that it will be possible for leaders to more clearly see the impact of positive and negative behaviours, the underpinning neural mechanisms and link between changes in brain pattern, behaviours and outcomes. CATALYST4 remains focused on keeping up to date with these emerging technologies and will be a fast adopter of these.

So, while continuing to experiment with technology options that support learning, our development focus remains on the softer skills so that leaders can spend their time “doing what computers and robots cannot do: collaborating, creating, connecting with patients and stakeholders.”

Consistent with emerging practice **CATALYST4 is designing more targeted development offerings** e.g., focusing only on one offering delivered through targeted modules of development, spread over time, based on assessed need.

Two other emerging trends are evident from the research and our experience:

- **Vertical vs horizontal development:** where:  
Horizontal Development = More information, skills, competencies  
Vertical Development = More complex and sophisticated ways of thinking.

The leadership literature has often talked about mindset vs. skillset (or being vs doing) and this balance has been a focus for CATALYST4’s leadership development – helping people see, and do, things differently. However, the horizontal vs. vertical development provides further

insights into the mechanisms for deeper development. Three key elements considered helpful for vertical development are:

1. **Heat Experiences** The leader faces a complex situation that disrupts and disorients their habitual way of thinking. S/he discovers that their current way of making sense of the world is inadequate. Their mind starts to open and search for new and better ways to make sense of their challenge. (The What—Initiates)
  2. **Colliding Perspectives** The leader is exposed to people with different worldviews, opinions, backgrounds, and training. This both challenges their existing mental models and increases the number of perspectives through which s/he can see the world. (The Who—Enables)
  3. **Elevated Sensemaking** The leader then uses a process or a coach to help him integrate and make sense of these perspectives and experiences from more elevated stages of development. A larger, more advanced worldview emerges and, with time, stabilizes. (The How—Integrates)
- **From level-based cohort programs to intact team interventions.** Increasingly, organisations will feel that level-based programmes are inconsistent with their drive to de-layer and de-bureaucratise their organisation. Furthermore, there is growing research (including CATALYST4 pilots with Fonterra and the University of Auckland) that development with intact teams has a stronger impact on results.

Interestingly, other trends considered emerging by Anthony Mitchell (2018) have been a core part of CATALYST4’s practice for many years including:

- **Far better incorporation of proven adult learning principles:** There has been and will continue to be, greater knowledge of how programmes must be designed and delivered to be effective, and there will be mandatory design requirements to ensure these are incorporated. Development interventions will demonstrate far more stretch, supported by far better and more frequent feedback, reflection and consolidation. CATALYST4 has been at the forefront of these developments, and keeps its finger on the pulse of these developments.
- **Real on-the-job leadership development.** This will be assisted by:
  - Core development around meta-learning, so that leaders understand how to approach on-the-job development.
  - Accountability for on-the-job learning.
  - Support for the on-the-job learning – using rapid feedback, embedded coaching, technology and other tools to help leaders reflect and process what they are ‘learning by doing’.
  - Effective data capture of the impact of on-the-job learning.

Please contact us to discuss how to bring these insights to your organisation.