DESIGNING POWERFUL BLENDED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES

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The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the adoption of new, virtual ways of developing leaders and teams (and ways of working more generally). While we will never go back to the pre-crisis status quo, we foresee that essential elements of best development experiences will return to face to face (F2F) as soon as it is safe to do so. It's therefore essential to start now to anticipate how to design and deliver the best blended leader and team development experiences after the crisis.

To design superior team and leadership development experiences, start by identifying the desired business impacts you aspire to achieve, focusing first on the dimensions that can only be achieved through F2F immersion (that is, being together in the same physical space). Only when you have designed these "anchor" F2F immersive experiences can you develop the supporting virtual elements to create powerful blended development experiences.

This process needs three steps. Start by identifying the desired dimensions of business impact requiring F2F interaction. Next, identify the right design drivers to create the anchor F2F elements for your application. Finally, decide how to augment these elements with virtual interactions and tools to develop the best-possible blended development experiences.

Our *Immersive Design Matrix* tool can guide you through this process.

The Immersive Design Matrix

Step 2: Apply the design drivers	Step 1: Identify the key dimensions of impact			
	Collaboration	Innovation	Acculturation	Dedication
Purposeful focus				
Interpersonal bonding				
Deep learning				
Unencumbered experimentation				
Structured serendipity				
Step 3: Identify the supporting virtual elements				

Step 1. Identify the key dimensions of business impact

The starting point is understanding what dimensions of business impact you can only achieve through immersive F2F interaction. Our research and experience shows there are four dimensions of

impact in team and leadership development — *collaboration, innovation, acculturation, and dedication* — that are difficult to achieve and sustain without F2F meetings.

- **Collaboration is** about integrating knowledge and building shared understandings, often requiring challenging conversations.
- **Innovation is** about getting creative ideas out of people's brains, exploring how they fit together, and collectively engaging in learning processes to refine and realize them.
- **Acculturation is** about building a robust, shared culture by developing shared values, reinforcing norms, and creating a sense of shared identity.
- **Dedication is** about developing a deeper commitment to the organization by fostering a shared sense of purpose and connection to a community.

These are difficult to achieve in virtual interactions because (1) they all rest on a foundation of personal connection and trust, and (2) they require deep integration of knowledge and working through diverse and sometimes deeply held perspectives. While it is possible to sustain connection and trust virtually to some degree, our experience and research show that F2F interaction is necessary to lay these foundations and regularly support it. Integration of knowledge and development of shared points of view on potentially divisive issues likewise require teams to engage in challenging conversations that are very difficult to have with even the best virtual technologies (see Our Research).

Our research

In November 2020, we surveyed more than 50 executives globally: three-quarters of them were working virtually for at least 60% of the time, and two-thirds more than 80%. They expected to continue working at least 50% virtually beyond the pandemic, suggesting that COVID-19 has driven a permanent shift in how we work.

When asked what work can be done effectively virtually, 45% identified reporting, updates, administration, and simple decision-making, while 25% said one-to-one meetings, interviews, and coaching.

In response to a related question about what work cannot be done effectively by virtual means, 40% said integrating perspectives in teams, innovation, strategic decisions, or complex problems. A further 15% said building relationships and networking, while 13% identified negotiating and having difficult conversations.

Therefore, the first step in the design process is to identify which of these dimensions requiring F2F interactions are most important for your application. Imagine, for example, that your organization is seeking to accelerate the integration of an acquisition and that you have formed a new executive team with leaders from both legacy organizations. In this situation, you initially would weigh the impact dimensions of collaboration and acculturation more heavily than innovation and dedication. Why? Because you want to make sure that the newly formed team starts working together effectively and begin to create a shared culture. (This does not mean, however, that innovation and dedication are not necessary. Those dimensions of impact can be the focus of follow-on initiatives.)

Step 2: Leverage the design drivers

The next step is to identify how best to achieve the desired impact on your specified dimensions. What are the best F2F elements of team and leadership development experiences to achieve your objectives? What is it, beyond placing people in the same place at the same time, that fosters collaboration, innovation, acculturation, and dedication?

For a successful immersive experience, you must create an environment that incorporates five design drivers.

Purposeful focus: Well-designed F2F experiences inherently generate and sustain more focus than virtual ones. It is more difficult to give in to all kinds of distractions when you are co-located. Group dynamics operate much more effectively to reinforce focus in F2F interaction. It is easier for leaders to stay focused and keep each other on task.

To achieve purposeful focus, the team engaged in integrating the acquisition could bring the key players together in a neutral and welcoming environment where they can focus without distraction and without the feeling of being on someone else's "turf."

Interpersonal bonding: Bonding is essential for creating safe environments for collaboration and innovation. It is about creating emotional connections that lead to trust, support, and openness among participants.

In our example scenario, an early step could be to have leaders exchange personal histories and life experiences, and informally get to know each other. Such personal interchange is usually best done in small groups supported by coaches.

Deep learning: Conceptual learning means gaining an understanding of ideas, such as empowerment or return on equity. Deep learning involves wrestling with those concepts, debating when and how they are useful, and understanding how subtle differences in context influence their application.

Deep learning happens when participants have the time, space, and support to explore the application of new concepts for their particular situations and challenges. By explore, we mean both the opportunity to share where they are in any specific area honestly, and the opportunity to get both feedback with — and be challenged by — others. Deep learning can make concepts come alive in both relevant and context-specific ways.

If you are designing a program to accelerate the integration of an acquisition, you try exploring and deepening mutual understanding of the acquisition's desired benefits. You could also use cultural assessments to launch a dialogue about the similarities and differences between the legacy cultures as part of developing a shared culture.

Unencumbered experimentation: Concerns over budgets, bonuses, revenues, margins, and so on often impede experimentation in business. Immersive F2F experiences, however, allow for exploration unencumbered by these concerns. You can facilitate experimentation with design thinking and prototyping minimally viable products. The best results are done under intense time pressure and with quick feedback rounds.

Returning to our acquisition example, once you have reached a common understanding, you can generate potential scenarios and create prototypes of integration plans. Teams can also explore approaches that preserve both cultures' best elements and mitigate the weaknesses.

Structured serendipity: Serendipity, our fifth and final design driver, refers to the effect of stumbling onto something truly remarkable while looking for something entirely unrelated. A well-designed immersive experience consists of a balance of formal and informal elements that create fertile ground for such a moment. You can accomplish this by selecting diverse sets of participants, the pedagogical variety of the program, opportunities to connect with diverse colleagues, the choice of locations that foster formal and informal connections, and the selection of spaces conducive to reflection and sharing.

Organizations aspiring to accelerate the integration of acquisitions could designate unstructured F2F time, for example dinners, walks, or shared recreational activities. The resulting informal exchanges can deepen interpersonal connections.

Step 3. Identify the supporting virtual elements

Have developed the F2F experiences that anchor your team or leadership development process, the final step is to identify the virtual elements that will occur before and between these experiences. These could include virtual sessions before, between, and after the in-person elements. These sessions would focus on what virtual interaction does best, e.g. providing program overviews and pre-work, doing initial introductions, and having participants engage in individual and small group coaching to drive accountability and sustain progress.

A summary of our application of the Immersive Design Matrix process to the acquisition example is shown below.

Step 2: Apply the design drivers	Step 1: Identify the key dimensions of impact			
	Collaboration	*Innovation*	*Acculturation*	*Dedication*
Purposeful focus	Select a location, facility, and support resources that promote focus and reflection		Conduct cultural assessments of the parties to focus attention on differences and similarities	
Interpersonal bonding	Take the teams through experiences that encourage connection and build trust		Explore values, leadership principles, and practices	
Deep learning	Structure and facilitate dialogue processes that promote understanding of each other's views and businesses		Use the cultural assessments to understand legacy cultures, and create a shared culture	
Unencumbered experimentation	Create mixed groups to explore new ways of working and organizing and do scenario planning		The teams explore approaches that take the best of both cultures and mitigate the weakest parts	
Structured serendipity	By continuously mixing the groups both for the formal and informal parts, relationships are built, and		Through informal interactions, novel and unexpected insights about the two cultures will	

	ideas are generated that no one could have predicted		emerge	
Step 3: Identify the supporting virtual elements	• Program overviews and pre-work • Session for initial introductions • Follow-on individual and small group coaching			

Powerful blended team and leadership development experiences are essential foundations for both short and long-term business success. The foundation is understanding the enduring value of focused F2F experiences and then leveraging virtual ones to augment and extend them. Are you ready to start building this into your team and leadership development programs?