

ADEPTION™



Developing leaders & managers
the way we evolved to learn

Back to the future.

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Authors Note — About this paper

I have worked for some great organizations., and I've also been involved with some not-so-great organizations. This has put me on a mission to discover how to systematically improve an organization's performance, and has taken me down a number of paths. I've been involved with developing; organizational identities, strategies, improvement programs, new technologies, new processes, and technical, management and leadership skills development programs. I also took two years out to study for an MBA at a top US University. Throughout all of this I've noticed two things:

1. It is complex. There is no simple answer to improved performance as each organization is different.
2. People are the key. Good people can deal with complexity and find what works for their organization. Great organizations are made by great people.

The thinking here reflects research from my MBA, and proposes a framework to help better develop more effective leaders and managers.

My ambition is that you will find something in here that you can use — today. I believe that every time someone takes action to improve how themselves and how their organization works we are making progress. This work has already helped to push and advance what my current company does to develop leaders and managers. I hope that these ideas will continue to evolve, so please feel free to share your thoughts, comments and experiences – enjoy.

About the Author

Carl Sanders-Edwards is Founder and CEO of Adeption, a company that has a mission to make leadership development, that works, available to everyone. Since its inception in 2009, Adeption has evolved to combine an in-the-flow of work methodology, people, and technology to enable a blended and scalable approach to leadership development. The organization now has a 50+ team, located globally, and operates from the Americas, India, Australia and New Zealand.

Carl's passion for leadership development is formed from over 20 years of working with global organizations and start-ups. While running Adeption, Carl completed a two-year MBA at Babson College (ranked no. 1 in Entrepreneurship worldwide) graduating in 2012 top of his class (valedictorian). At Babson Carl was awarded the Sorenson Award for excellence in academic, entrepreneurial and co-curricular activities and the Management Division Award for excellence in management. He received Massey University Young Alumni of the Year in 2011 and in 2010, the NZ Fulbright Platinum Triangle Award for Entrepreneurship.

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200,000 YEARS AGO humans lived, learnt and adapted in the Serengeti, Africa.

We spent most of our time outside, moving and in an unpredictable, threatening environment. This unpredictability was tempered by comforting predictable routines such as day and night and the changing seasons. We were also intensely social. Rather than grow physically bigger and stronger to survive we evolved the ability to coordinate our activities with each other and work as a team. We learnt to survive, adapt and thrive. Everything we needed to learn from was embedded in the environment we lived in. Work, play, and learning were integrated and often indistinguishable from each other.

This was the environment we humans evolved from. As neuroscientists such as John Medina propose, it is the environment we are best optimized to learn and operate within.

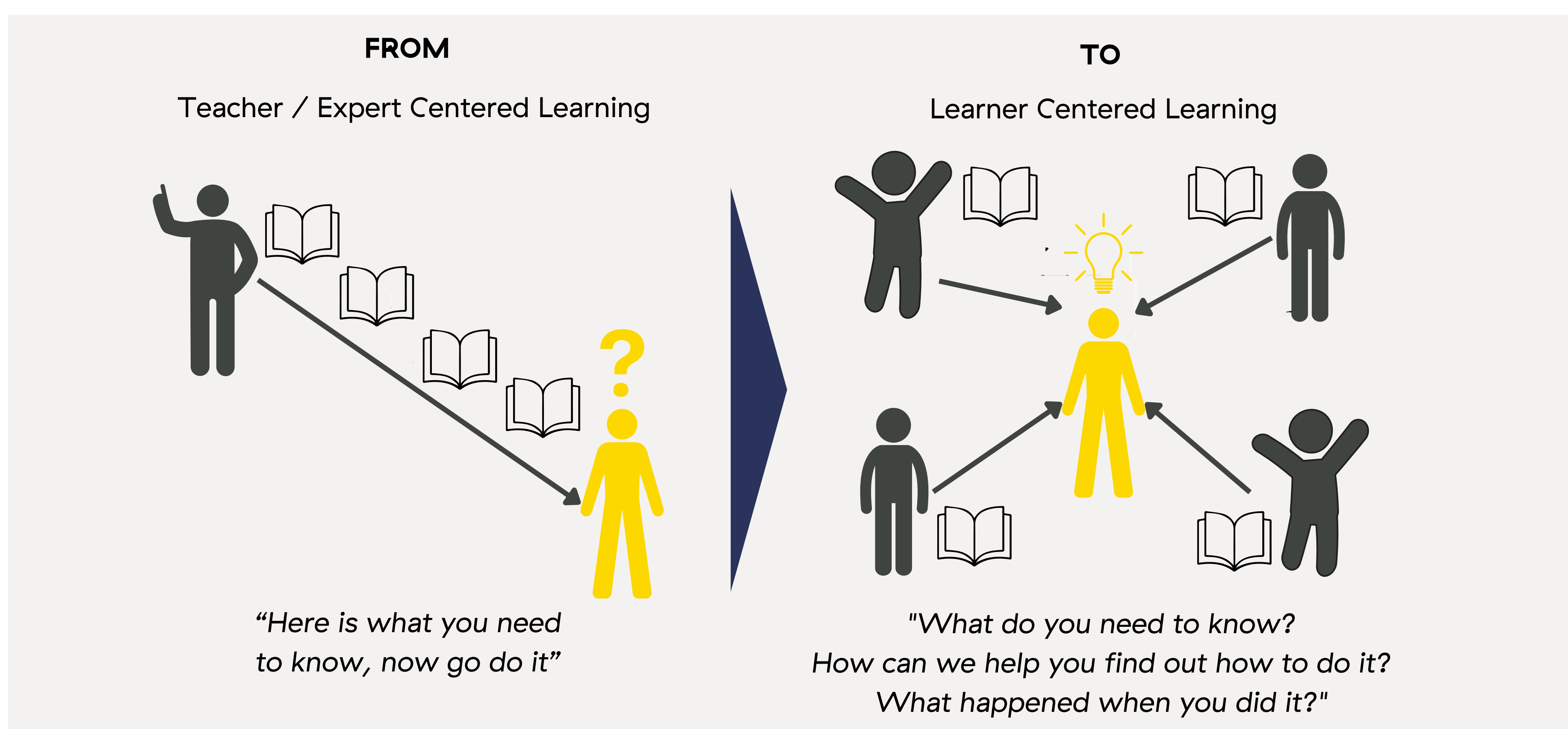
This paper proposes a framework to help design better programs to develop leaders and managers. This framework leverages how humans are optimized to learn and develop — Serengeti style. It does so without losing the benefits of advances in mainstream education, workplaces and technology. As a result, it better prepares leaders and managers for the realities of today and tomorrow. It also helps close the ‘Knowing–Doing Gap’.¹ That is the gap between what the ‘theory’ tells us we should be doing and what we are actually doing. We need to improve what people do rather than what they know.

“If we were to design a learning environment that is directly opposed to the fundamental wiring of our brains, we will design a classroom and then design a cubicle!”

John Medina

To do this we propose an integrated, action based, learner–centric approach. It is integrated in that the distinctions between work, learning and play are reduced. It is action–based as the focus is on people doing meaningful things in order to learn. It is learner–centric as it truly puts the learner rather than the trainer, facilitator, mentor or coach in the driving seat of the learning.

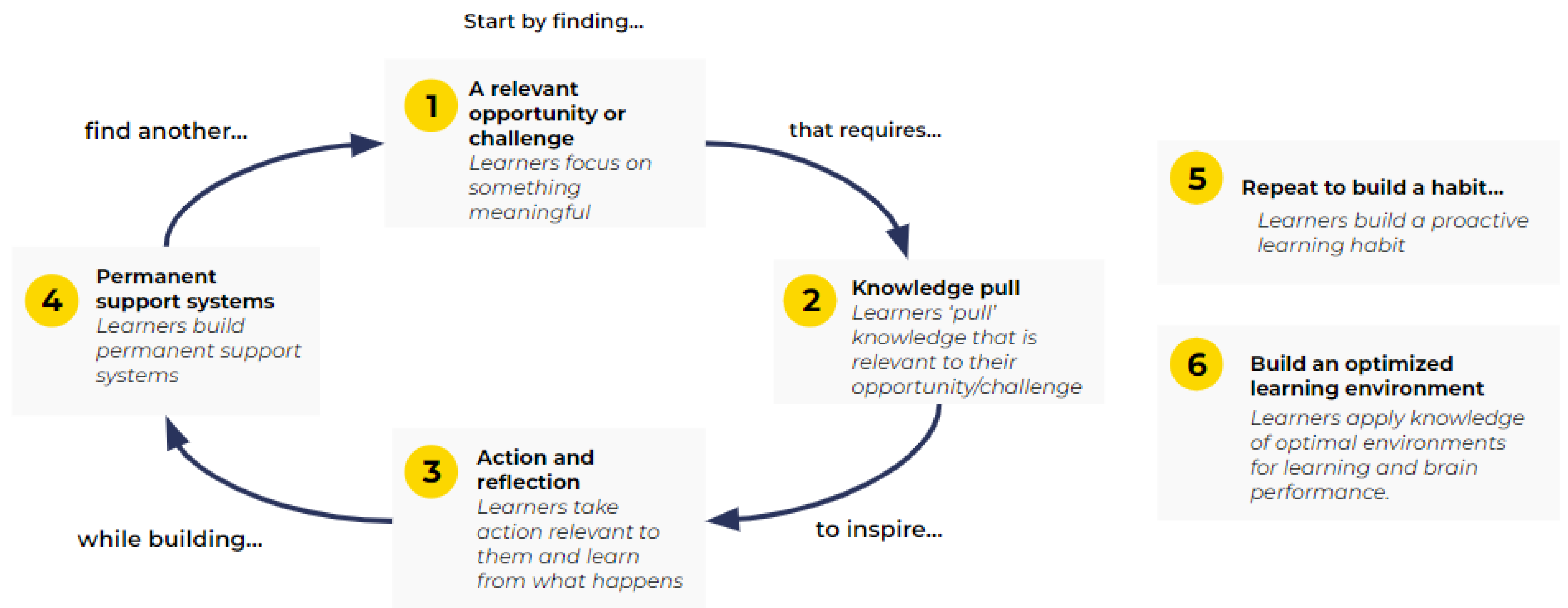
The diagram below summarizes the core idea behind this approach.



We have developed a framework that can help design learning programs. The framework is based on emerging practices, and is supported by relevant and diverse research.

Integrated, action based, learner–centric framework

OUR FRAMEWORK places leadership and management development as the outcome of an ongoing process and not an event. It focuses on supporting people to build a habit of taking meaningful action that they then learn from. After a series of cycles of taking action and reflecting, learners become self–sufficient in improving how they lead and manage. Throughout the process there is a deliberate environment of support and guidance for the learner. The impact of the framework is amplified if activities occur in environments that are optimized for learning.



1 Start by finding... Relevant opportunity or challenge

Learners focus on something meaningful

‘The training was great, we learnt all sorts of interesting things, it just isn’t really relevant to me’. How many times have we heard statements similar to this? If a topic isn’t directly and obviously relevant to a person’s current reality how can they be fully motivated to learn?

Learners should first identify drivers of their own learning, to ensure they identify learning opportunities that provide meaningful and motivational value. Identification of goals and drivers is paramount, as learning methods need to move away from instructor–based ‘learning outcomes’ towards learner–based goals and outcomes. When these opportunities¹ have been explored we can begin working to create long–term sustainable changes.

¹ These opportunities and challenges are often systemic in nature providing a large payoff to individuals and organizations that successfully address them. Typical things include cultural norms, measurement and planning systems as well as restrictive personal mindsets to organizing work and managing others.

Learners should be guided to help define their own personal values and goals. These goals and values should be in tight conjunction with their team and organization's values, goals, and key measures. This process ensures learners identify opportunities and challenges that are intrinsically meaningful and motivating to solve.

The learners then begin problem solving and action planning around these areas. In the process they create long-term sustainable improvements in their own capability but also in the organization's performance. Tangible business improvement becomes part of the process of leadership and management development instead of a 'hoped for' outcome.

Research supports a focus on relevant opportunities and challenges

Harvard psychologist Keganⁱⁱⁱ and other developmental researchers have shown that adults pass through predictable stages of development. The level of 'vertical' development significantly impacts their workplace performance. Kegan also showed this development is primarily accomplished by challenging one's current abilities and skills. New 'bigger' ways of thinking are required to solve the challenge. As outlined in a CCL whitepaper you need to 'earn' this type of growth^{iv}. These challenges and opportunities help expose someone's 'unconscious incompetence' (the first of the Four Stages of Competence model). We are primed for learning when we realize we require new skills, knowledge and ways of thinking to improve performance. This realization is an important element for the next stage of our framework as learners are motivated to seek and gain new knowledge to help them.



Relevant opportunity or challenge in action

A group in the UK focused their Leadership development program solely on supporting leaders to find and implement solutions to significant opportunities their organization faced. The result was leaders developing improved skills and behaviors in order to overcome the challenges while organizational performance was improved in a measurable way.

2 That requires... Knowledge pull

Learners 'pull' content that is relevant to their job/challenge

On day one of their 'development' program, participants are handed a heavy folder of content. Everyone feels good thinking they must be getting lots of value from this content. After the program has finished participants are raving. However back at work they fail to do anything differently. Sound familiar? Why?

We think one reason is that they have been 'pushed' content. Someone other than the people being 'developed' decided what the entire room needed to know and 'pushed' it to them. This is similar to what plagued US manufacturing companies in the 1970's and 1980's.² Planners 'pushed' inventory onto production lines regardless of whether it was required or not. Massive inventories and inefficiencies built. Toyota's Kanban system helped solve this issue^v by turning the system on its head and in the process Toyota become one of the world's most successful car manufacturers.

² This issue received widespread attention in the US when an NBC episode summed up the feeling in the 80's, it was titled, 'If Japan can...why can't we?'.

Kanban allowed production staff to pull inventory when they required it. Learning and development programs can learn from this. Participants should be supported to ‘pull’ relevant learning content.

The ‘pull’ approach brings many advantages.

- Increased self-reliance – When learners are supported to find their own relevant content, it further decreases reliance on specific ‘development’ events.
- More relevant – Pulled content is ‘by design’ more relevant to a learner’s unique situation and more likely to be useful in application.
- Repeatable – It is easier to design a repeatable program (scalable with benefits of spaced repetition) with a pull approach, as content is de-coupled from the methodology used.



Knowledge pull in action

The simplest version of knowledge pull is the ‘feedforward’ approach credited to Marshal Goldsmith. Leaders ask others for ideas on how to develop skills and tackle challenges that they face before starting. Another enterprising leader we spoke to defined the challenge they faced then searched Google for ideas on how to overcome it, claiming they avoided countless false moves and wasted time.

Technology makes ‘pull’ learning more possible

This may seem a radical concept for many ‘expert’ trainers but it shouldn’t be. In the past, content was relatively scarce and concentrated therefore training people by ‘pushing’ content was efficient. Today expert content is disbursed and freely available. Modern technology has essentially democratized the availability of knowledge. For example, I watched a TED talk from a Harvard professor³ talking about the benefits of a ‘power pose’ a few weeks after she gave the talk. Within two more days I was applying the message personally and with clients. It is cheap and easy to find great leadership and management tools and frameworks. Therefore, instead of deciding what content participants need to know and ‘teaching it’, we propose designing programs that encourage learners to find and ‘pull’ their own relevant content.

Edward Deci’s^{vi} research on human motivations and need for autonomy supports this idea. Deci suggests we ‘need’ autonomy over our work to perform at our best. In this case, why needn’t we require autonomy over our learning to perform at our best?

3 To inspire... Action and reflection

Learners take action and learn from what happens

Taking action is at the very essence of how we learn. Think about how you learnt to ride a bike. Did you learn by thinking long about how to ride the bike or did you just start riding and then adjust to what you discovered in the process?

³ http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are.html

Unfortunately for learning, psychologists have shown that people have a bias for preserving the status quo (or against taking action).^{vii} In 'The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People'^{viii} Steven Covey suggests that much of this bias for inaction is learnt. He argues that we are punished for taking action that turns out bad, but we are rarely punished for inaction. With this in mind, we think that learning and development should focus on inspiring action and make taking it 'safe', rather than 'teaching' knowledge.

Learning and development programs should focus on inspiring and helping learners take action in their workplace. Action learning is well established as the 'gold standard' in adult learning. It is enshrined in the 70:20:10 model; 70% of learning happens on the job, 20% from feedback and coaching, and 10% from reading and courses.^{ix} We think action learning initiatives can further benefit when combined with pulling content to inspire actions. This way, on-the-job actions are important and relevant to the learner, and don't just 'reinforce' predetermined material.



Act and Reflect in action

All Adepton programs (developed by the author) build in action reflection time at the start of each new module. Participants share the outcomes of actions planned in the previous module and how/if they differed from expectations. A big theme in the groups is to 'steal lessons with pride' from each other.

Participants should be inspired and encouraged in their work environments to act on what they have learned. Thanks to steps one and two, their learning has been focused on relevant and engaging material. The risk of engaging in novel behavior can be managed with inclusion of peers and superiors and with implementation of small incremental changes that can be corrected or adjusted if necessary.

The risk involved in taking action can be managed by making each action small and discrete. Support from experienced facilitators and peers further reduce risk. Successes add up over time while failures are captured and adjustments made to avoid repeats. Taking action provides the opportunity for powerful learning processes of feedback and reflection.^x Learners ask; What happened?, What can I learn from what happened?, What will I do next as a result? After repeating this process a number of times, learners become self-sufficient and can drive their own learning and development. This self sufficiency further supports them to become more adaptable leaders and managers.

The brain science behind learning from action

It is now pretty widely understood that we learn through taking action.^{xi} Our dopamine system is finely tuned to make us 'learn' from these unexpected results. Much of today's AI software development programs are developed under this paradigm; to initially make random moves and learn from mistakes (and successes).

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4 While building... Permanent support systems

Learners build permanent support systems

I did a great business writing course on the 'Pyramid Principle' I arrived back at work jazzed, ready to try out the new techniques but the feedback from my manager and peers was, '...Oh that's not how we do it'. I had no support and I was dejected. The support system at work wasn't ready for what I had learnt.

⁴ Mistakes carry a lot more learning 'weight' in AI systems just as they do within our brains.

Humans are intensely social beings and what our peers do and say matters. Research in neuroscience⁵ proves that our social interactions and emotions are paramount to our performance and wellness.^{xiii} Good learning programs respect this and foster rich interaction between participants. However these programs eventually end, often leaving participants back in an unsupportive work environment.^{xii}

Therefore it is critical for development programs to have an environment of support that is ‘built in’ to participant’s workplaces. Peers, support staff, and leaders are all critical social networks and should all be involved in the program. It isn’t just social support systems either; organizational processes, systems and performance measurements have a large influence over what people do. The design of any development program needs to be aligned and integrated with these wider support systems (and vice versa).



Permanent support systems in action

One of the best examples we found was groups of 3 or 4 peers taking two hours a month to meet and discuss⁴ how to improve how they lead. They planned actions and held each other accountable by following the following simple process; 1) Discussed aspirations and shared current challenges 2) Inspired each other with ideas to overcome the challenges 3) Planned and committed to action that was reviewed at the next meeting.

Converging research supports using strong support systems for learning and development

- Hackman’s research on team performance^{xiii} highlights both how we overstate the role of a ‘leader’ versus the collective impact of the team and the importance of supportive context.
- Google’s ‘Oxygen’ study⁶ found ‘coaching others’ the most distinguishing competency of its best leaders.
- John Seely Brown in ‘A New Culture of Learning’^{xiv} (2011), highlights the importance of social systems and peers to learning.
- James Surowiecki in ‘Wisdom of the Crowds’^{xvi} shows how individuals working alone don’t have the cognitive power or creativity required for complex challenges but individuals working in teams do.

All of this evidence suggests that development programs should align with and/or develop social and organizational support systems that will remain in place after the program has finished.

5 Repeat... to build a habit

Learners build a proactive learning habit

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Going back to when you learnt to ride a bike; did you learn in one lesson, an event, or a series of attempts? We are sure it was a series of attempts. Yet many learning and development efforts are structured as an event, ‘during the day you will learn...’. This is not how we learn new behaviors.

5 For an interesting range of material on this topic check <http://neuroleadership.org/>

6 For a summary of Google’s oxygen study see <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/business/13hire.html?pagewanted=all>

Event-based development builds a dependence mind-set. When material is ‘taught’ during a single event, we ‘train’ learners that development is something that only occurs on a course. They believe that they need access to an ‘expert’ in order to learn.

We propose that learners should be guided through an extended development process. This process should be standardized and repeated so that participants can eventually perform the process on their own. As mentioned, the process should focus on helping learners identify challenges or opportunities that they can resolve through discovering new knowledge, taking action and strengthening their support networks. The learning and development effort has turned from ‘give a man a fish’ to ‘teach a man to fish’, or as scholars call it, a deuterio-learning⁷ process.



Repeat to build a habit in action

Adeption programs use a clearly defined process for every module they run that is the same regardless of the topic. This ‘decoupling’ of content from process allows leaders to repeatedly use the same process to reflect and action plan during the program. By the time the program has finished, many people continue to use the process to help drive their own self development initiatives.

Experts agree — we need repetition that supports adaptability

A repeatable process that equips participants with ongoing learning and development skills is important for two reasons. First, human brains learn best through repetition. As John Medina in his book ‘Brain Rules’^{xvi} puts it, ‘repeat to remember and remember to repeat’. Second, a number of researchers have found that the most effective leaders are adaptive — they are able to change and adapt their approaches and learn new ones as situations change. McCall, Lombardo and Morrison (1998) found that newly promoted managers who relied on the skills that got them promoted, often failed in their new roles. As the title of master executive coach Marshall Goldsmith’s book suggests, ‘What got you here won’t get you there’.^{xvii} Instead we need to help people continuously learn so they can adapt and grow as situations change. Those familiar with Deming’s Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle^{xviii} of continuous improvement will understand the value of a repeatable process that supports adaptability.

Finally, providing learners with a repeatable learning process provides certainty and stability in an uncertain environment. Our brain craves patterns and predictability⁸ and a standardized learning process helps provides this certainty.

6 All in an... Optimized learning environment

Apply knowledge of optimal environments for learning and brain performance

Recent advances in neuroscience have taught us a lot about the optimal performance environment for the brain. Three important areas not already discussed in this paper are; the importance of vision, meaning, and the concept of brain plasticity.

⁷ Deuterio-learning is essentially learning how to learn.

⁸ Neuroscientists J Lehrer and D Rock both discuss how our brains seek patterns and predictability — however the link between this and the patterns in day and night and seasons is speculation on my part.

In, 'Brain Rules', John Medina (2008) states that vision trumps all other senses^x. Over 50% of our brain's processing capacity is used for vision. Therefore visual aids and frameworks should be used as much as possible to facilitate learning and development efforts.

Human minds process meaning before detail^{xxi} and somewhat paradoxically we remember emotive stories better than discrete simple information.^{xxii} This can be illustrated by a simple memory game. If you try to memorize a list of words by only thinking about the words alone you will struggle. However if you create a story that links all of the words together into something of higher meaning, you will remember many more. The 'meaning' gives the detail more connections in the brain. Emotion is also evoked and emotion and memory are tightly linked. Given these phenomena are well known why do learning programs still regularly subject learners to reams of content, slides and detail that have little 'meaning'?



Optimized learning environment in action

We found many inspiring examples of optimized learning environments including; Steve Jobs famous walking meetings, the use of music in workshops, large visual displays that require learners to constantly move from one place to another, amusing videos to transition between workshop stages, and activities taking place during treks in the outdoors.

In the bestseller 'The Brain that Changes Itself'^{xxiii} Norman Doidge illustrates how our brains are plastic and continue changing throughout our lives. There are various ways to make our brains 'more plastic' and we can use these to our advantage during learning. Laughter, the mild pressure⁹ brought on by challenge, and a positive state of mind can all increase brain plasticity. Therefore building environments that promote these into development programs will help get sustained behavior change for learners.

Sounds great, but how do we implement this?

We found many examples illustrating how the framework can work in practice and deliver impressive results in the process. Some are:

- *Adeption*¹⁰ delivers leadership and productivity improvement programs based on all elements of our framework. Learners are supported through a repeatable process to diagnose their own opportunities and root cause issues before finding inspiration to plan actions to overcome them. Strong internal support systems are developed by involving managers and peers in the program. These programs have achieved impressive results. Over 80% of Adeption's participants are rated by peers as 'significantly improving' their leadership skills.¹¹ Participants also make 20 to 30% gains in personal productivity.¹²
- *Designers within the Centre for Creative Leadership (CCL)* have developed programs that ignore traditional 'teaching' and instead allow learners to gain experience through problem-solving real-world projects to achieve stated business goals. Traditional teaching is only introduced if and when it is required to achieve these outcomes.
- *Huthwaite, a sales performance training organization*, has trained over 60,000 people. This sample has demonstrated measurable and sustained sales performance improvement as a result of the training. The, 'Four Truths of Changing Performance' that guide Huthwaite's programs have similarities to our framework. The truths are; change doesn't come easy and the engine of change is measurement (organizational systems and processes), adults only learn what they deem important and relevant (has meaning), classroom time is expensive and should be focused on interpersonal practice and feedback (social systems), and change takes time (a process that requires repetition).

⁹ We need to be careful with pressure or stress. The more severe 'threat response' stress only improves motor function at the expense of all other functions and reduces brain plasticity.

¹⁰ The founder of Adeption is the author of this paper.

¹¹ Based on before and after 360 surveys measuring a standardized leadership competency set, n=50+ tested six months after the programs have finished.

¹² Personal productivity gains are self reported but also validated by managers of participants.

- *Henry Mintzberg*¹³ has developed a successful peer based learning system called, ‘Coaching Ourselves’. This is perhaps the most radical example yet of our proposed framework in action. Learners learn and take action from downloaded meeting plans that they execute 100% by themselves — without a facilitator or trainer at all.
- *New technology solutions are also paving the way:*
 - QStream¹⁴ provides a platform that supports a simple question answer based learning system. It is based on concepts of; crowd-sourced answers, spaced repetition for retention, social interactions and online-anywhere access.
 - Another system quickly gaining traction is Quora.¹⁵ Quora is focused on helping connect people to the content/knowledge that they need to know. It is a textbook example of a tool supporting ‘pull’ learning.
 - The Khan Academy¹⁶ is a platform supporting on demand learning for people where and when they want it. By November 2012 the Khan Academy had delivered over 147 million lessons.

These and other similar initiatives are redefining how people develop as leaders and managers.

To conclude

We have presented a framework that is providing an integrated, action-based learner-centric approach to developing leaders and managers. We believe that people who are developed in this way will be better equipped to lead today and tomorrow. It is ironic that today’s advances in technology have created a world better suited to the type of learning environments our Serengeti ancestors evolved in. Just as then, we will see people:

- 1 Learning in order to do things meaningful to them (survive and thrive).
- 2 Getting inspiration from knowledge embedded in the environment they live and work in.
- 3 Taking actions to create the future they want and learning along the way.
- 4 Building strong and enduring support systems with each other and the environment they live and work in.
- 5 Relying on predictable processes and patterns to cope with inherent unpredictability.
- 6 All within environments that humans evolved to work and learn in.

The ideas and concepts in this paper have been developed and influenced with the support of a large number of talented co-collaborators from a range of disciplines from all around the world. We extend a special thanks to everyone who has helped form these ideas and will continue to help improve and refine them. This includes Prof Jay Roa, Prof Sebastian Fixson, Prof Heidi Neck, Prof Dwight Gertz, President Leonard A. Schlesinger, Nick Petrie, Bert De Coutere, Marea O’Sullivan, Logan Westwater, Mark Watkins, Charleen Tupper, Melanie Cash, Paul Tisdale, Gary Jackson, Anna Russell, Pete Schibli, Nathan Searle, Julian Keith-Loran, Matt Murphy, Emma Sanders-Edwards, Don McVeigh, Janine Irvin, and Cynthia Johnson.

¹³ <http://www.mintzberg.org/>

¹⁴ <http://qstream.com/>

¹⁵ <http://www.quora.com/>

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