

The Roundtable

Reinventing Leadership Development

The Power of Peers



If you ask leaders to reflect on their top 3 impactful learning experiences, chances are at least one of them will be incidental. It didn't happen in a classroom or with a boss or from reading a book. It came through an experience or discussion with a peer that caused them to reflect on a situation differently. And, if that "aha" moment was followed up with trying out the new behaviour and further reflecting on the impact, that learning was solidified

Peer learning relationships capitalize on this type of learning and anchor to some of the key drivers of adult learning¹. They:

- **Build off each person's professional expertise** - Adults have a lifetime of experiences that influence and shape how they approach integrate new knowledge. Any meaningful learning activity needs to embrace that expertise.
- **Drive accountability** - Most of us are wired for self improvement. Working with a respected peer or peers creates a powerful recipe for mutual accountability. In other words, peer pressure makes a difference.
- **Focus on real life issues** - Busy professionals want to solve real life problems. Learning is more powerful when it is grounded in your own concerns and can be applied immediately.

In today's business reality where the pace is faster than ever, leadership is more complex than ever and the pressures for today's mid-level leaders are mounting, leveraging the genius of bringing like-minded professionals together to learn and grow in this way is compelling.

A Powerful Alternative for Developing Future Leaders

Glain Roberts-McCabe, the founder and CEO of The Roundtable, saw the benefits of peer relationships in her own development. Rising through the leadership ranks, she realized some of her greatest leadership insights came from interactions with trusted colleagues, not in formal classroom based training sessions. And while those at the executive level had access to coaches and more formalized learning networks, she and other mid-career leaders didn't.

The Roundtable for Leaders program was created to fill that gap. By harnessing the power of peer to peer interactions while also leveraging the benefits of one-on-one coaching and peer mentoring, Roberts-McCabe and her team created a unique twist on leadership development that is reaping huge rewards for mid-career leaders and for their organizations.

Here's how it works:

Working in small peer groups, leaders meet at regular intervals over 12 months. Led by an experienced coach and facilitator, they learn and share practical strategies and tools; discuss crucial issues related to their immediate challenges and opportunities; and, get feedback and insights to help them move forward against goals.

As part of the process, participants learn how to coach and mentor one another and how to accept and internalize feedback. Between sessions, they individually work on their plans and, with the support of learning partners, implement new tools and strategies. The process is powerful and intense and leads to sustained behaviour change.

Personalized coaching around the core peer sessions provides further support on the leadership issues that matter most to them individually.

Graduates come away with clear direction on how to maximize their leadership and business impact, the confidence to make better decisions and lead with purpose and broadened capability in order to take on more.

Distinct Benefits of 1:1 Coaching and Peer Mentoring

A unique feature of our program is the combination of peer mentoring with more traditional, one-to-one coaching. Participants have access to a professional coach for one-on-one discussions to supplement the peer mentoring that is core to the experience. We were thrilled to learn participants saw distinct differences and benefits into what each approach provided.

Coaching helped them establish and clarify their short and long-term goals.

- "The access to the personal coach ... was fantastic"
- "[My coach] challenges me to think about what do I need to be doing, and stop making excuses, and his intent is to help me continue to grow in my career.."
- "The coaching was wonderful. She really helped me focus on some very specific short-term goals that I was working on..."





Peer Mentoring gave participants concrete ideas to deal with specific work challenges, fostered new ways of thinking, provided a sounding board, and created vicarious learning opportunities.



- "Am I doing the right thing? You don't always want to be running to your boss asking those questions so having that peer group to rely on to give you feedback and help you through issues was phenomenal"
- "...the areas I probably enjoyed the most were not the ones I thought I would, like the peer mentoring aspect of the program. ...It was probably the most beneficial to me and the part that I really looked forward to most."
- "The ability to discuss issues with people at your level across different organizations and industries was really, really interesting and one of the best parts of the program."

The peer format created deeper accountability (peer pressure) that encouraged them to stick to their goals. While some individuals saw more value in peer mentoring and others in coaching, most liked the blended approach with both combined into one program.

Different from one-on-one coaching on its own, the blended approach provides a unique opportunity for coaches to view leaders "in context" as they practice new behaviours in real time in their group sessions, which are facilitated by their coach.

This is often challenging to do in traditional 1:1 coaching programs, but increases the value and insights brought to the individual coaching process.

Transformative Learning

In this program, two types of distinct, yet mutually supportive, personal learning take place: work-related and career-related.

Work-related learning involved learning how to complete job-specific tasks, deal with subordinates, address specific tactical challenges, and make better decisions.

- "I was able to apply it to my job and move things forward."
- "I give a lot of feedback, but I've learned through this process sometimes it wasn't effective feedback. So I've really tried to improve how I've managed that process. "



In the **Voice of the Leader Study**, The Corporate Leadership Council surveyed 8000 leaders to determine which approaches to development had the greatest impact on their leadership success. Results showed that "relationship-based programs," having a leadership plan, working with a coach, peer learning, interacting with a mentor and getting feedback, far outranked on-the-job experience and classroom training in terms of lasting impact and success.

Results

In 2013, we engaged an outside leadership researcher to assess the impact of our program. Using an open interview format, 30 graduates were asked to comment on their experiences in the program. Participants had completed the program between 4 and 24 months prior to the research interviews. Input was collected through an open interview format and the following provides a summary of findings.

General Reactions to the Experience and Format

All respondents, without exception, spoke extensively about their positive impressions of the program.

"I thought it was a brilliant model and I learned a lot"

"I think that program is fantastic"

"... absolutely loved it"

"It was a very rewarding experience"

"The single most valuable thing I have ever done in terms of my career development."



- "Absolutely it helped me with that decision-making process"
- "It helps me to be more strategic in my thinking. It helped me identify my weaknesses or things that I needed to improve upon."

Career-related learning was evident when the respondents described how their participation in the program had exposed them to a higher level of aspiration and created a different outlook on their careers.

- "... there is this process you go through where you identify, you know, what are your values, what are your interests, and you kind of define what you want from a career perspective"
- "[The Executive Roundtable] helped me better define what my own brand is and what my values are"
- "I realized I needed to come up with a different plan... So, the group really helped me realize that I need to get back in the driver seat with respect to my own career."

Organizational Impact

Participants also viewed that their individual learning had a positive impact on organizational performance. Improved skills and strategies enabled them to manage their teams more effectively and bring new tools and approaches back to their workplaces. In addition, the peer mentoring process allowed participants to create action plans in real-time and provided them with the structure of accountability to follow-through on those plans.

- "... I think [my team] definitely benefited because I'm a stronger performer because of that program"
- "I brought back into the organization some of the coaching that I was going through..."

Furthermore, managers surveyed in corporate (onsite) Roundtable programs shared that they had broadened their understanding of the business (75%), built and maintained key relationships across the organization (50%) and increased their self-awareness (75%).

Conclusion

Peer mentoring when combined with individual coaching generates positive participant reactions, meaningful personal learning, and significant affective and tangible outcomes. Ultimately, this blended approach provides next generation executives with a major boost in accelerating their careers and increasing the bench strength of their organizations.

A Case in Point

Andrea is an ambitious finance leader who has recently been promoted to Director. She is very proud of her company and wholeheartedly supports the organization's values. Recently, she's been **challenged by the behaviour of a new peer Bob**. He's new to the company and raising some eyebrows with his approach to leadership. Several members of Bob's team have come to Andrea in tears, upset by the way he speaks to them. Andrea has observed his condescending approach first hand and wants to speak to her boss about Bob's behaviour. He's not role modelling the values of the organization and **she's concerned for the long-term effect it will have on the department**. She decides to bring her concern to her peer coaching group to get their perspectives.

At the session

Andrea describes her situation to her group of 7 peers. Each takes a few minutes to ask Andrea further questions - questions **to help Andrea reflect on her situation**. Through this process, Andrea realizes her discomfort is not actually with what Bob is saying to his team. She is reacting to his approach and style.

As part of the mentoring component, the group shares personal experiences related to situations similar to Andrea's. **Andrea hears a variety of perspectives and strategies that broaden her view of the situation**.

At the end of the coaching, Andrea shares how the experience has expanded her perspective. **She leaves the session with a plan to discuss her concerns with Bob directly**. At the following session, six weeks later, Andrea shares the outcomes of her conversation with Bob which was extremely constructive. She thanks the group for their feedback and shares that their input completely changed her approach. Several people commented that Andrea's coaching session was applicable to their own situations and had changed their approach too.

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Roundtable for Leaders Snap Shot

- 12 month program
- 8 members from various industries and functional units
- Sessions are held every 6 weeks and are 3 hours in length
- Led by experienced coach and facilitator

Program components:

- LEA 360 and debrief
- Individual action planning (aligned to individual and organizational needs)
- 8 peer mentoring sessions
- 5 hours of individual one-on-one coaching
- Participation in Roundtable community events and resources (webinars, executive forums, newsletters and online resources)



Participant testimonials:

- * "Having people in sort of the same stage in career as I was, facing similar problems that I was facing and that I could speak to in a very objective kind of way was the absolute most meaningful thing I've done in my career"
- * "I am definitely a different person from a leadership perspective than I was a year ago and for the better"
- * "This program is the single best thing that I've done in the way of leadership development."

- * "It gave me skills to speak with my boss about situations. I would say it empowered me to have conversations--uncomfortable conversations. It helped me give structure with my relationship with my boss."

From their managers' perspective:

- * "Very strong support for this initiative. It feels like a very productive investment in our high potential candidates."
- * "Participant expressed that this has been the most developmental program he has ever been involved in."
- * "This program is a game changer and significantly elevated our talent."

Learn More

The Roundtable for Leaders process is available publicly or onsite. The program can be implemented, as described here, or can be modified to support existing programs that you may have in place in your organizations.



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