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Evaluating Strategic Leadership Development Programs

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EVALUATING STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

An Action Research Paper

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Abstract

Companies that lack an in-depth understanding of leadership development program evaluation may invest in a program that achieves suboptimal results. However, there is no generally prescribed framework for the evaluation of leadership development programs (Ely et al., 2010). Thus, the purpose of this action research paper is to provide the basis for vetting leadership development programs based on their organizational fit and investment value, training methodologies, workplace development approaches, coaching and development support, and targeted business outcomes.

Keywords: leadership; leadership development; leadership development programs; leadership training; leader; leader development; talent development; strategic leadership; microcredentials; micro-credentials; core competencies; competency-based training; evaluation; 360-degree feedback; multi-rater feedback; international coaching federation; ICF; leadership coaching; group coaching; executive coaching; team coaching; evaluation; instructional design; experience-driven; ROI; assessments; Kirkpatrick; return on investment; return on expectations; ROE; professional certification; 70/20/10

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Introduction

In today's fast-paced global business landscape, effective leadership is essential for organizations aiming to remain competitive and adapt to ongoing change. Strategic leaders hold direct accountability for ensuring that their company is responsive to evolving demands and well positioned for emerging opportunities within their areas of responsibility. Strategic leadership is defined as "the ability to influence others to voluntarily make day-to-day decisions that enhance the long-term viability of the organization while maintaining its short-term financial stability" (Rowe, 2001, p. 81). Those with strategic leadership responsibilities play a pivotal role in achieving outcomes that impact investors, customers, and various vital functions within the company. Moreover, the absence of this leadership strength often leads to decision-making bottlenecks, high-stress work environments, elevated turnover rates, and a failure to meet significant organizational goals.

The significant role that strategic leaders play combined with the scarcity of talent compels organizations to invest in talent development (Tishma, 2018). The leadership training market is a $366 billion global industry with an estimated $166 billion spend annually in the USA alone (TrainingIndustry.com, 2021). According to Ismail-Wey (2023), an estimated 25% of the total training spend goes to leadership development.

Employers are increasingly turning to external sources such as universities, professional societies, and management consultancies to access specialized expertise (Moldoveanu, 2021). Presently, there are hundreds of degrees in leadership offered by colleges and universities, a proliferation of online courses and other learning platforms from both traditional institutions and upstarts, and custom programs offered by consultants and other sources (Moldoveanu,

2021). As a result, employers face a dilemma in selecting effective leadership development programs and in evaluating their effectiveness.

To address this challenge, this action research paper will delve into the critical issue of evaluating leadership development programs. First, we will provide a background on leadership program evaluation methods. Then, we will explore options for applying these evaluation methods to outsource strategic leadership development programs.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research paper is to investigate methods used to evaluate leadership development programs.

Research Questions

1. What should employers look for when selecting a leadership development program?

2. What considerations should be given to accommodate the needs and interests of potential participants?

3. How can employers evaluate the organizational fit and alignment of a program?

4. What are the elements of a high-quality program?

5. How should organizations assess the potential effectiveness of a leadership development program in achieving the desired behaviors?

6. How should organizations assess the potential effectiveness of a leadership development program in achieving the desired business outcomes?

Literature Review

Companies that lack an in-depth understanding of how to evaluate leadership development programs may invest in a program that achieves suboptimal results. However, there is no generally prescribed framework for the evaluation of leadership development programs (Ely et al., 2010). Thus, the purpose of this literature review is to provide the basis for vetting leadership development programs based on an evaluation of their organizational fit and investment value, training methodologies, applied learning theories, experiential development approaches, coaching and development support, and business outcomes.

Definitions

A leader is any individual who guides, directs, or inspires others to achieve goals or objectives, regardless of title or position (Hartley & Hinksman, 2003). In the workplace, leaders are shaped and developed through leadership training and leadership development programs. As the evaluation goals depend on the purpose of the program, we will begin by defining these terms and how they differ.

What is leadership training?

Leadership training aims to increase leadership qualities by addressing competency gaps, leadership upskilling and reskilling, and addressing organizational competencies or KSAOs (Campion et al., 2011; Mendenhall et al., 2017). KSAO stands for Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, and other characteristics such as leadership traits and types. Performing a job analysis, developing competency models, or competency mapping can help organizations identify the competencies needed to perform a job efficiently or to assess the competency inventory of their leadership bench (Campion et al., 2011; Kaur & Kumar, 2013; Mendenhall et al., 2017).

Leadership training may be triggered by career phases (i.e., new hire, first-time manager, culture training) or part of a larger strategic resourcing initiative (e.g., build bench strength, retain talent, elevate high potentials). Training tends to be based on a pre-established set of learning interventions aimed at achieving a specific outcome in a short amount of time, such as through workshops and courses (Hartley & Hinksman, 2003). The drawbacks of leadership training in a corporate setting are that the short duration of leadership training allows for limited time to practice new skills and learning is often completed without the real-world application of new skills.

What is leader development and what is leadership development?

According to Day (2000), leader development focuses on intrapersonal skills, while leadership development focuses on interpersonal skills.   Additionally, leader development focuses on enhancing the capabilities of the individual in leadership roles, whereas leadership development centers on improving the collective leadership capacity of an organization through integrated networking efforts (Van Velsor & McCauley, 2010).

Differences between leadership training and leadership development

Leadership training contrasts with leadership development in purpose, duration, and complexity. Refer to Table 1. A key distinction between leadership training and leadership development is that the purpose of leadership training is to respond to an immediate need with a concrete goal whereas leadership development aims to address complex, open-ended goals (Kirchner & Akdere, 2014). Whereas leadership training refers to specific training interventions of a short duration, leadership development is a long-term process with multiple opportunities to gain experience, grow, and change (Kirchner & Akdere, 2014). Leadership development is

based on the premise that leadership learning is an interactive process in which adults are

exposed to insights that may contradict their beliefs and may cause them to shift their thinking

and behaviors in a given context over time. Thus, a range of developmental activities including

training, work assignments, group coaching, mentoring, and collective team efforts, are

associated with leadership development programs (Hezlett, 2016; Hartley & Hinksman, 2003;

Solansky, 2010).

Leadership Training	Leadership Development
Limited duration – Mostly short-term with a concrete goal	On-going – Long-term activity with open-ended, complex goals
Aims to address competency and skill gaps	Aims to develop new behaviors to achieve business outcomes at an organizational level
Useful. Designed to help improve efficiency and productivity.	Transformative. Aims to provide insights that change a leader's way of thinking.
Focused on the role; enhances knowledge of skills for a particular role or a specific job requirement	Focused on interpersonal relationships, how people collaborate, and the results of their collective actions
Training completion demonstrates evidence of mastery; program may offer micro-credentialing	Training completion initiates self-awareness and new insights; program may follow up with leadership coaching
Addresses an immediate or present need	Addresses a strategic or future need
Mastery achieved within the duration of training and demonstrated by the end of training intervention	Mastery over time with the aim to demonstrate 3 to 12 months after training is completed
Acquire simple skills	Acquire complex skill clusters
Simulate work environment for authentic learning experiences (simplified, isolated practice)	Apply on the job (In context, achieve results despite situational challenges)
Tends to be more of a consistent experience with established mastery requirements, such as enrollment in a leadership training class	Tends to be more of a personalized experience centered on the needs of an individual or the organization
Ability to lead faster and more efficiently	Ability to lead through ambiguity
Tends to focus on simple or component skills with can be isolated and established in a controlled environment	Tends to encompass complex skills, requiring multiple training interventions

Emphasis on Kirkpatrick Levels 1 (Reaction) and 2 (Learning)	Emphasis on Kirkpatrick Levels 3 (Behaviors) and 4 (Outcome)
Designed for all levels of leadership with an emphasis on independent contributors and middle management.	Formerly focused on C-Suite Executives, now expanding to other levels, particularly middle to senior level managers.
Centers on upskilling and reskilling; encompasses both hard and soft skills.	Centers on improving leadership capability and realizing leadership potential

Table 1. Leadership Training vs Leadership Development *(ATD, 2023a; Day et al., 2021; Hartley & Hinksman, 2003; Hezlett, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 1998; Oragui, 2023; Sinha, 2023; Van Velsor & McCauley, 2004).*

Leadership Training Evaluation Methods

Next, we will delve into models frequently used for evaluating leadership training programs. It's important to note that these models primarily pertain to internal training programs, which may differ from the evaluation that precedes the selection and assessment of programs provided by external experts. The evaluation methods we discuss here focus on models reported by academic researchers - which may not fully encompass practical considerations such as the value creation for leaders in relation to their level and cost or the efficacy of commonly used evaluation methods. such as vendor reputation, marketing materials, and word-of-mouth.

Kirkpatrick's Model of Training Evaluation.

Kirkpatrick's model offers a structured approach for evaluating training effectiveness, covering a range of outcomes from initial impressions to tangible organizational results. The model comprises four levels: Level 1 (Reaction), Level 2 (Learning); Level 3 (Behavior), and Level 4 (Results) (Kirkpatrick, 1998). At Level 1, trainers measure the participants' immediate reactions and satisfaction with the training. In the realm of leadership development, this stage

may also capture the leader's planned actions (Kirkpatrick, 1998). Level 2 focuses on evaluating

the extent to which participants have acquired new knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Level 3

assesses the application of learning in real work situations and the resultant changes in

behavior. Level 4, the highest level, examines the impact of training on the organization,

including factors like increased productivity, employee retention, or improved performance.

Most training program assessments cover Levels 1 and 2, reaction and learning, as steps

beyond this are influenced by factors that are beyond the scope of individual accountability

(Njah et al., 2021). However, for leadership development in particular, successful outcomes are

judged based on behavior (Phillips & Phillips, 2007).

Microcredential Evaluation for Competency Based Training.

For organizations looking to quickly upskill at scale, microcredentials offer a credible

means of validating a level of mastery within a short period of time (Tamoliune et al., 2023;

Zhang & West, 2019). Microcredentials, also known as digital badges, enable leaders to provide

proof of acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities (Ellis et al., 2016). While employers tend to rely

upon the reputation of the training provider when assessing the credibility of a microcredential

(Lerman et al., 2020), issuers suggest the following criteria for evaluating the quality of a

microcredential: credential design, course design, instructor skill, learner perspectives,

employer perspectives, delivery, technology infrastructure, and management resourcing

(Bigelow, 2022). Most notably, quality microcredentials are awarded based on transferrable

evidence of leadership skill mastery (Ashcroft et al., 2020; Dalporto & Lepe, 2022; Gauthier,

2020; Zhang & West, 2019). Additionally, these microcredentials leverage digital badging for

portable and verifiable documentation of achievements and transparent assessment criteria

(Ellis et al., 2016). Stackable credentials, i.e., credentials that count towards other credentials, give learners the freedom to build a learning path around their interests, needs, and abilities and may potentially lead to credits towards a professional industry certification or towards a degree (McGreal & Olcott, 2022).

Leadership Development Program Evaluation Methods

Assessing the effectiveness of leadership development programs is a crucial step for program selection and design. Leadership development is a highly customized process, tailored to the unique needs, cultures, and leaders of each organization. Thus, the identification of suitable programs is of paramount importance. In this section, an overview of the key aspects encompassing leadership training assessment, post-training leadership development, leadership coaching evaluation, leadership assessment, leadership performance appraisal, and the assessment of program outcomes and their impact will be presented. Refer to Figure 1.

Needs & Goals Alignment Assessment

Evaluating leadership development programs hinges on their alignment with organizational goals, needs, and requirements. It is imperative to assess how the program aligns with the organization's strategic vision and whether it effectively addresses organizational challenges. Ideally, the organization has developed clear linkages between business needs, leadership development outcomes, and levels of evaluation (Phillips & Phillips, 2007).

Leader Development Framework and the 70/20/10 Rule

Within the domain of leadership development, the Experience-Driven Leadership Development framework, also known as the 70/20/10 rule, stands as a widely acknowledged

model. According to this framework, leadership skills are largely acquired through informal learning experiences (the 70%), social interactions such as coaching, networking, mentoring, peer learning, and group-based leadership development (the 20%), and formal education and structured training (the 10%) (Hezlett, 2016; McCauley et al., 2014). While the 70/20/10 principle should not be regarded as a prescriptive formula, this experience-driven approach is a widely accepted guideline for structuring well-rounded, effective leadership development programs (Hezlett, 2016; McCauley et al., 2014).

Leadership Training Evaluation (10%). Previously in this paper, we discussed Leadership Training Evaluation in the context of a standalone training intervention. Here this model is reframed in the context of formal training within a leadership development program (the 10%). The implication of this mindset shift is that the purpose of training changes from demonstrating competency to viewing the training as an opportunity to develop transformative insights that will then be applied and mastered in the workplace. Based on this premise, the following theories are offered for evaluating training program design:
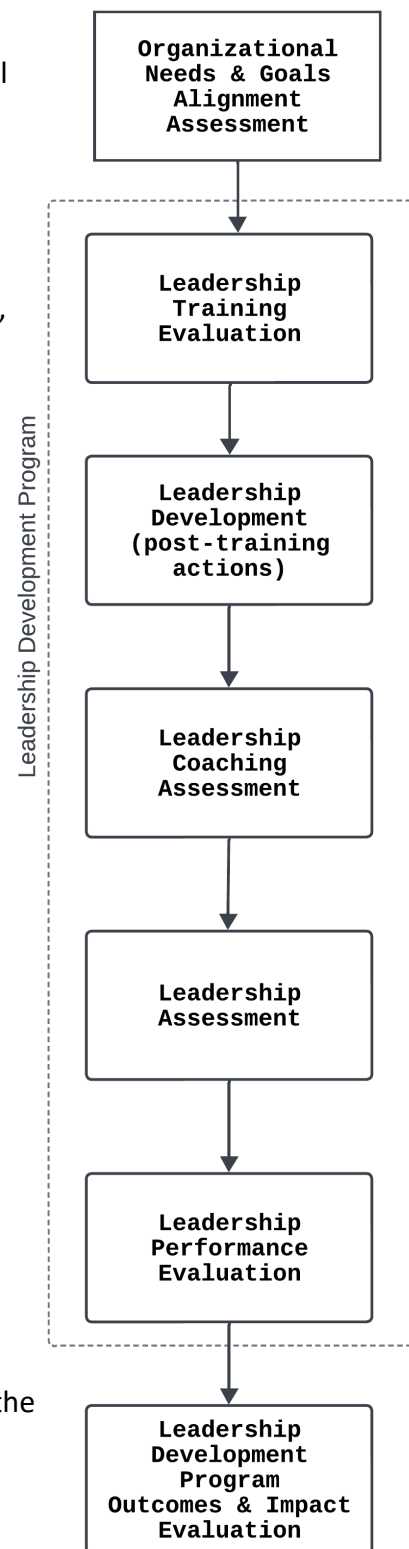

Figure 1. Leadership Development Program Evaluation

1. ***Adult Learning Theory: Andragogy.*** When assessing the effectiveness of leadership programs, it is vital to consider the principles of andragogy (Weinstein, 2004). Unlike teacher-centered pedagogy designed for children, andragogy recognizes that adults bring a wealth of prior experiences that shape their learning process. This theory is grounded in the following key principles: adults possess a psychological need for self-direction, leverage their rich experiential background to learn, learn more effectively when they see the relevance of content to their lives, benefit from the structured organization of educational activities, and are intrinsically motivated (Knowles, 1970; Weinstein, 2004). This is especially applicable to leaders (Wang & Gordon, 2023; Weinstein, 2004).

2. ***Transformational Learning Theory***. Transformational learning experiences enable learners to gain deep insights that challenge long-held beliefs and conventions for long-lasting benefits by guiding them through a disorienting dilemma leading to self-examination followed by a critical assessment of existing beliefs (Mezirow, 2009). Learners then explore alternative viewpoints and potential solutions, culminating in the integration of a transformed perspective into their identity and guiding future actions (Mezirow, 2009). Evaluating training effectiveness using this theory involves assessing whether training programs create disorienting dilemmas and promote self-reflection and critical thinking for long-term shifts in beliefs and values (Ciporen, 2010; Johnson, 2008). When evaluating leadership development programs for the degree to which the

program prompts transformative learning, evidence of transformative learning may be found in the program's survey results or testimonials.

3. ***Cognitive Learning Theory***. Leaders guide others to implement actions that lead to growth and change within the organization. Leadership roles require higher-order thinking abilities for problem-solving, decision-making, and strategic thinking (Wiggs, 2023). Therefore, training programs are ideally evaluated to ensure that their learning objectives and training assessments are aimed at the higher-order thinking levels of Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revised Bloom's Taxonomy.

4. ***Motivation***. The goal of leadership training is for learners to apply what they have learned after the training is over. Recognizing whether a program is built to promote self-directed learning can be determined by assessing factors such as the flexibility of the learning path, opportunities for learners to set their goals, and the presence of real-world problem-solving scenarios (Ambrose et al., 2010).

In addition to evaluating the design of the learning instruction, it is imperative to measure whether learning has taken place. Within leadership training interventions, learning is measured with simulations, case studies, skill practices, and tests.

Leadership Development in Context (70%). The success of leadership programs hinges on leaders applying their leadership skills within intricate challenges of their work environments (Feser et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2015). Leadership skills find their true test in the interdependencies across and within teams and in complex, situational circumstances. Recognizing this, the Experience-Driven Leadership model asserts that the transfer of learning

from the classroom to the workplace is inherently limited. Instead, learning primarily takes place in the workplace through informal learning, especially when teams are tasked to collaboratively explore issues prior to decision-making and action (the 70%) (Hartley & Hinksman, 2003). Examples of informal learning opportunities include action learning programs, stretch assignments, key strategic initiatives, and special projects (Day, 2000; Hartley & Hinksman, 2003; Hezlette, 2016). A leadership development program that tasks leaders with opportunities for deliberative learning, reflection, and intentionality on-the-job immediately following training can provide real-world motivation to learn important lessons and gain desirable leadership attributes (Hartley & Hinksman, 2003; Norzailan et al., 2015).

Leadership Coaching (20%). Leadership coaching, a component of social learning in the 70/20/10 framework, supports and evaluates a leader's motivation and progress in a development program. Within this context, there are two types of coaches: internal and external. Internal coaches are employees tasked with coaching others for specific deliverables as part of their job responsibilities; external coaches are specialists sought after for their expertise, skills, and impartiality in handling sensitive matters (Boysen-Rotelli, 2018). Studies show that preferred professional coaches have extensive, accredited training, with credentials from the International Coaching Federation (ICF) being widely recognized, and have experience that aligns with the needs of the coachee (Boysen-Rotelli, 2018).

This training and experience provide the foundation for a productive and effective coaching partnership. Within this relationship, the role of the coach is to hold the leader accountable for following through on their development plans, enhance the leader's self-awareness and responsiveness to situational cues, and evaluate the leader's progress (ICF,

2023). To help promote client development, a professional leadership coach may apply coaching models such as Peterson's Development Pipeline. This model conceptualizes the development process through the insight, motivation, capabilities, real-world practice, and accountability phases (Peterson, 2006).

Leadership Assessments (Developmental)

The assessment of leadership is a method for evaluating whether a leadership development program is having an impact on leadership behavior. Widely used approaches for assessing the influence of leadership development on observable leader behaviors include self-rating, 360-degree feedback, and coach assessments (Day, 2000; Solansky, 2010). Self-rating serves as an essential tool to promote self-awareness and self-efficacy, enabling leaders to reflect on their mindset and the effectiveness of their actions. 360-degree feedback is a multi-rater tool, involving the collection of feedback from superiors, peers, and subordinates to assess leadership effectiveness. Multi-rater feedback is purported to be a more complete and more accurate assessment of leadership effectiveness than self-rating (Day, 2000; Hartley & Hinksman, 2003; Solansky, 2010). Additionally, leadership coaches employ various assessment tools to provide feedback to their clients. These coaching assessments can be used for a multitude of purposes such as gauging motivation, change, and progress, characterizing a leader's preferences, traits, and capability (e.g., Meyers-Briggs MBTI, DISC, Clifton StrengthsFinder, Korn Ferry Assessment of Leadership Potential Assessment (KFALP)), assessing workplace behavior (e.g., 360-degree feedback, Leadership Circle), assessing organizational needs and progress (e.g., leadership culture surveys) and helping to improve a leader's sense of self-efficacy and self-awareness (e.g., work journal reflections) (Boysen-Rotelli, 2018). Assessing

the use of leadership assessments may help to measure the effectiveness and impact of

leadership development programs on leadership behavior. The assessment of development

bridges to the evaluation of leadership performance.

Leadership Performance and Organizational Impact

Organizations evaluate the impact of their leadership development efforts at the leader,

team, and organizational levels (Avolio et al., 2010; Day & Dragoni, 2015). This involves

measuring the application of skills and knowledge gained through the program in a variety of

contexts. For instance, leadership development may result in individual leaders demonstrating

enhanced decision-making abilities and improved conflict-resolution skills (Patterson et al.,

2017). At the team level, effective leadership can lead to higher team cohesion, better

productivity, and lower turnover rates (Patterson et al., 2017). Business outcomes can also be

evaluated, including key performance indicators (KPIs) such as increased revenue, improved

profitability, and enhanced customer satisfaction (Patterson et al., 2017). Strategic HR metrics

like talent retention and employee engagement can be employed to gauge the impact on the

workforce (Patterson et al., 2017). Alternately, the Phillips ROI Model can be applied to quantify

the financial impact of training programs based on the Return on Investment (ROI), Return on

Expectation (ROE), and cost-to-benefit ratio (Phillips, 1998; Phillips & Phillips, 2007; Phillips et

al., 2015). Correlating leadership training and development program objectives with the leader,

team, and organizational goals can help to ensure proper leadership development program

option vetting (Phillips et al., 2015).

Overall, evaluating leadership performance through these lenses provides a

comprehensive view of how well a leadership development program aligns with organizational

objectives and whether it successfully delivers the desired impact across individual, team, and business levels.

Research Method

Various stakeholders may hold distinct viewpoints and priorities when evaluating outsourced strategic leadership development programs (Cummings, 1998). To gain insights into effective methods for evaluating outsourced strategic leadership development programs, perceptions were collected, synthesized, and analyzed from interviews, practitioner training courses, proprietary vendor solutions, and my own work experiences.

Interviews

To gain valuable insights into workplace needs and identify the leadership training required to address skill gaps, three professionals with over 20 years of experience in talent development were selected for interviews based on their experiences with training and development and talent management. Interviews were conducted between April and September 2023 with initial interviews and follow-up questions. Interviews were conducted one-on-one via video conference call.

Three talent development professionals were interviewed: an HR Director, a Recruiter, and a Learning & Development Director. For reasons of confidentiality, personally identifiable information will not be disclosed in this study; participants will be referenced by title only. The HR Director has 20 years of experience in HR and works at a small, privately owned company that provides corporate services, such as HR, Accounting, and IT. She is SHRM certified and is also pursuing her ICF coaching certification. The HR Recruiter and former HR director is SHRM certified and has about 40 years of experience. He services clients in the Health Care Industry

and his career focus is recruiting and talent development. At the time of the interview, his professional interests had recently shifted from recruitment to development, and he is looking to deliver training to his clients. The third interviewee is a Senior Director of Learning & Development (L&D) with 22 years of relevant experience. She works for a large, non-profit charity. Her responsibilities include delivering and managing training, including sourcing vendor training and executive coaching. The Interviewees were asked to respond to the following questions:

- How does your organization assess competency in the hiring process? In the workplace?

- What training does your organization offer to its employees or clients?

- How do you utilize microcredentials in the hiring process? In the workplace?

- What are your biggest needs or gaps in leadership development? How are these needs determined?

- How does your company (or your clients) handle talent development management?

Additionally, the L&D Director was asked to explore her positions on competency mapping, executive coaching, leadership assessments (including 360-degree feedback), and how the company defines success. Insights gained from these interviews were captured, synthesized, and paraphrased.

Program Development Courses

To better understand practitioners' approaches to leadership training and development from leaders in the field, I took the following professional education courses: *Building a High-Quality Microcredential Program* (Educause, 2023a), *Microcredentialing: Aligning Learning to Employer Needs and Implementing a Comprehensive Learning Record* (Educause, 2023b) and

Creating Leadership Development Programs (ATD, 2023a). Refer to the Appendix for more information.

Proctor and Pedrick (Educause, 2023a), the facilitators for the *Building a High-Quality Microcredential Program* course, covered their experiences with creating microcredential programs in the SUNY System and at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. They shared the best practices, pitfalls, tools, and support needed. This Educause learning lab course was delivered online through live lecture-style presentations via video conferencing and hands-on practice through assignments in the Canvas LMS (Learning Management System). According to the LMS posts, there were approximately 40 active participants. Based on chat and discussion posts, attendees were looking to implement microcredential programs within their higher-education institutions. Attendees did not identify their role within the institution. However, the advertised target audience for the program was higher education leaders, provosts, deans, and directors of professional development.

The *Microcredentialing: Aligning Learning to Employer Needs and Implementing a Comprehensive Learner Record course* covered "the process of developing a credential system that is aligned to industry and employer needs and demonstrates the development of a comprehensive student learning record" (Educause, 2023b). This coverage also included communicating the value proposition to leadership and learners and designing an adaptable microcredential. The delivery of the course was the same as the Educause course described above (Educause, 2023a). There were about 30 active participants. Like the above Educause course, attendees represented higher-education institutions.

The Association for Talent Development (ATD) course facilitator, Greenberg (ATD, 2023a), covered the ATD leadership model for creating leadership programs. The course covered a process for obtaining alignment with the organization's culture, goals, and needs, creating a list of competencies and observable behaviors, and utilizing tools and templates to measure value, assess the program, and incorporate best practices for implementation (ATD, 2023a; ATD, 2023b). There were 23 attendees enrolled. Most of the attendees worked in the fields of Training & Development and Program Management. There were also attendees in Talent Management, Instructional Design, and Consulting. The ATD course (2023a) was delivered online through short lectures interspersed with frequent group exercises to work through workbook exercises, learn from collective insights, and digest online course content (e.g., videos, articles, and textbook content).

Proprietary Vendor solution – Korn Ferry Leadership Architect

Proprietary solutions provide ready-to-use options for companies looking to invest in leadership development. To better understand leadership development competency and assessment options available in the marketplace, I researched the Korn Ferry Leadership Development Architect™ Model by Korn Ferry, a global consulting firm that is well known by the talent development professionals interviewed for its leadership development and assessment tools.

Korn Ferry's Leadership Architect (KFLA) Global Competency Framework defines observable and measurable behavior based on 4 factors (thought leadership, results leadership, people leadership, and self-leadership) which are defined by 38 leadership competencies (Barnfield, 2014). According to Korn Ferry, this research-based global competency framework

helps to align business strategy with talent strategy. It is based on comparing competency data to formative research studies to identify differentiating competencies for success. Furthermore, this framework assesses performance correlations to develop strategies by level and to assess the risk of derailment. I obtained Korn Ferry Leadership Architect materials to assess the potential role of this proprietary framework in the evaluation of outsourced leadership development programs. Refer to the Appendix for more information.

My Work Experience in Strategic Leadership and Leadership Coaching

Finally, my background and experience provide me with relevant insights on the topic. As a strategic business leader, I actively contributed to steering strategic growth and implementing transformative changes within multiple large, publicly traded industrial manufacturing corporations. My background and experience in leadership provide first-hand knowledge of the needs and challenges of commercial business leaders within the corporate work environment and the inner workings involved in corporate decision-making and delivering performance outcomes. This perspective is unique from that of HR and L&D because it represents the perspective of business stakeholders; this mindset is business results-focused (Cummings, 1998). Additionally, as a business leader, I participated in leadership training and development programs. This provided insights into the participant's point of view. Furthermore, as a leadership development consultant and ICF-trained professional leadership coach, I now support leadership development through training, development, and coaching. This experience was applied to provide a perspective on the role and importance of support, accountability, and self-awareness in adopting desired behaviors, mindsets, and skills in the workplace.

Research Findings

As outlined in the literature review, the comprehensive evaluation and selection of leadership development programs depends on the careful consideration of the program's design, implementation, and assessment, along with the associated development actions. Published literature explains that different roles have different perspectives on success (Cummings, 1998). No studies were found in academic literature to advise on how talent development professionals, who are looking to outsource their leadership development programs, evaluate available solutions delivered by vendors and institutions in the workplace. Therefore, this research study was conducted to understand how these decisions are made based on the perspectives of the different stakeholders involved.

Talent Development Professional Perspective

Interviews with talent development professionals provided a valuable practitioner's perspective on the realities of the workplace. These discussions provided insights into opinions, challenges, and the diverse levels of implementation of best practices related to microcredentials, leadership training, and leadership development. Additionally, the acquired insights provided a deeper understanding of the real-world work environment, extending beyond what is often captured in published literature.

Microcredential Program Provider Perspective

My objective in attending Educause courses on microcredentials was to gain insights into microcredential programs for outsourcing leadership training. An unexpected observation was that most institutions represented by participants in the Educause training courses were still in the exploratory stage, not yet at the refinement stage; establishing a microcredential

program was aspirational (Educause 2023a; Educause, 2023b). Additionally, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the *Building a High-Quality Microcredential Program course* (Educause, 2023a) did not focus exclusively on instructional design as a means of building a high-quality, reputable microcredential program. Instead, facilitators also provided valuable guidance on establishing a supportive infrastructure through communications, community advocates, marketing, and implementation strategies (Educause, 2023a). As a strategic business leader, I observed that this approach parallels commercial business practices employed when developing and launching a new product, and the guidance would better equip participants with a pathway to help institutions better connect with commercial sponsors.

Leadership Development Programs Developer's Perspective

Unlike the Educause courses which were predominantly delivered based on instructor presentations with individual assignments, the ATD course was delivered as a workshop with extensive opportunities to hear from the perspectives of other participants in the class (Educause 2023a; Educause, 2023b, ATD, 2023a). This not only provided useful insights into ATD's leadership development program but also enabled me to learn directly from the experiences of other participants in the program throughout. Although ATD's leadership development program is a systematic process for developing leadership development in-house, the initial discovery and alignment phases provided steps that should be taken prior to embarking on any program (ATD, 2023a, ATD, 2023b).

From there, the ATD leadership development process outlined the steps needed to develop and implement the program in-house – which aligned well with the internal training and development focus of most of the participants. Curiously, I observed that the scenarios and

examples provided throughout the course were based on leadership development programs implemented through outside consulting firms. This happenstance was attributed to the fact that consulting agencies may be more incentivized to publish case studies; still, it does highlight the acceptance of outsourced leadership development programs in the workplace.

The ATD course was designed around a scenario where the objective for leadership development was intended for the succession planning for high-potential candidates for C-suite positions and an expectation of being promoted soon after completion of training. However, there was also an acknowledgment from course facilitator Greenberg (ATD, 2023a) that she is aware that the practice has evolved in recent years to make leadership development inclusive to different levels of management to serve additional organizational needs. This acknowledgment highlights the current focus on scalability due to the democratization of leadership discussed in published literature (Feser et al., 2018).

Proprietary Vendor Solutions Perspective

Competency mapping and modeling are frequently cited in the literature as a means of achieving organizational alignment with program development goals (ATD, 2023b; Day et al, 2021; Hezlett, 2016; Kaur & Kumar, 2013; McCauley & Hezlett et al., 2001). Despite these published best practices, understanding the real-world implementation proved to be challenging. My L&D interviewee (personal communication, 2023), for example, said that they had developed one in her company. During interviews, my Learning and Development contact (personal communication, 2023) disclosed that they had successfully developed a competency map within her company. However, it was a resource-intensive process that took months to complete and was not shareable externally. The HR Director (personal communication, May 30,

2023) expressed during the interview her intention to undertake this task in the future.

Meanwhile, an HR recruiter (personal communication, April 21, 2023) suggested, that for

efficiency, it might be beneficial to work exclusively with companies that had already

established competency maps. These insights underscored the significance and desirability of

competency mapping as an achievement.

Consequently, this prompted me to explore Korn Ferry's KFLA model, which I found to

be a potentially time-saving framework for defining observable and measurable behaviors but

not a panacea. This framework of general competencies did not translate directly to methods

for evaluating leadership development program effectiveness. Organizations will still need to

determine what competencies to target, and which leadership development program solutions

meet these criteria.

Perspectives from Strategic Leadership

Drawing from my background and experience, I believe that the process of developing

and evaluating a strategic leadership program benefits from a strategic, business-oriented

perspective. My central discovery is that different stakeholders in leadership development

programs hold varied perspectives, each contributing distinct and valuable insights. In the

discussion section, these insights will be synthesized, particularly in the context of evaluating an

outsourced strategic leadership development program.

<div align="center">

Discussion

</div>

As organizations turn to external vendors for their specialized expertise in strategic

leadership development, it is imperative that these companies make informed decisions based

on the merits of the program. In this discussion, we will explore the decision-making dimension

in greater detail, examining the key considerations and factors that should inform the selection of a suitable strategic leadership development program from external vendors.

Strategic Leadership Development Needs & Goals

Interviews with talent development professionals revealed the challenges faced in leadership development outsourcing. HR personnel make recommendations for leadership development programs for budgetary approval (Educause, 2023a). The HR Director (personal communication, May 30, 2023) and the L&D Director (personal communication, June 21, 2023) reported that they are flooded with marketing materials from various companies. While the L&D Director (personal communication, June 21, 2023) said that she likes to send employees to experience training courses so that they could gather feedback on it, the HR Director (personal communication, May 30, 2023) had different priorities. The HR Director (personal communication, May 30, 2023) focused most of her attention on rolling out her own in-person training initiative; the task of leadership development remained on her 'to-do' list. Furthermore, the 'to-do' list sentiment was also expressed by a large percentage of participants in the ATD course (ATD, 2023a). This is indicative of the competing priorities that internal resources face. Additionally, the HR professionals interviewed reported that they selected programs based on vendor name recognition. Overreliance on name recognition over program compatibility may result in a suboptimal fit. A timely and reliable evaluation process is crucial for ensuring that the program effectively addresses the organization's unique, urgent, and evolving needs.

ATD's LEADS model for Creating Leadership Development Programs advises organizations to ensure that programs will meet organizational needs by first clarifying the

purpose and goals of leadership development (i.e., defining key drivers and goals based on a skill gap analysis, crafting an organizational philosophy statement for leadership acceptance and long-term commitment, and incorporating leadership input) (ATD, 2023a; ATD, 2023b). Talent development practitioners attending this ATD training program noted that while this approach may help to achieve buy-in, the process adds an estimated 6 months to the program as compared to the typical 2 weeks or less time frame typically allotted for a program recommendation (ATD, 2023a). Additionally, the LEADS model is geared towards internal, custom leadership program design rather than on outsourced training (ATD, 2023b). These findings suggest that there is a sense of urgency to expedite the development of leaders and that the evaluation framework for outsourced leadership development programs may differ from training developed in-house.

Practitioners attending the ATD course also complained that the executive leadership team typically seeks to establish program benefits and financials prior to program selection or design (ATD. 2023a). This is further complicated by the fact that calculating ROI based on the Phillips ROI model is labor, time, and resource-intensive (Phillips et al., 2015). This ROI model is also summative, which means that ROI is measured after a program is completed to determine whether they are effective; hence this would not be a suitable tool for leadership development programs selection. In my experience, leadership is highly decentralized and democratized nowadays; decisions are made at all levels within the organization. Therefore, I assert that a more direct, straightforward, and common approach would be to present the strategic leaders with their performance targets and then collect their input on the training and development that they will need to meet these expectations.

From the point of view of executives who seek to quickly make informed decisions based on financials and expected benefits, an approach that mirrors those frequently used by myself and other strategic leaders is proposed. I suggest that the vetting of potential programs could begin with simple, preliminary ROI and cost-to-benefit ratio calculations based on potential scenarios for expected, best-case, and worst-case outcomes. Alternately, I propose that businesses that have an established ROI benchmark for investments can start with their established ROI target, back out a budget for the program, and then determine how many leaders can be trained based on level or development needs. This information can then be used as a screening or comparative tool based on achieving a critical mass of program participants to quickly reach critical mass for sustainable change. Non-tangible differences between different leadership development programs included in a comparative analysis will also help to differentiate their relative strategic value.

Strategic Leadership Development Competency Framework

I proposed that organizations adopt a cognitive and behavioral competency framework for strategic leader development program evaluation. For an example of a cognitive framework for strategic leaders, refer to DuBrin's (2016) Components of Strategic Leadership model. See Figure 2 below. Table 2 also illustrates an example of leader competencies for strategic leaders.
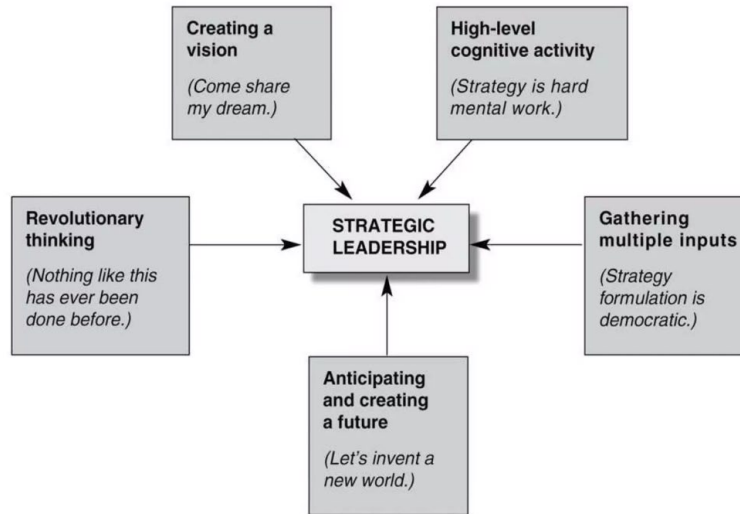
Figure 2. Components of Strategic Leadership (DuBrin, 2016)

This list is based on the Korn Ferry KFLA model that I have pared down to 10 core competencies

for strategic leadership training based on my experience (in yellow) and 5 coaching topics that

rank high for functional strategic leaders (in blue) (Kurschner, 2015).

FACTOR I: THOUGHT	FACTOR II: RESULTS	FACTOR III: PEOPLE	FACTOR IV. SELF
Business Insight	Action Oriented	Collaborates	Demonstrates
Financial Acumen	Plans and Aligns	Interpersonal Savvy	Self-Awareness
Decision Quality	Ensures Accountability	Communicates	Manages Ambiguity
Balances Stakeholders	Drives Results	Effectively Persuades	
Strategic Mindset			

*Table 2. Proposed Critical KFLA Competencies for Functional Strategic Leadership Development
(with leadership training topics in yellow and top coaching topics in blue) (based on Barnfield,
2014)*

**Evaluating a Strategic Leadership Development Program based on Applied Learning Theory.**

A program suitable for strategic leadership skills development will require higher-order

thinking (Schoemaker et al., 2013; Wiggs, 2023). This can be evaluated by reviewing the stated

objectives for the program. If, for example, the stated objective of a leadership development

program is to apply new skills on the job, then the program's stated learning objectives should be Level 3 (Apply) taxonomy of Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revised Bloom's taxonomy. Refer to Figure 3.
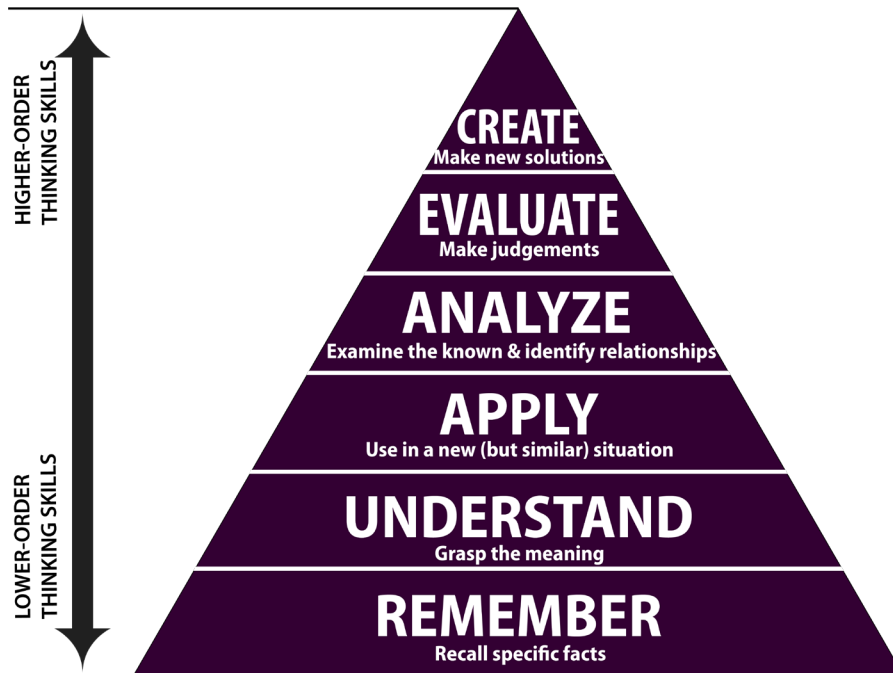
Figure 3. Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001)

Moreover, for companies assessing their strategic leaders based on their capacity to devise innovative solutions and drive revolutionary change for their organization, incorporating Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK) may be an appropriate addition to look for in a leadership development program. Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK) is a context-focused assessment of mastery designed to extend cognitive skills beyond the information presented - with the highest level of mastery being when leaders make real-world connections in unique ways (Littlejohn, 2022).

Evaluating a Strategic Leadership Development Program's Microcredential

According to ATD course participants (ATD, 2023a), leaders are motivated by learning experiences that help further their careers and improve their job performance. According to HR directors interviewed, leadership development programs are more appealing to employees if they offer the opportunity to earn an external certificate. Microcredentials that provide credit towards a degree or a professional credential or are otherwise recognized external to their employer are particularly valuable (Fong et al., 2023; Tamoliune et al., 2023; Zhang & West, 2019). Thus, when comparing leadership development programs, the existence and quality of the microcredential is an important consideration.

ATD course participants also shared an expectation that leaders expect to be promoted after completing a leadership development program. If the purpose of the program is to promote a succession planning initiative, then the program should have a means of providing evidence of mastery to HR (e.g., a transcript, company presentation, certificate of achievement, project report, or ePortfolio).

Leadership Development on-the-job

An effective leadership development program not only provides thought-provoking training but also promotes ongoing development interventions on the job. Both HR Directors interviewed and practitioners in the ATD course said that their measure of success is whether a training and development budget is renewed (ATD, 2023a). In the case of strategic leaders, executives are looking for behaviors and actions that demonstrate an ability to think and act strategically because of program participation. To assess the likelihood that a program will provide measurable results, the program should have a means of promoting transformative

shifts in leadership mindsets, a. a commitment and plan to achieve deliverables such as a business proposal, project, initiative, or strategic action plan within the workplace. Ideally, the program also incorporates training leadership teams that work together or in similar roles as cohorts. This context helps to establish common accountability and shared expectations, cross-functional interdependence and networking, and an opportunity to resolve obstacles in the training environment prior to implementation in the workplace.

Leadership Coaching

Leadership coaching also provides an additional opportunity to leverage group dynamics. One of the HR directors stated that their spend is heavily weighted toward executive coaching while other leaders within the organization received only internal training. While studies show that executives benefit from leadership coaching (Anthony, 2017; Ladegård & Gjerde, 2014), the L&D Director interviewed who arranges executive coaching for her organization pointed out that singling out individual executives gives others the impression that the coaching is remedial (to correct a problem) rather than developing high potential. Programs that focus on providing coaching for everyone in the team establish developmental support as an opportunity to receive focused attention for accountability, insights, developmental support, and progress assessments by a neutral professional coach. Additionally, group coaching for mid-level strategic leaders is a more cost-efficient means of achieving a critical mass of exposure to more employees enabling organizations to attain critical mass and sustainable progress more quickly and more cost-efficiently than dedicating focus on only a select few (Anthony, 2017). Beyond cost and scale considerations, studies show that group and team coaching help to reduce organizational silos and increase organization capacity (Britton, 2015; De Vries, 2005).

Thus, the inclusion of an optimized leadership coaching program is an important aspect of leadership program evaluation.

Leadership Assessments (Developmental)

An effective leadership development program should also incorporate behavioral assessments (Level 2, Kirkpatrick). In reference to the KFLA competencies for strategic leaders (Table 2), a strategic leadership development program may be evaluated based on its use of 360-degree feedback to gauge the degree to which these skills and behaviors are demonstrated in the workplace.

That said, the mention of 360-degree feedback during interviews drew some criticisms and words of caution from experienced leaders. One HR Director found that 360-degree feedback has a bad connotation. In her experience, they were conducted when there was a problem and highlighted to the reviewers that this person's job was in jeopardy. The L&D Director cautioned that 360-degree feedback is sometimes used to judge performance rather than as a developmental tool to provide feedback. Additionally, both expressed that care should be taken to handle sensitive information with care; they recommended that the individual being evaluated receive the information shortly before having a 1:1 debrief with them to discuss the results. Therefore, in deference to this input, it is essential that leadership development programs be administered equally, fairly, and with great care so that the tool provides insights that help the individual to see how they are perceived by others and where they need to improve.

Measures of Success

As a sharp departure from the literature, ATD course participants (2023a) balked at the extensive use of ROI as a means of measuring the value of leadership development programs. These HR professionals expressed that they were not financial experts nor were they in control over the leadership behaviors in the workplace, and that they felt that this was an aspect of the job that they felt least sure of. Furthermore, they shared that their performance evaluations were tied to survey results from Kirkpatrick Levels 1 and 2. Finally, as their time was spent addressing urgent incoming training requests (e.g., new hire orientation, compliance training, operator safety training), their inclination was to hold leadership development programs on their 'to-do' list and avoid addressing this issue altogether. So, given the circumstances, it may not be feasible to determine whether a program is or will be effective based on a rigorous ROI calculation.

A more relevant outcome that aligns with getting work done and reinforcing expectations post-training is to establish expectations that the leaders be given the opportunity to present to leadership how they and the organization have benefitted from training. At an organizational level, these strategic leaders would demonstrate this by attaining alignment and support for their strategic proposals from peers, operational teams, and senior management. Progress should also be apparent in their functional strategic plans for the business. Finally, executives should be able to determine whether a strategic leadership development program is effective based on key performance indicators maintained by leaders within the program and other stakeholders. By aligning the participants' performance with their jobs and with corporate measures of success, the work of leadership development can be fully integrated into

the company's processes in a streamlined manner. Thus, when assessing a leadership development program, the assessment criteria is whether there are measures from the leader who participated in the program directly to more senior leaders in the company to assess the program's impact on the organization. Thus, their leadership effectiveness is evaluated based on their ability to work with others to help achieve the company's financial and strategic goals.

Conclusions

In conclusion, evaluating strategic leadership development programs is a critical undertaking for organizations seeking to invest in the growth and effectiveness of their leadership teams. Beyond relying on vendor reputation, organizations should delve into the competency development objectives of these programs, ensuring their strategic alignment with overarching goals. Factors such as training design, scalability, and the availability of post-training coaching support and assessments should be thoroughly assessed. Equally significant is the program's ability to support and measure leadership learning both during training and in the workplace. Through this comprehensive evaluation, organizations can pinpoint programs that not only foster the development of strong leaders but also reinforce their strategic direction, cultivating a culture of continuous growth and improvement.

Final Thoughts

Drawing from my background and experience, I believe that the process of developing and evaluating a strategic leadership program benefits from a strategic, business-oriented perspective. My experience within large corporations underscores the significance of situational context, shared experiences, and shared responsibility due to the interdependencies of cross-functional networks. The need to rapidly scale up leadership development programs to include

teams that work together and leaders of different levels to achieve a sustainable 'critical mass' resonates strongly with published literature (Feser et al., 2018). I advocate for the importance of integrating leadership training into day-to-day work and job expectations as this translates directly into observable and measurable outcomes. In my role as a professional coach and consultant, I have found group coaching and the inclusion of multiple levels of leadership in leadership training programs are effective leadership development strategies.

Reflecting on my experiences as a former leadership development program participant, I contend that the success of leadership training and development hinges on the leader's motivation. This motivation is grounded in the adult learning principles of Andragogy (Weinsten, 2004). Applied within this context, leadership development programs need to clear three hurdles to meet participants' needs: (1) promoting career advancement, (2) providing support, and (3) being an immediate and relevant need. Career advancement encompasses various forms such as promotion, microcredentials, visibility, networking, and obtaining valuable work experience or a choice assignment. Support includes organizational expectations for participants to apply learned skills, strong executive champions, social pressure to adopt new behaviors, and ongoing post-program conversations. Relevance considers the program's practical applicability on the job, its contribution to job improvement, and its importance relative to other demands.

When I began this study, my aim was to examine and understand methods for evaluating outsourced strategic leadership development programs. And, following this study, I see two distinct paths forward. One is to develop a decision-making framework to educate cross-functional teams on what to look for, to achieve strategic alignment based on

organizationally weighted criteria, and to evaluate leadership development programs based on their merits. Secondly, additional research should be done to help correlate cause and effect to help practitioners avoid an overreliance on vendor reputation and instead base their decisions on leveraging evidence-based research as described in the following section.

Directions for Future Research

A recommended topic for future research is understanding the correlation between leadership motivation factors and the success of strategic leadership development program outcomes. This study has identified key motivators such as relevant and transformative training interventions, microcredentials, leadership coaching, performance expectations, 360-degree feedback, and eligibility for career-building assignments. Moving forward, research efforts should delve into each of these motivators, quantifying and qualifying their impact on participants' engagement and overall success within leadership development programs. Moreover, the studies could correlate the impact of leadership motivation on intangible and tangible organizational outcomes. The findings from this research would contribute evidence-based refinements to the evaluation of strategic leadership development programs.

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Appendix – Professional Development Courses

Course: Building a High-Quality Microcredential Program

Source: Educause

Facilitators*:* Cynthia Proctor and Laura Pedrick

Course Landing Page: Learning Lab | Building a High-Quality Microcredential Program

Course Description (from landing page): "Building on foundational knowledge of digital credentials, this lab takes participants through the process of developing a credential system that is aligned to industry and employer needs and demonstrates the development of a comprehensive student learning record. Leaders in these two areas will share their approach on how they established policy (e.g., governance), communicated value to academic leaders and learners, connected with employers, and designed a dynamic and adaptable microcredential."

Course Dates: May 2 - 18, 2023

Course Delivery: Live lecture-style presentations via video conferencing with hands-on practice through assignments in the Canvas LMS

Course: Microcredentialing: Aligning Learning to Employer Needs and Implementing a Comprehensive Learner Record

Source: Educause

Facilitators*:* Luke Dowden, Kim Moore, and Sonya Watkin

Course Landing Page: Learning Lab | Microcredentialing: Aligning Learning to Employer Needs and Implementing a Comprehensive Learner Record

Course Description (from landing page): " Building on foundational knowledge of digital credentials, this lab takes participants through the process of developing a credential system that is aligned to industry and employer needs and demonstrates the development of a comprehensive student learning record. Leaders in these two areas will share their approach on how they established policy (e.g., governance), communicated value to academic leaders and learners, connected with employers, and designed a dynamic and adaptable microcredential."

Course Dates: June 20 – July 6, 2023

Course Delivery: Live lecture-style presentations via video conferencing with hands-on practice through assignments in the Canvas LMS

Course: Creating Leadership Development Programs Certificate

Source: Association for Talent Development (ATD)

Facilitators*:* Peggy Greenberg

Course Landing Page: Creating Leadership Development Programs Certificate

Course Description (from landing page): "The ATD LEADS model, an exclusive model based on industry-leading research and best practices, serves as the foundation for the course. Using the model as a guide, we will explore all the components necessary to build a successful program, from establishing organizational readiness and analyzing various assessment models to evaluating leadership competencies and behaviors and their relationship to your organization's workforce needs. Six case studies allow you to learn from other organizations that have implemented leadership development programs. This course addresses identifying candidates and designing developmental opportunities, including creating learning events. You will also learn how to sustain programs by demonstrating their impact on the bottom line."

Course Dates: September 5-14, 2023

Course Delivery: Live online workshop with mini-lectures interspersed with frequent group exercises to work through workbook exercises, learn from collective insights, and digest online course content organized within an LMS (e.g., videos, articles, and textbook content)

Course: Korn Ferry Leadership Architect™ Certification

Source: Korn Ferry

Facilitators*:* N/A; self-study

Course Landing Page: I obtained the materials to assess the potential role of this tool in the evaluation of (outsourced) leadership development programs. Nevertheless, there is a certification course on this method that is scheduled periodically across different regions, and it

is currently priced at $3,595. It is taught virtually through 3 4-hr webinars (Korn Ferry Leadership Architect™ Certification)

Course Description (from landing page): "Built on best practices and decades of research Korn Ferry Leadership Architect™ (KFLA) offers the most powerful framework available today. Learn how to implement all 38 competencies or a tailored model within your organization to align your business strategy with your talent strategy."

Course Materials Purchased:

- Leadership Architect Sort Cards – a working card deck for the application of the Korn Ferry Leadership Architect framework
- The Korn Ferry Leadership Architect™ FYI® For Your Improvement Guide (Barnfield, 2014) - explains the competencies model
- The Korn Ferry Leadership Architect™ Global Competency Framework illustrated reference which summarizes the model graphically
- Korn Ferry Leadership Architect™ Sort Card Quick Reference Guide which explains how to use the sort cards.