

The New Model of Live, Cohort-Based Leadership Development



Overview

As the organization of companies becomes flatter and more dynamic, workers are often thrust into leadership positions, whether it be as supervisors, managers, or simply project leaders. More than 80% of businesses today operate as highly interconnected and empowered networks of teams, which expands the definition of leaders to include everyone in the organization, not just leaders designated by spans of control.¹ More so, the capabilities that leaders need have also changed radically.

Organizations today are increasingly recognizing that leadership development is not just for assigned leaders but instead for everyone in the organization, irrespective of whether they have people management responsibilities. But this poses a challenge for learning and development (L&D) functions when it comes to balancing the personalization and scalability, as well as the cost and impact of their learning programs for leaders. Live, cohort-based leadership development is a new approach that provides a plausible and promising solution to this challenge. It is, in fact, gaining popularity among highly mature organizations that want to not only democratize access to leadership development but also provide a model that integrates high-quality training content and facilitation by experts, small-group collaboration, and capability development in a virtual environment.

In this report, we will unpack how the definition of leadership has evolved, the leadership capabilities that matter most, and how cohort-based and digitally enabled synchronous learning experiences can support development for today's leaders.

Leadership Development: What Has Changed Today

Most of the original intellectual property on leadership strategies comes from the iconic book *The Leadership Pipeline*. The book posited that leaders go through six stages of slow, steady, and upward sloping development over time. In this model, an individual takes decades to traverse this ladder, learning new things at each level. For example, when you move from individual contributor to supervisor, you learn how to manage and coach people. When you become a manager of managers, you learn how to budget and select leaders. As a functional or business manager, you need to learn how to budget, drive value, and increase profit. And as an enterprise manager, you must learn how to operate a multifunctional enterprise. This architecture of leadership is based on linear, hierarchical organizational structures, which is not how businesses operate today. Leadership has changed, and traditional models of leadership development no longer make the cut. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Leadership Development—What Has Changed Today

Traditional	New
Span of controls define leaders	Spans of influence, connections, and contributions define leaders
Leadership development is for leaders or people managers	Leadership development is for everyone
Based on the idea of linear hierarchical, organizational structures	Based on the idea of smaller, flatter, and empowered networks of teams
Programmatic, episodic training	Contextual, continuous, and experiential development
Limited to skills like customer-centricity innovation, execution, and accountability	Includes PowerSkills that build trust, inspire excellence, and create happiness
Leaders trained to control teams and manage performance	Leaders developed to empower teams and unleash performance

Source: *The Josh Bersin Company, 2022*

¹ Organization Design research, The Josh Bersin Company, 2022.

Leadership Development Is for Everyone

Traditional models assume that growth takes the path toward leadership or management, which is not the path every employee chooses. For example, many engineers, production specialists, operations people, and sales executives may never want to go into management. And still, these individuals impact and influence how their peers and teams perform, positioning themselves as leaders in their own capacity and contribution. As we mentioned, most businesses today operate as smaller, flatter, and highly interconnected and empowered networks of teams, greatly expanding the definition of leaders to include everyone in the organization, not just leaders designated by spans of control.

Forward-thinking companies are embracing this shift in the definition of leaders. For example, the “unbossed” leadership strategy forms the bedrock of Novartis’s employer branding approach. It suggests that organizations should involve employees at all levels of the company: frontline,

management, and senior leadership. “By involving everyone, full engagement beyond the leadership team is cultivated, resulting with a collaborative leadership style,” said Jason Tan, Head of HR for People and Organization, Novartis².

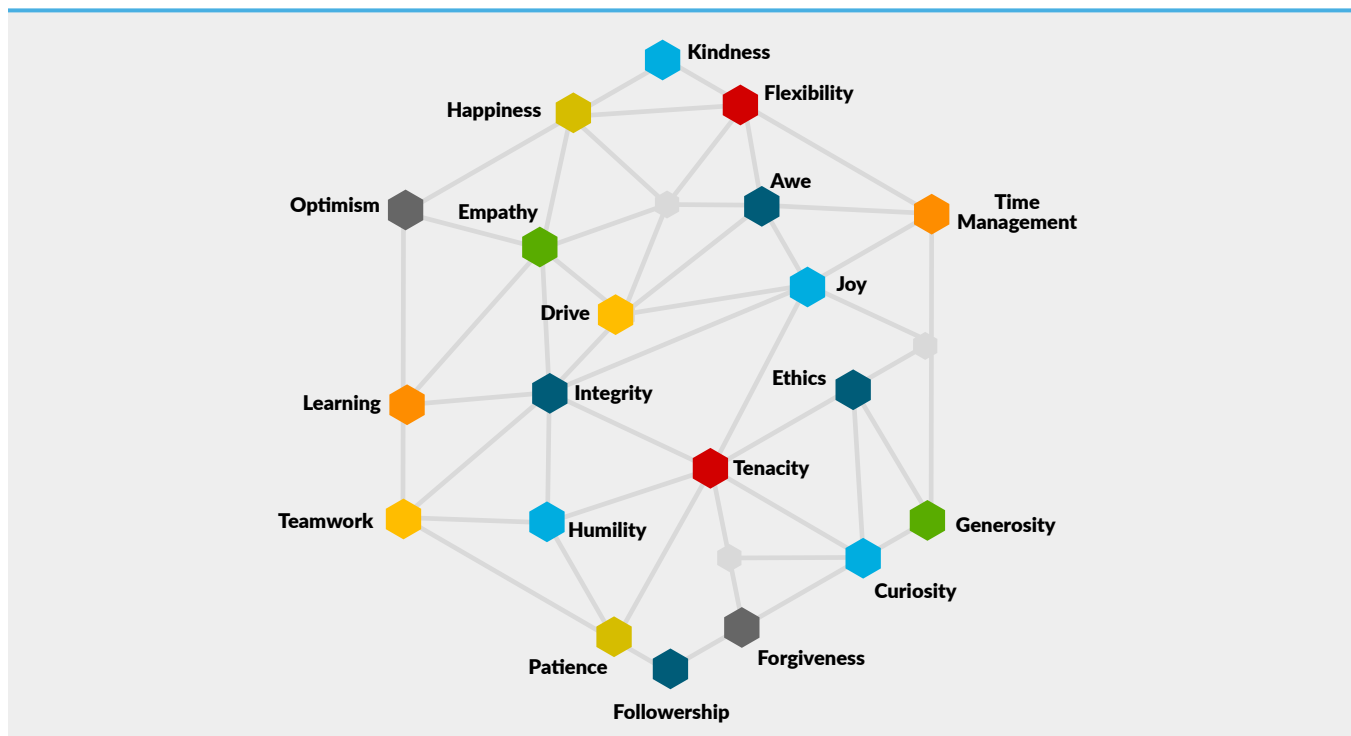
Another notable example is LEGO, the toy maker known for its plastic building blocks. LEGO defines leadership as the act of creating a safe space, like a playground, where everybody feels energized every day, making leadership a capability for everyone in the organization, not just leaders.

The Most Important Leadership Skills Have Changed

Traditional leadership models typically include skills like customer centricity, innovation, execution, accountability, and teamwork. These are all important skills, but they don’t clearly articulate how leaders need to act and behave to be good leaders.

UC Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center is a research body that studies happiness. It has defined characteristics

Figure 2: PowerSkills for Leaders



Source: IBM, Greater Good Science Center, Pymetrics, and The Josh Bersin Company, 2020

² Case study: How an “unbossed” leadership approach drives Novartis’ employer branding journey. Staff Writer/Human Resources Online, October 21, 2019.

and words that create happiness such as kindness, empathy, joy, and several others listed in Figure 2. These words, ironically, rarely ever surface in most organizations' leadership models, mission statements, leadership assessments, and job descriptions for leaders. If leaders must truly inspire excellence, build trust, and catalyze a positive employee experience, they need to create "happiness" in the workplace. The skills they need to do this are what we call "PowerSkills" (see Figure 2). Organizations need to reinforce these particular skills in every way possible, recognize and reward for these skills, and make them a core element of their culture.

Scheduled Programs: No Longer Sufficient

Leadership development is not just an episodic program. The idea of building a leadership pipeline through "development programs" and "a well-defined schedule of experiences" is no longer sufficient: we also need to provide mentoring, coaching, and lots of external and internal exposure to leadership experiences. Leadership development should exist

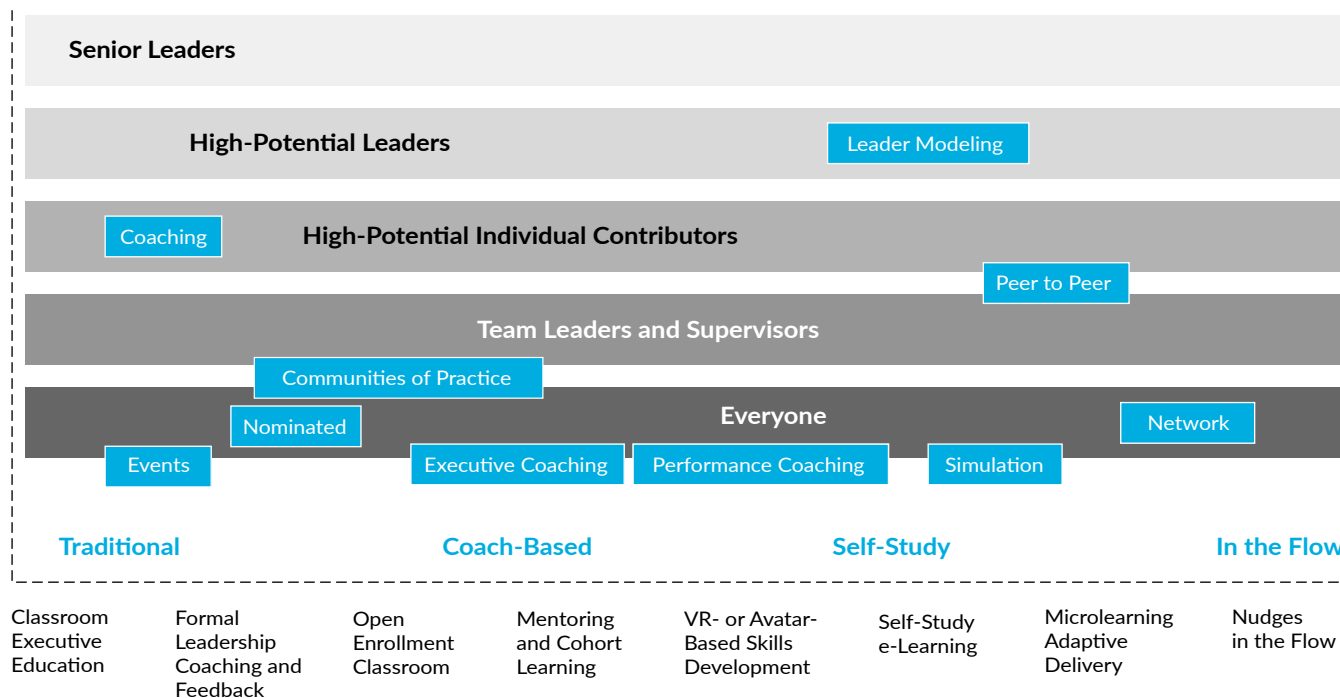
as an end-to-end continuum and make the shift from episodic to continuous and ongoing experiential journeys. The most successful leadership curriculum is about as diverse and blended as anything could possibly be, and Figure 3, below, is a model that shows the range of opportunities from left to right, and how companies can mix and match them.

Traditional leadership development, which followed a phased, architected process, does not work anymore. Building a new breed of leaders requires a new, rigorous approach to hone capabilities inside the organization by leveraging expertise from outside the organization—ultimately supporting high-quality, specialized, and scalable leadership development.

Building Leaders at Scale: A Business Imperative

In our Corporate Learning study of over 1,000 organizations worldwide, we saw that building leaders at scale is a hallmark of the most mature learning organizations, which facilitate

Figure 3: The Continuum of Leadership Development



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

growth in the flow of work.³ These organizations help every employee build their capabilities and navigate their careers in ways that will unlock their full growth potential.

To build leaders at scale, organizations must democratize access to leadership development for all employees, and across all career levels. High-performing organizations are seven times more likely to develop leaders at all levels and are twice as likely to be great places to work because of their investments in leadership development⁴.

Clover Health, for example, a healthcare company headquartered in Tennessee, offers a broad range of leadership development opportunities ranging from foundational programs for entry-level employees, a multitude of cohort-based trainings for emerging and new-to-role leaders, mentoring for individual contributors, and one-to-one coaching and reverse mentoring for senior executives.

The Missing Middle: Building PowerSkills at Scale

PowerSkills are traditionally known as "soft skills," but in fact they are hard to develop because it happens over time and these skills are strengthened through experiences, interactions with experts and peers, and amplified in group settings where people can challenge each other and create opportunities to apply and practice. These skills are developed through a combination of education; meticulously designed experiences that can help individuals practice those skills; as well as through interaction, discussion, and application of these skills with others.

To fast-track PowerSkills development, organizations must design programs and content that span across time and diverse topics as well as include a solid foundation in research and facilitation expertise. It requires creating an environment where individuals can have intimate conversations, healthy debate, and challenge each other as they strengthen these skills. Developing these programs in-house can cause a significant drain on any company's L&D resources. And as the workforce today is largely remote and distributed, doing these

in-person is not a plausible option. At the same time, the plethora of self-directed learning resources available in millions of content libraries do not drive impact due to the lack of interactivity and experiences.

The missing middle ground is now a hugely promising market of expert and instructor-led live, cohort-based virtual trainings. Innovative L&D vendors like Hone are helping organizations optimize management training and leader development through highly scalable, engaging, and collaborative training experiences. Platforms like Hone combine live classes with the power of technology to create interactive, cohort-based learning experiences to drive behavior change around leadership; diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); wellbeing; change management; conflict resolution; and feedback.

Live, Cohort-Based Trainings: Quality Meets Scalability

Live, cohort-based training solutions are surfacing as a highly sought-after approach for bridging the gap between broad-based general learning and specialized in-person development programs that are personalized but less scalable. These solutions specialize in designing and facilitating programs based on research-based tried-and-tested content, replicating the elements of personalized classroom trainings in a collaborative, small-group, and digital environment and help organizations build PowerSkills at scale. Organizations that offer carefully designed, cohort-based trainings on PowerSkills have 20% lower turnover, 46% higher leadership quality, and fill roles 23% more quickly.⁵

A Continuous and Collaborative Learning Experience

Providing one-off scheduled leadership programs is often a lost investment, especially if people can't apply and practice what they learn—in fact, Ebbinghaus's Forgetting Curve⁶ validates that learners forget 90% of what they learn when they aren't able to practice. Providing continuous leadership development warrants a substantial commitment and strain on the bandwidth of leaders and L&D. This in most cases isn't feasible,

3 *The Definitive Guide to Corporate Learning*, Josh Bersin and Nehal Nangia/The Josh Bersin Company, 2022.

4 *Ibid.*

5 "The Changing Face Of Leadership: 10 New Research Findings All Leaders Need to Understand." Kathy Caprino/Forbes, February 28, 2018.

6 *Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology*, Hermann Ebbinghaus/Martino Fine Books, September 12, 2011.

especially in a time when 81% of the workforce already reports feeling overwhelmed and at the risk of a burnout.⁷

Pioneering L&D technology vendors like Hone lean heavily on the principles of collaborative learning to facilitate leadership development for broader audiences, and in ways that enable peer interaction, exposure to executives, and experiences that help cement learnings through practice. They create learning journeys spanning across several months and are facilitated through a robust tech platform that allows tracking, measurement, as well as pre- and post-assessment surveys to assess change on crucial leader behaviors (see Figure 4).

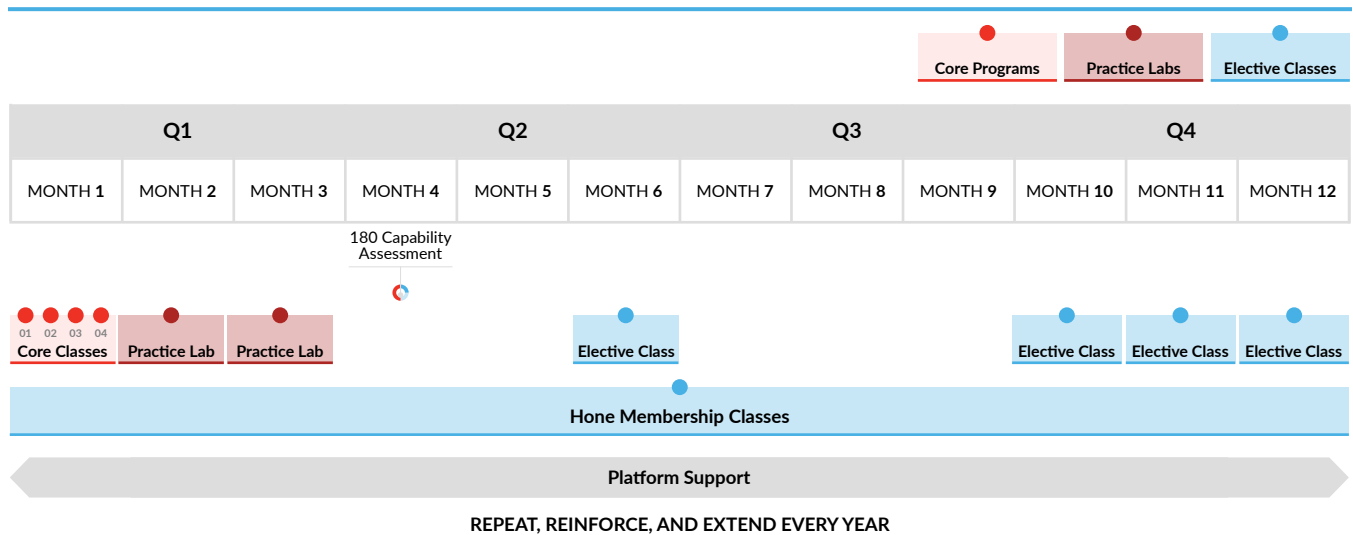
By deploying live, cohort-based leadership development programs to carefully composed groups of people with shared learning goals, organizations can affordably and exponentially increase the reach and range of these experiences.

Use Cases and Functionalities

In our conversations with several organizations taking advantage of live, cohort-based, digital leadership development solutions, we've come across a variety of use cases and functionalities that drive value for its learners and the company. These are included in the following section for companies considering embarking on this journey.

- **Knowledge-sharing and collaboration:** “Learning to lead” is a journey, and various experiences, interactions, and observations help inform and shape the journey for each individual. These solutions are designed to enable interactivity and collaboration among learners and include activities such as small break-out discussions, online communities, and the ability to share knowledge and experiences with each other and with coaches. This modality offers learners the best of instructor-led, live, collaborative, and digital learning experiences.
- **Essential management training:** Good leadership may look different and vary based on the culture, mission, and vision of each organization. However, the essential management skills like communicating effectively, managing difficult conversations, managing biases, etc., are applicable in the context of every organization. Leveraging external experts for these trainings is advantageous in several ways. It frees up capacity for L&D teams to focus their internal skills development efforts on skills that are unique to the context of the business and cannot be outsourced. It also gives employees access to experts who do this as a profession and therefore provide curriculum based on extensive research and validated across thousands of learners.
- **Inclusion training:** Inclusion is a C-suite priority for every organization and is by far the most common use

Figure 4: Hone’s Annual Learning Experience



Source: Hone, 2022

⁷ Global Talent Trends 2022, Mercer, 2022.

case of group learning and development. Using external facilitators to deliver trainings around sensitive topics will likely result in higher reception rates since there are relatively fewer preconceived notions associated with the instructor. For instance, if a team member does not consider a leader inclusive, they are less likely to be receptive to their wisdom around inclusive behaviors. External coaches and facilitators bring in more objectivity when it comes to topics like DEI, which are very personal and subject to opinion.

- **Customized soft skills training:** Coaching and cohort-based training solutions create huge networks of coaches and facilitators, who bring in deep expertise and experience, across regions and countries. This allows vendors, as well as their coaches/trainers, to flex and customize curriculums as and when needed, while not being constrained by a “one size fits all” curriculum. These vendors often can customize content for region-specific as well as company-specific needs. For instance, while there are several change management models that work well, if a company uses a specific change model that applies for its context, it has the ability to weigh in on the program design to ensure it is relevant and applicable.
- **Integrated learning experiences:** These experiences integrate coaching into the company’s existing leadership development programs and integrate with the human resources information system (HRIS) and the learning management system (LMS). These integrations make tracking, reporting, analyzing participant metrics, and linking to learning journeys an effortless exercise while giving organizations actionable insights on their learners. These platforms also can automate training operations and often come with some forms of assessments and 180/360 feedback mechanisms. For instance, Hone’s platform automates calendar invites, communication, reminders, feedback aggregation and post-session follow-ups on a daily, monthly and quarterly basis—taking a hefty burden off of the L&D administrative team.
- **Assessment and evaluation:** This market is becoming more sophisticated with vendors striving to ensure that organizations can substantiate tangible value from these offerings. These platforms are supplemented with pre- and post-training assessments that assess gaps, help define clear needs, and enable tracking progress after training. Most coaching and training vendors work with companies

to determine a “cool off” period after which they measure the impact, behavior change, and retention from the learning. The goal is not a one-and-done training, but experiences that facilitate long-lasting behavior change.

A Proven High-Value Investment

We find that 74% of high-performing organizations use the expertise of external coaches or training professionals coupled with collaborative learning for leadership development.⁸ These organizations drive significantly higher talent and innovation outcomes because of this approach. Cohort-based leadership development experiences facilitated by trained external experts provide an inlet for external expertise around leadership development, and an outlet for workers to share and learn from experts in a safe and stimulating environment.

Companies that provide access to cohort-based leadership development are:

2.4× more likely to build the skills and capabilities needed to enable career growth

1.9× more likely to innovate effectively

1.6× more likely to enable employees to grow, develop and unleash their full potential

Source: *The Josh Bersin Company, 2022*

Conclusion

Leveraging cohort-based leadership development solutions is not outsourcing training but a way of strategically providing experiences, exposure, and access to leadership experts in a scalable and engaging way. High-performing companies see this approach as a credible way of growing leadership capabilities at scale. These platforms have the potential to supercharge the corporate training experience by bringing together the expertise of huge networks of coaches, mentors, and certified trainers; research-based curriculum on diverse topics; and digitally enabled collaborative learning experiences. It is a great time for HR leaders to take advantage of this hypergrowing market and strategically invest in growing their leaders.

⁸ Corporate Learning research, The Josh Bersin Company, 2022.

Clover Health Empowers Leaders with Capabilities and Connections

Clover Health was founded in 2014 and is headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee. Clover Health is a healthcare company focused on seniors who have historically lacked access to affordable, high-quality healthcare. By taking a holistic approach to understanding the health needs and social risk factors of its members, the company aims to provide great care, in a sustainable way, by having a business model built around improving medical outcomes while lowering avoidable costs. This strategy is underpinned by its proprietary software platform, the Clover Assistant, which is designed to aggregate patient data from across the health ecosystem to support clinical decision-making by presenting physicians and other providers with real-time, personalized recommendations at the point of care.

By making Medicare accessible and empowering physicians to make effective healthcare recommendations, Clover Health strives to ensure that people who have historically lacked access to affordable healthcare can get the care they need. As of 2022, Clover Health has more than 650 employees, and has offices in Nashville, San Francisco, Jersey City, Atlanta, and Hong Kong.

Empowering People to “Lead People Well”

Clover Health’s mission is to improve every life. It strives to accomplish that by providing underserved populations with access to high-quality healthcare and empowering physicians to serve communities effectively through technology. To do that, the company realized the need to empower its own people to take risks, be innovative, act with integrity, make good decisions, and ultimately, as Whitley Harris, Senior Manager, Talent Development at Clover Health, stated, “We want people to feel empowered—to lead people well.”

Defining Core Leadership Competencies

The first step was to define “lead people well,” that is, the behaviors that Clover wanted to foster in leaders across the

company to help them cultivate and lead high-performing teams. Clover Health identified eight core competencies that they believe contribute to driving individual and organizational performance, listed below.

- Accountability
- Articulating vision and setting goals
- Building relationships
- Communication
- Delegating responsibility
- Diversity and inclusion
- Managing and motivating teams
- Self-awareness

Empowering Employees, Level by Level

In 2021, the talent development team at Clover established a holistic leadership development journey to support development in different ways depending on what is needed at each career level. These programs covered the entire spectrum of career levels at Clover Health, as seen in Figure 5 on the following page.

Designing Leadership Programs for Scale and Impact

As is true for most organizations, the biggest group of leaders fall in the mid-career levels. The experiences and exposure available to leaders in these stages are foundational in shaping their leadership styles and approaches throughout their careers. To accelerate skills of leaders across mid-career levels, Clover Health launched the “Management Acceleration” program in partnership with Hone—a platform that supports live and virtual cohort-based leadership development through professional coaches. This program bridges the gap between broad-based training and self-directed, one-on-one coaching. It enables knowledge-sharing and collaboration, creating a safe and stimulating environment for learners to develop new skills.

The Management Acceleration program began as a 3-month program with two half-day sessions dedicated to self-

Figure 5: Leader Development across All Levels at Clover Health

Career Level	Program Name	Capability Focus	Provider	Duration
Emerging Talent Levels 1 to 3	Pathways	Clover Health created this program to ensure employees have the foundational skills for success. These include business communication, managing up, and building relationships.	Clover Health	4 weeks
Mid-Level Managers Levels 3 to 6	Management Acceleration	The program addresses the largest group of leaders in the organization across 10 weeks with weekly 60- to 90-minute sessions. These sessions aim to build self-awareness and support capabilities for effective performance management, hiring, and fostering diversity and inclusion. The cohorts in each session comprise about 60 people, who then break into smaller cohorts for learning and sharing.	Clover Health and Hone	10 weeks
Experienced Leaders/ Executives Levels 5 to 9	One-on-One Coaching	The company provides experienced and tenured leaders with access to one-on-one coaches for six months to a year. These coaches help leaders self-reflect and address personal skill gaps rather than build generic leadership skills.	Sounding Board	6-12 months
Across all levels Levels 1 to 10	Mentoring and Reverse Mentoring	Clover Health offers a mentorship program where senior leaders mentor junior employees to share experience and expertise to help navigate careers. They also offer a reverse mentorship program where junior employees mentor senior leaders on diversity issues. The pairings are facilitated by HR, and most people have 6 to 8 sessions during the 3-month mentorship cycle.	Clover Health	3 months

Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2022

awareness, performance management, hiring, and diversity and inclusion. The group sessions would set the context within cohorts of about 60 people, and then participants would break into smaller cohorts for learning and sharing in “peer learning circles.” Clover Health has now tailored Management Acceleration to a 10-week program with weekly 60- to 90-minute sessions and will continue to iterate on the program in 2022 and beyond.

Clover Health also defined evaluation metrics early in the design process. “Our ability to clearly connect what we did in the program to organizational impact was key to our success,” said Harris. To understand how the program would impact Clover Health, the company also deployed pre- and post-program assessments to managers and their direct reports.

Empowerment through Capabilities and Connections

The combination of education, experiences, interactions, and exposure to professional coaches through the “Management Acceleration Program” helped people build new skills and develop new connections across the organization. “Participants were able to make connections across the organization that they had not been able to previously. Cohort-based programs like Management Acceleration help leaders break down silos and connect individuals across the organization to one another,” said Harris.

As an outcome of the Management Acceleration program, people felt supported across all competencies identified for being effective leaders at the organization. They also

felt empowered and equipped to deliver their best work, substantiated by an improvement in self-ratings and ratings from direct reports in each competency area. The program also exceeded their target scores on learning transfer, effectiveness, and satisfaction, as seen below.

- **Learning Transfer:** 100% of responding direct reports indicate that their managers shared knowledge from the program with them during a 1:1 (Target: 85%)
- **Effectiveness:** 89% of participants indicated that the program was valuable (Target: 85%)
- **Satisfaction:** 90% of participants indicated that the program was a “great experience” (Target 85%)

What's Next?

Cohort-based coaching has enabled Clover Health to drive value for its workforce by building leadership skills aligned with their core competency areas. As next steps, the company aims to continue building skills in their leaders through a new development framework that better aligns programs to organizational priorities. By doing so, Clover believes it will support leaders in building high-performance teams that can meet the company's goals in 2023 and beyond. ■

Rover Builds “Connecting with People” as a Manager Capability

Rover was founded in 2011 as an app and website to connect pet parents with loving pet sitters and dog walkers in neighborhoods across the U.S., Canada, the U.K., and Europe. Today, it's the world's largest network of five-star pet sitters and dog walkers. The company believes that everyone deserves the unconditional love of a pet, and its mission is to make it easier to experience that love. Rover empowers its community of trusted pet sitters and dog walkers to run their own pet care businesses on Rover with the tools and security of a global company to back them. With approximately 500 employees across different locations in the U.S. and abroad, Rover serves clients in 10 countries and more than 24,000 neighborhoods around the world. More than 3 million pet parents have booked care through Rover.

Leaders as a Lever for Shaping Change

Rover's business is largely tied to the travel industry. When people go on trips and need to leave their pets behind, they look to Rover to provide pet care connections. While the travel industry slowed down during the pandemic, there was a significant increase in the number of people adopting or buying pets. “They were pandemic puppies,” said Peggy Marvin, Senior HR Manager for the business partner team at Rover. “This created an opportunity for us as a business. We wanted to meet the needs of those new pet parents.” To continue to grow the business in new, creative, and agile ways to support this new segment of potential customers, Rover wanted its leaders to take charge. This required a greater investment in leaders who could steward this shift.

A Core Value: Devotion to Each Other as People

Rover's core value of “devotion to each other as people” instills a collective commitment toward ensuring everyone contributes to their full potential and was critical for supporting the new business model shift in Rover. An underlying core skill for driving collective success was “connecting with people” in the most effective ways. To build this skill for customer success, they needed to strengthen this skill within teams.

Rover decided to invest in all its managers, as well as aspiring managers, to bolster this skill across the organization.

Rover partnered with Hone to build manager capability in small-group, expert-led, and live virtual classes. The company decided that everyone who is an aspiring manager within the organization, along with every people manager, would go through Hone's manager fundamentals classes. As of 2022, about 20% of Rover's employees have gone through the training. Each group comprises 8 to 12 employees to allow for ample interaction and connection building.

Manager Fundamentals Training at Rover

Rover launched a comprehensive suite of three training programs for its people managers and aspiring managers—two of these programs have already been deployed, and the third program is currently in the works as listed below.

Manager Core 101. Manager Core 101 features four classes, with 60 to 90 minutes for each class. This class was designed for managers to develop the people around them by identifying people's strengths; empowering them to make their own decisions; and creating a culture of accountability on one's team. It is a live, virtual track delivering essential leadership skills such as listening deeply and asking powerful questions of others. Facilitators guided Rover employees through experiential exercises, role play, and group coaching to reach their highest potential and deliver exceptional results for the company. Approximately 55 Rover employees—20 of them being aspiring managers—went through 101. Manager Core 101 lays the foundation for leadership.

Manager Core 201. The next step is more about high performance. Participants learn how to set powerful goals, prioritize the right work, delegate diligently, and evaluate individual performance. This course is for those who previously completed the 101 series. The typical cohort size was 8 to 12 people since Rover wanted to make the most of session engagement and breakout groups. The company

Figure 6: Manager Fundamentals Training at Rover

Manager 101	Manager 201	Manager 301
The Coach Approach	Coaching	Motivate Anyone to Do Their Best Work
Build High Trust Relationships	Prioritize the Right Work	Manage to Your Team's Strength
Giving Feedback That Lands	Delegate Like a Pro	Create Compelling Career Paths
Leading Highly Effective 1:1s	Evaluate Team Performance	Personalize Motivation to Your Team

Source: Rover, 2022

wanted to make sure that people don't just sit and listen but that they contribute and are actively engaged in the training conversations. "The smaller the group, the more opportunity it gave for each learner to engage, actively participate, interact with peers, and therefore implement what they learned with their teams," said Marvin.

Manager Core 301. Having trained its employees in management fundamentals and then being a high-performing manager, the third step is creating high performance and growth for others in the organization. "It's about developing oneself, and then it's about developing other people," said Marvin. Manager 301 is focused on growth, motivation, and career development. As of 2022, about 30 people are in the pipeline for the Manager 301 Core Track. With this additional training, about 100 Rover employees will have gone through the manager training in 2022. A summary of what each program covers is included above (see Figure 6). A few weeks before participating in any of these programs, employees undergo a preassessment. Thirty days after the program concludes, they participate in a reinforcement session as well

as a post-assessment, which allows for a 10-week period to assess behavior change because of the trainings.

An Increased Net Promoter Score of Managers

Within a year of deploying these programs, Rover experienced a significantly high net promoter score (NPS) for its managers. Eighty-eight percent of employees said they would recommend their manager to others—which was a testimony to strong manager capabilities in the organization. Managers who attended these programs reported feeling better equipped to give meaningful feedback and lead highly effective one on ones. It brought people together and helped build stronger connections among Rover's people. The modules helped build the skills needs for leveraging these connections to support high performance and growth, which were essential to the business case for building manager capability in the organization. Through the skill of connecting with people more effectively and helping them deliver higher performance, Rover is able to engage its workers more while serving its customers better. ■

Course Hero Builds Trust and Belonging through DEI Training

Founded in 2006, Course Hero, Inc., is a leading education provider, offering a suite of learning resources and tools to help anyone learn more deeply, more effectively, and affordably throughout the arc of their career. The Course Hero, Inc., portfolio includes CourseHero.com, an online learning platform of academic resources; CliffsNotes, the original and study guide company; LitCharts, a creator of literature resources; QuillBot, an AI-powered platform helping people improve their writing skills; Symbolab, a pioneering developer of AI for mathematics education; and Scribbr, a leader in multilingual proofreading, editing, and citation services for academic writing. Headquartered in Redwood City, California, the company is a virtual-first organization with 450 employees and office hubs in the U.S., Canada, Israel, and India.

Societal Changes Brought DEI to the Forefront

The May 2020 death of George Floyd and subsequent racial and social unrest brought diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) to the forefront for Course Hero. Course Hero recognized the need to invest more resources in building its DEI strategy and ensuring that its people know they were cared for. “Previously, we did have programming around DEI, but it was more disjointed,” said Vicki Choi, VP of HR. There had been training sessions on unconscious bias and employee groups that were started organically, but it lacked a strong underlying strategy that consistently drove DEI efforts across the organization. “We really wanted to make sure our employees felt that we heard them and knew what was important to them, and so we decided to invest more resources and time in building an inclusive workplace,” said Choi.

A New DEI Mission and Framework

The HR leadership set off to establish a strategic framework that would integrate DEI efforts across the workforce, the workplace and the communities it serves—to link back to a common goal of being fair, equitable, and inclusive. Course Hero grounded its mission in “trust” as the foundation of its DEI strategy. Through building trusted relationships and

embracing differences, it endeavored to create equity and belonging for its workforce and stakeholders. Course Hero’s Strategic Framework includes three key components:

- **Workforce:** This area of focus addresses how Course Hero recruits, develops, and retains top talent that’s diverse and has diverse experience and backgrounds.
- **Workplace:** This represents how Course Hero educates, promotes, and communicates with its people to cultivate and reinforce inclusive behaviors.
- **Marketplace:** This area of focus addresses how Course Hero partners within its community and becomes a DEI advocate for its members and students who use their products.

Building DEI Capabilities Collectively

As part of this new DEI strategy, Course Hero wanted to first establish a collective understanding of essential DEI behaviors through education and training. It wanted to bring people together and level-set everyone on the basic definitions. “A lot of people at the company—managers, leaders, and individual contributors—don’t know necessarily what the definition of equity means, for example,” said Choi.

Course Hero started exploring ways in which it could support building these capabilities at scale, in ways that would allow people to train, interact, share knowledge, and have discussions on pertinent DEI topics. The HR leadership team identified a list of attributes that they needed in a training partner who could help advance these efforts.

Training-Partner Selection Criteria

- Ability to support training for carefully composed groups
- High-quality content and multiple short sessions
- Virtual breakout rooms to enable connection and learning among group members
- Live sessions with highly qualified and engaging facilitators

- Automated administrative work to ease the process of signing up, follow-ups, and reminders
- The ability to customize content and align it with the company's strategy and learning objectives

As Course Hero's HR team was researching different vendors, it discovered Hone—a virtual cohort-based training platform that offers live coach-led trainings along with automated administration and analytics. "Hone had 90% of what we were looking for," said Choi.

Carefully Composed Cohorts for DEI Training

Course Hero began working with Hone in early 2021 and rolled out the program to employees and manager cohorts from September to December 2021. While Course Hero rolled out the training to the entire staff, the company organized its approach to consider the fact that managers and leaders have considerable influence and a responsibility to role-model behaviors. This meant that:

- Training sessions for managers were smaller and more intimate "so that the content and the learning process could be a little bit more memorable and ingrained," said Choi.
- For employee cohorts, sessions covered broad-based topics across larger groups with relatively less interaction and a deeper focus on education.

Course Hero used the DEI Fundamentals Program, which has four sessions of 60 to 90 minutes. While employee cohorts had 60 to 70 people, manager cohorts were smaller, with 12 to 15 people each week for four weeks in a row. Each cohort went through the four sessions. Course Hero made this an optional program for employees but created a comprehensive communications plan that included a kick-off email and an

all-hands meeting announcing this would be part of the company's DEI strategy. The company made it a mandatory program for its leadership and worked with executive assistants to schedule sessions and make sure executives attended them. Course Hero sent managers reminders to check in with their employees who had not signed up and to encourage them to do so. The company met every week with Hone to track enrollment status, attendance, and post-session follow-ups.

A Culture of Trust and Belonging

The three areas of Course Hero's strategic DEI Framework enable the company to continue embedding DEI into its fabric, inside and outside of the organization, as it expands its support of students through its unique learning journey. Using an online group-based leadership training program for advancing its DEI strategy allowed Course Hero to bring people together in groups—to build DEI capabilities and trusted relationships with each other. Course Hero ran 300 people through the DEI Fundamentals program.

Course Hero's DEI Accomplishments in 2021

In 2021, Course Hero had an average 20% increase in the hiring of underrepresented minorities from Quarter 2 to Quarter 4. Through a partnership with CodePath, the company offered tech training and career mentoring to minority groups of which five received internship offers on completion of the courses. The company's employee resource groups, volunteers, and workplace team also hosted more than 20 DEI events. More than 78% of enrolled participants finished the DEI Fundamentals Training. The company was also able to increase its metric of belonging from its engagement survey by +5%, which is a tremendous jump. ■

About the Authors



Josh Bersin

Josh founded Bersin & Associates in 2001 to provide research and advisory services focused on corporate learning. He expanded the company's coverage to encompass HR, talent management, talent acquisition, and leadership and became a recognized expert in the talent market. Josh sold the company to Deloitte in 2012 and was a partner in Bersin by Deloitte up until 2018.

In 2019, Josh founded the Josh Bersin Academy, a professional development academy that has become the “home for HR.” In 2020, he put together a team of analysts and advisors who are now working with him to support and guide HR organizations from around the world under the umbrella of The Josh Bersin Company. He is frequently featured in publications such as *Forbes*, *Harvard Business Review*, *HR Executive*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *CLO Magazine*. He is a popular blogger and has more than 800,000 followers on LinkedIn.



Nehal Nangia

Nehal is the Director of Research at The Josh Bersin Company. In this role, Nehal drives empirical research on key workforce-related topics and the development of actionable insights and powerful stories for today's talent executives. Nehal has over 15 years of professional experience in human capital, with a focus on learning and development; performance management; employment value proposition; workforce transformation; and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). She is the research leader for learning and leadership at the Josh Bersin Company.

Prior to joining The Josh Bersin Company, Nehal was a global advisor for clients at Deloitte and published several studies on pertinent topics such as DEI, performance management, and bias. Nehal lives and works in India and has a master's degree in psychology. Nehal has also led deployments of benchmarking and diagnostic products at Gartner for clients across EMEA, APAC, and ANZ.

The Josh Bersin Company Membership

The Josh Bersin Company provides a wide range of research and advisory services to help HR leaders and professionals tackle the ever-evolving challenges and needs of today's workforce. We cover all topics in HR, talent, and L&D. The Josh Bersin Academy—built on our research and powered by Nomadic Learning—helps HR practitioners grow key foundational skills. Our corporate membership program provides HR teams and senior leaders with the skills, strategies, and insights to build cutting-edge HR and people strategies through a combination of research, assessments, professional development, exclusive events, and community. In 2022, The Josh Bersin Company introduced the Global Workforce Intelligence (GWI) Project to guide market-leading businesses and their leaders through the challenges of industry convergence while remaining future-focused.

For more details, contact us at info@bersinpartners.com.