

# OUR APPROACH TO LEARNING - INPUT

## INTRODUCTION

Research shows that leadership programs often do not generate the intended change in participants due to a number of issues, including:

- Focusing on content and information rather than on development and growth,
- Failing to link the learning to participants' realities and translate it into actions that address their everyday challenges,
- Viewing participants in isolation as opposed to engaging them as members in interdependent networks of stakeholders who can support, advise and hold them accountable (when properly engaged) or resist them if disrupted by participant's behaviours,
- Designing the programme as a one-time event rather than an on-going learning process.

Learning, change and development can be hard for people to achieve and sustain over time. The purpose of this section is to help learners understand how adults develop and learn, and introduce our distinctive approach to learning in this programme, which is intended to overcome the challenges listed above.

## MAIN IDEAS

Drawing on adult developmental theory, Ellie Drago-Severson defines growth as “increases in our cognitive, affective (emotional), interpersonal and intrapersonal capacities that enable us to manage better the complex demands of teaching, learning, leadership and life.” (Drago-Severson 2004a). As we grow in these capacities we are able to take broader perspectives on others and ourselves. We introduce below two complementary approaches to leadership development, namely *horizontal* and *vertical* learning.

**Horizontal Learning is about developing our Skill Sets (competencies).** This learning:

- Increases what you know and strengthens technical expertise by absorbing more information
- Is essential for using known techniques to solve clearly defined problems
- Develops functional knowledge, skills, and behaviours that strengthen your leadership toolkit

**Vertical Learning is about Self-Transformation (evolving mindsets).** This learning:

- Enhances how you interpret events and make meaning of the world, often transforming your perspective (your ways of knowing),
- Is essential to address complex new problems
- Helps cultivate high-stakes relationships

- Develops your mental complexity and emotional intelligence
- Grows your ability to recognize patterns
- Helps you navigate rapidly changing, uncertain circumstances

While horizontal learning constitutes an important part of leadership development, it mainly focuses on knowledge and skills that individuals acquire while operating at a specific stage of growth and development (at a given level of cognitive, emotional, and relational complexity). Vertical learning on the other hand is focused on looking inward and increasing individuals' mental and emotional capacity (transforming how they think, feel, make meaning, know and relate to the world...).

This model of learning builds on the research of Dr. Robert Kegan, Harvard University (1982, 1994 and 2000) on constructive developmental theory and the work of Dr. William Torbert, Boston College. (This is detailed later in the [Global Leadership Profile](#) exercise).

In brief, their research revealed that human beings make sense of their learning experiences, life experiences, and the world in qualitatively different ways. Four different phases of vertical ways of knowing and perceiving the world are most common in adulthood ([see graph](#)):

- The **Instrumental way of knowing** (rule-based, doing things “the right way”).
- The **Socializing way of knowing** (other-focused and reflective, able to think abstractly and consider other people’s opinions. Others’ approval and acceptance are very important to them.)
- The **Self-authoring way of knowing** (have the developmental capacity to generate their own internal value-system, and taking initiative in the service of personal vision and goals. Are limited however by an inability to recognize that others can have opposing perspectives that can inform their own.)
- At higher developmental stages (the **Self-transforming way of knowing**), individuals have their own self-generated ideologies and perspectives but are simultaneously able to take some distance and recognize them as limited/partial.

These ways of knowing shape how individuals understand their roles and responsibilities, how they perceive leadership, how they relate to others, and equally as important what support and challenges they need to grow and develop. (Drago-Severson, 2004).

**An environment that is safe and challenging:** The intention of any learning experience is to create the context and conditions that will foster formational learning and growth to support participants in their leadership calling and mission. While exploring skill related competences is key, transformational experiences seek to explore ways of expanding not only skills and knowledge but also our capacities as learners and leaders. Growing in our ways of knowing and meaning-making is not always comfortable or easy and can sometimes be painful as it involves losses. Consequently, facilitating the learning experience involves intentionally creating an environment where people feel safe and supported but also challenged and stretched. More than that, because we are Ignatian in our approach, the hope is to support the whole person in meeting and managing the mental, emotional, and practical challenges that come with leadership.

**Why a “holding environment?”** Learning new ways of being is not comfortable or easy and can sometimes be painful. It often happens when people feel safe but also challenged; accepted for who they are yet also encouraged to grow; supported yet also critiqued. As individuals gradually let go of what they held tightly to (their old selves) and try to rebalance who they are growing to become, they need plenty of support.

In the literature on leadership, the term for this safe yet challenging space is *holding environment*.

- The idea of “holding” came from Dr. D.W. Winnicott’s pediatric work where he considered that the “foundations of health are laid down by the ordinary mother in her ordinary loving care of her own baby” (Winnicott, 1973). He used the term to refer to the different kinds of care and challenges needed to support an infant’s development.
- Kegan (1982) extended the application of the holding environment to a human being entire life span as we need different forms of support and challenges in order to continue growing throughout our lives.
- The holding environment can be physical, virtual or relational, but most importantly, it is an atmosphere where people should feel safe enough tackling difficult issues.

**What makes effective holding environments?** Effective holding environments that support adults in their growth need to:

- Offer a healthy balance of both high support and high challenge:
  - First, they need to “hold well” by meeting an individual where he or she is (their current ways of making meaning). In other words, they must recognize, honour and confirm who the person is, without an urgent need to push or demand change.
  - Then, they need to ‘let go’ (when the person is ready) by offering developmentally appropriate challenges that help the person grow towards a new way of knowing
  - Finally, they need to “stick around” to provide continuity, availability and stability as a person is demonstrating new developed internal capacities.
- Be responsive to the individual’s unique and rapidly changing needs. In fact, each individual experiences learning opportunities in different ways, based on the way he or she makes meaning of these experiences (their current ways of knowing and perception), and their developmental needs; consequently, each learner needs different supports or challenges to grow. (Drago-Severson, 2004)

## IGNATIAN NOTE

For those familiar with the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises, one of the key graces or fruits of the early phase of the retreat is a person to realize that he or she is loved by God, even as a sinner. This experience of being both imperfect, yet perfectly loved by God is the basis and foundation for freely responding to that love through deepening personal conversion, and more faithful imitation of Christ. This seemingly paradoxical grace helps

relieve us of the mistaken belief that we need to do something special to earn or beg for God to love us. No, God's love is the starting place for all the learning, growing, and maturing that follows.

In the context of a leadership development program creating the right “holding environment” is not an easy task. In fact, the kind of complexity which is the focus of maturity and vertical learning is not something that can be taught or developed by reading a book. This evolution relies on participants' internal disposition, their willingness to embrace uncertainty and readiness to overcome fears, detach themselves from specific desired outcomes, and open up to new ways of making meaning and perceiving the world. In many ways, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius are a powerful vehicle for this kind of inner growth and development (McCallum, 2001). In the same way that the Exercises involve the support of God, a spiritual director, a conducive environment, and the powerful challenges inspired by the life and ministry of Jesus, so there are many internal and external conditions involved in the work and service of leadership.

**Practices to support the learning:** In the context of leadership, vertical or developmental growth comes from the experience of deeply engaging with increasingly complex situations and others. Four practices suggested by Ellie Drago-Severson can support this kind of growth:

- *Teamwork* (opens communication, decreases isolation, enables sharing of leadership, help them overcome resistance to change, invite them to question their assumptions...)
- *Mentoring and being mentored* (individually supporting each other's growth depending on our developmental needs, sharing experiences and feedback,...)
- *Leadership stretch* experiences (such experiences help adults assume their own authority, uncover their assumptions, test new ways of working, ...)
- *Collaborative inquiry* (collaborative problem solving and shared dialogue that helps people become more aware of their assumptions and beliefs, and develop more complex perspectives through listening and learning)

## FINAL THOUGHT

A monk in his travels once found a precious stone and kept it. One day he met a traveller, and when he opened his bag to share his provisions with him, the traveller saw the pearl and asked the monk to give it to him. The monk did so readily. The traveller departed overjoyed with the unexpected gift of the precious stone that was enough to give him wealth and security for the rest of his life. However, a few days later he came back in search of the monk, found him, gave him back the stone and entreated him: 'Now give me something much more precious than this stone, valuable as it is. Give me that which enabled you to give it to me.' - Excerpt from *Unencumbered by Baggage*: Father Anthony de Mello: A Prophet for Our Times (Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1987), 43 by Carlos G. Valles

## EXPECTED LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

1. Introducing the way adults develop and learn
2. Exploring frameworks and practices for promoting deeper learning
3. Inviting participants to reflect on the learning they hope to gain from this experience

*“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write. It will be those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn” - Alvin Toffler*