The Future of EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

Learning Leadership in a Digital Age

Edited by Nora Grasselli

ESMT BERLIN

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Christoph Burger is senior lecturer at ESMT Berlin. His research focus is on energy markets, innovation/blockchain, and decision making/negotiation. Christoph directs and teaches sustainable energy future, decision making/negotiation, blockchain/metaverse in open as well as customized programs for senior executives in a variety of industries such as banking, consumer goods, energy, IT, or transportation. He is a speaker at conferences and a mentor to start-ups.

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Geoff Church is the co-founder and co-director of Dramatic Resources, a theatre-based communication skills training company and is a regular speaker at business schools throughout the world. He was both a successful stage and television actor for over twenty years. His acting career included plays with the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal National Theatre, and a leading role in a BAFTA winning TV drama-documentary. His work combines the rigour and discipline of working in theatre with a fresh insight into the world of business communication.

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Olivia De Paeztron is a senior learning designer at ESMT Berlin's Learning Innovation Lab, where she enjoys collaborating with the faculty and other stakeholders to produce online learning experiences that encourage creative and critical thinking. She holds a BA in Philosophy from the University of Cambridge and an MSc in Digital Education from the University of Edinburgh, where her dissertation explored the challenges of designing time for part-time online learners and teachers.

Nora Grasselli

Nora Grasselli is program director at ESMT Berlin and is responsible for the design and delivery of its flagship programs as well as customized programs for corporate clients. Prior to joining ESMT, she worked for the Boston Consulting Group and was a lecturer for MBA and executive programs at multiple business schools. Nora earned her Ph.D. at HEC Paris. Her research on collaboration and leadership has been published in Organization Studies, MIT Sloan Management Review, The European Business Review, and Forbes.

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Hannes Gurzki is Senior Director Innovation and Transformation at The DO and an external program director at ESMT Berlin. He is an award-winning researcher who is passionate about turning insights into action. He works with world-leading companies to co-create impactful strategies and empower their people to accelerate their transformation.

Nan Guo

Nan Guo is Director of the Learning Innovation Lab and Program Director of Executive Programs at ESMT Berlin. Nan and the lab's dedicated digital learning experts collaborate with subject matter experts from ESMT Berlin and beyond to design and deliver technology-enhanced educational programs that meet the evolving needs of students and the business community.

Mandy Hübener

Mandy Hübener is passionate about lifelong learning and firmly believes that investing into personal strengths is much more rewarding than the traditional development approach of "closing gaps" and fixing weaknesses. Throughout her career to date, she has been focused on leadership and organizational development, first in HR consulting, eventually at the business school ESMT Berlin. Mandy enjoys partnering with organizations to create learning programs that help them drive transformation through learning and development. She is particularly interested in the topic of organizational culture and culture change.

About the Authors

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Angeliki Papachroni is a lecturer and the faculty lead of the Master in Innovation and Entrepreneurship at ESMT Berlin. Her research and teaching focus on strategy and innovation (organizational ambidexterity, strategic agility, tensions of innovation).

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Bethan Williams

Bethan Williams works in a learning design role at Kiron Open Higher Education. She is responsible for designing blended learning journeys for refugees and other underserved communities in Germany, in close cooperation with partners from government and industry. Her work centers around ways to maintain engagement and a supportive learning community during flexible, self-paced study on Kiron’s own online learning platform.

Thanks to Christopher Xitco for the diligent proofreading of the manuscript.

Introduction

We didn’t want a book.

Even before the COVID-crisis hit in 2020, big changes were underway in executive education. Since then, the discipline upturned. Leaders want different learning content and want to learn it now in different ways compared to ten years—or even five years ago. We, educators and learning specialists associated with the business school ESMT Berlin, wanted to share our innovative classroom practices, but not in a book. Because a book is something we would have written ten years ago. Or five years ago.

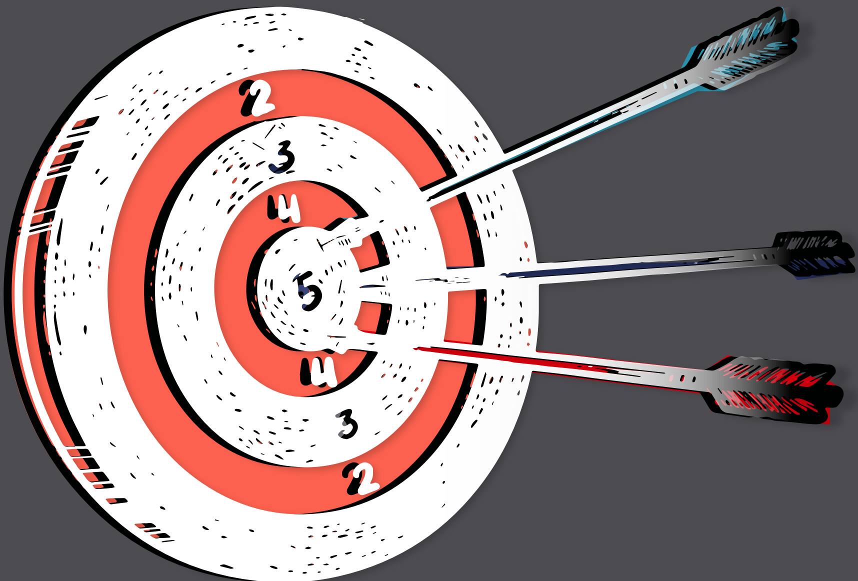
The Future of Executive Education is a bookazine—a professional book with the look-and-feel of a magazine. All concepts included are tried and tested in our face to face, virtual, or hybrid executive classrooms. The chapters are short with many illustrations for a quick and enjoyable read, and good retention of the presented ideas. There is no set order to read this bookazine, just start anywhere and read only what you are interested in without compromise.

Nora Grasselli

Berlin, January 2023.

Designing for Impact

A results-driven perspective for executive education



Aligning with multiple stakeholders on high-level strategic ambitions can be complex but proves essential for purpose-driven customized executive education.

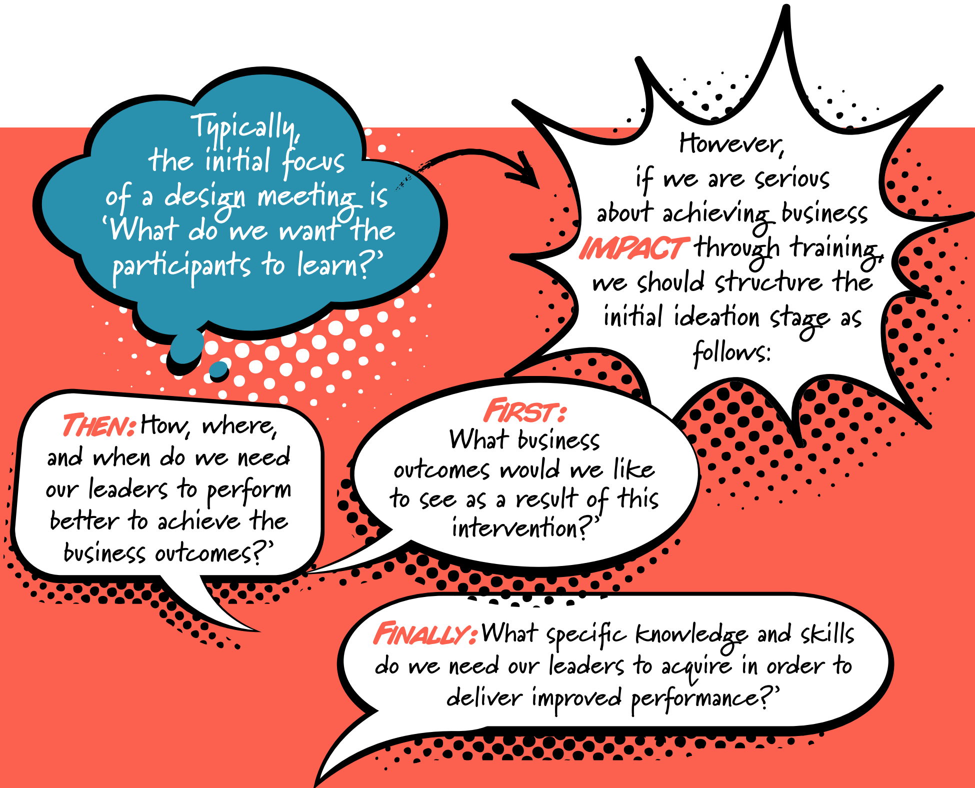
Christoph Burger, Nora Grasselli, Edward Boon

A problem to solve

JANE'S STORY IS A COMMON ONE. IT ILLUSTRATES THE NEED FOR ORGANIZATIONS TO TAKE A FRESH LOOK AT THEIR APPROACH TO EXECUTIVE EDUCATION.

Sending executives to training is an expensive business...

On top of the training cost, there is the 'opportunity cost' of employees not being at their desks, plus travel, food, and accommodation... it adds up quickly. Yet most organizations recognize that not providing their future leaders with ongoing training is a risk they are not willing to take. In today's fast moving and ever-changing business environment, failure to invest in the development of the organization's leadership capabilities is a one-way ticket to extinction. For management boards, sending high potentials to external experts for training is an investment. And of course, those who invest hope to one day make a return on the bottom line.



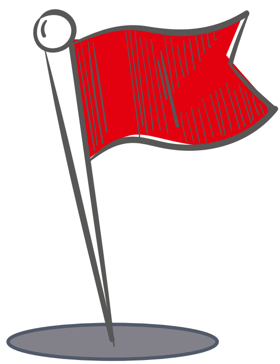
The outcome of this 'results first' perspective is twofold. It ensures that the training content is aligned with the desired outcomes—guiding us towards an effective design. Moreover, it encourages us to focus only on the necessary steps to produce these outcomes, guiding us towards an ***efficient*** design.

These are nobel aims! However in reality, those involved in the often drawn-out process of program design will know that it is all too easy to somewhat lose focus on the specifics of end goals as more stakeholders are brought in to the process. In cases where various locations or brands are being brought together under one global strategy vision, this risk becomes even more acute.

A perfect example is the TRATON GROUP, which in 2018 brought together four of the world's leading truck brands (MAN, Scania, Volkswagen, and Caminhões e Ônibus), and then went on to acquire Navistar in 2020. TRATON set out to become the global champion of the transportation services industry. An ambitious talent development strategy was launched in the wake of this merger, and in a competitive bid, ESMT Berlin and training partner Mindset joined forces to support TRATON's cross brand management in designing and executing a structured training program for strategically-vital high potentials.

ESMT faculty member, Christoph Burger, is convinced that one single document made a huge difference in the eventual success of the program design: the "Impact Training Map".

Originally conceived by thought leader Robert Brinkerhoff[1], this one page document demonstrates how each learning intervention will specifically connect to a business result.



1 Brinkerhoff, R. and A. Apking. 2001. High Impact Learning: Strategies For Leveraging Performance And Business Results From Training Investments. Cambridge: Perseus.

FIGURE 1: IMPACT MAP FOR TRATON'S MANAGEMENT EXCELLENCE PROGRAM

Organizational ambitions

Restructure the very concept of transportation and become the global champion of the transportation services industry.

Be a leading global manufacturer of commercial vehicles and best in class in terms of:

> Profitability.

> Customer innovation.

> Global presence.

> Employee satisfaction.

Performance outcomes

> Increased identification of cross-brand (function) synergies.

> Increased cross-brand (function) collaboration.

> Increase in business-driven decisions.

> Improved business-driven decisions.

> Increase in team involvement in decision making process.

> Increased initiative taking in the team.

> Improved open error culture in the team.

> More innovation.

> Increased operational efficiency.

Source: Program team

Learning outcomes

- Understands the key characteristics of an intrapreneurial and disruptive mindset.
- Ability to lead cross-brand (function) collaboration and innovation.
- Understands essential financial management principles.
- Ability to apply business analytics in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world to create financial value.
- Ability to make fact-based decisions under stressful conditions.
- Ability to facilitate group decision making.

Behavioral applications

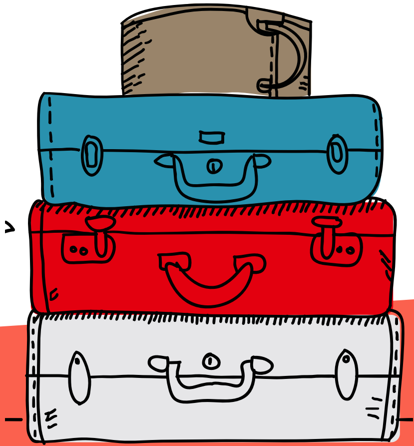
- Applies an intrapreneurial mindset and toolkit to drive financial value creation.
- Explores all perspectives in cross-brand (function) scenarios to identify optimal solutions.
- Identifies cross-brand (function) synergies and takes responsibility for driving the broader TRATON agenda.
- Employs a range of decision making tools to include and involve the team in the decision making process.

Source: Program team

When you are designing and evaluating for business results, you have to 'set the table' for success before-hand.

- Organizational ambitions describe the newly-formed TRATON's high-level strategic goals.
- Performance outcomes highlight more immediate outcomes expected to occur as program participants apply what they have learned. These bridge a conceptual gap between *organizational ambitions*, which feels distant from an individual participant's perspective, and the specific *behavioral applications*, which can be more easily applied to one's individual working context.
- Behavioral applications define the where, when, and how of an application so that the *performance outcomes* will occur. It is, of course, possible to apply everything that one has learned from a training program and still not create any meaningful wider impact if it's applied at the wrong time, in the wrong place, with the wrong person, etc.
- Learning outcomes constitutes the most fine-grained goals, defining exclusively the type of knowledge and skills that will support the *behavioral applications*.

The field of instructional design is no stranger to such multi-purpose documents. In their day-to-day work, instructional designers "join up the dots" between various stakeholders on the technical, pedagogical, and business sides.



When you are designing and evaluating for business results, you have to 'set the table' for success before-hand. Make sure all stakeholders are aligned on the success you are looking to achieve and how you will measure them. Trying to do this retrospectively—after the training—is like packing your bags, jumping on a plane, and then deciding where you want to go on holiday; it just doesn't make sense!

Christoph and Edward agree that such a document is invaluable during the program design, execution, and follow-up stages:

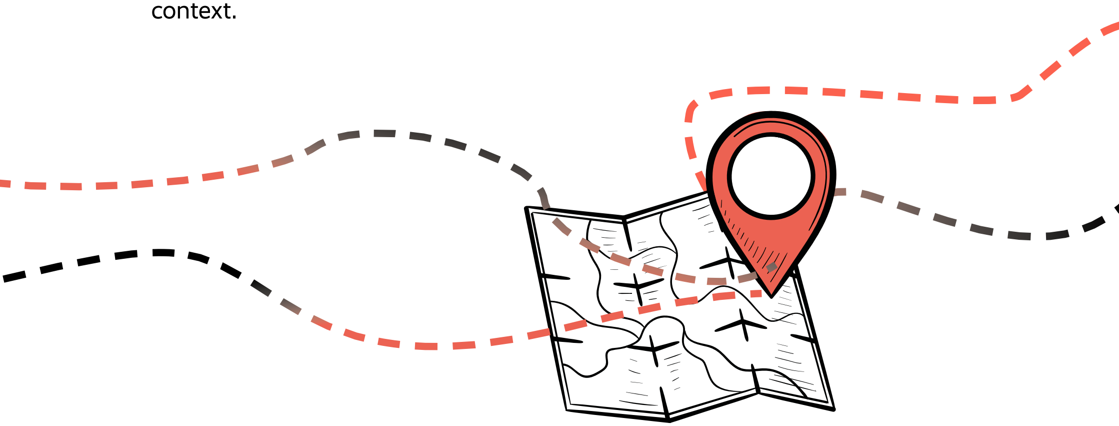
Firstly, the action of creating the document encourages dialogue from the get-go. It ensures the alignment across various stakeholders on the program logic, then learning intervention storyline, and contribution to business results.

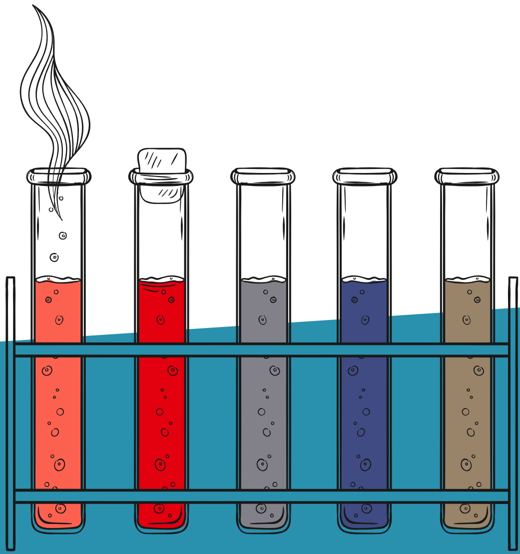
Secondly, it functions as a design blueprint. *Learning outcomes* and *behavioral applications* provide guidance on what content to include and which scenarios participants should be focusing on in the reflection and application stages of the learning journey.

Thirdly, it is a vital tool for communicating the purpose of the program to key stakeholders and gaining buy in. Even the best designed program is unlikely to succeed if the participants and their key stakeholders are not clued in on the link between learning outcomes and organizational ambition.

Finally, it is a useful blueprint for the evaluation: what should be followed-up and measured, in order for the program to qualify as a 'success'?

With the impact map in place, the program team were able to draft a cohesive 10-month journey, woven into the very fabric of each participant's professional context.





Transferring the learned knowledge and skills to the performance environment requires new and different behaviors. This can be daunting for the participant and risky for the organization should the experiment go wrong. Thus, we build in thoughtfully guided practice scenarios in our learning journeys that become gradually trickier and more complex as the journey proceeds. We also ensure that we consider where feedback will come from so that our participants have the support and encouragement they need to achieve sustained behavioral change.

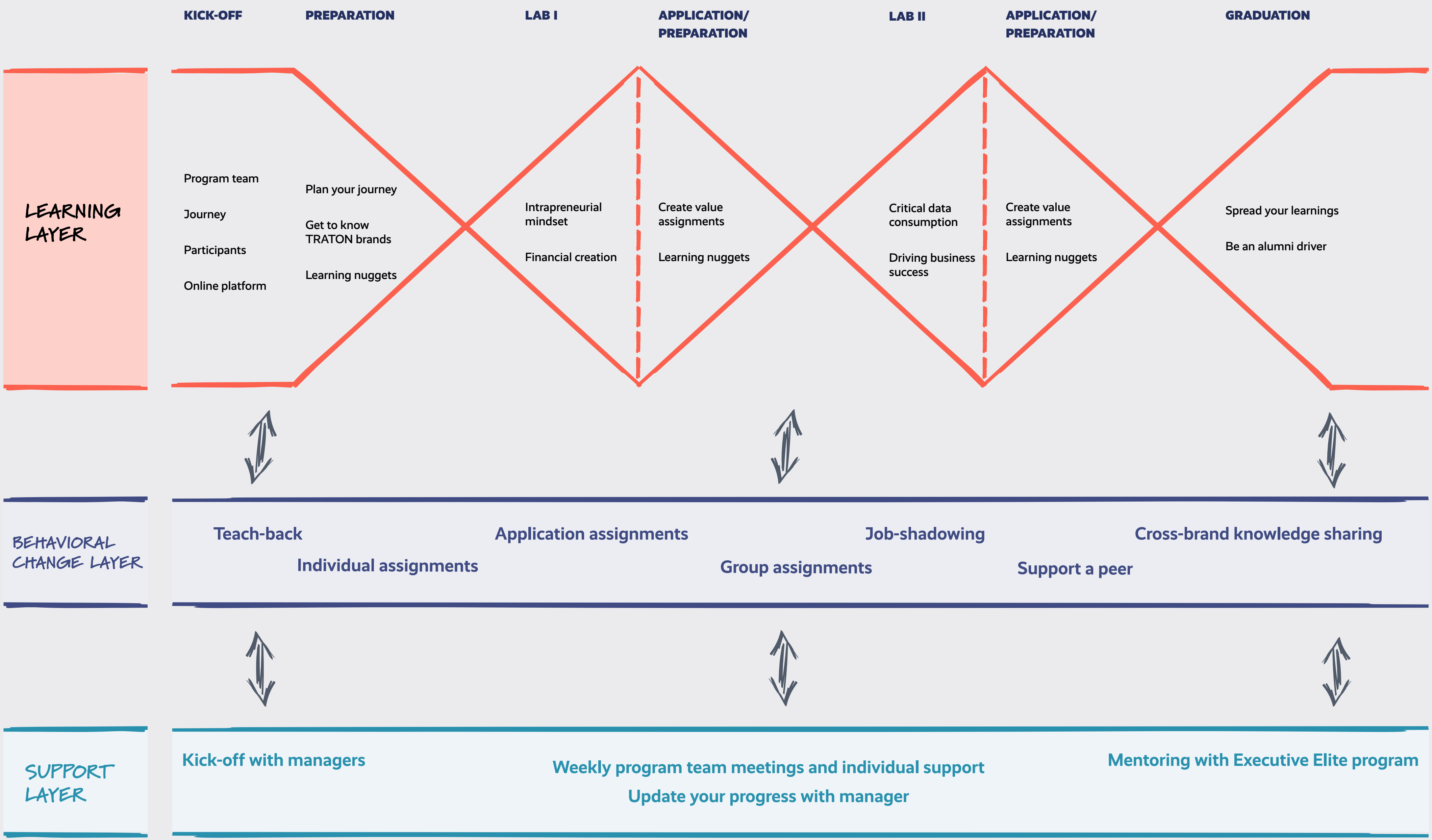
The result was a development journey built around three key principles: learning, behavioral change, and support (Figure 2).

- A **'learning' layer** modelled on the design thinking principle of converging and diverging thinking.
  - Before each of the synchronous interventions (so-called 'labs'), participants received a series of assignments designed to build common knowledge foundations (converging).
  - 'Labs' then built on these concepts, providing a safe environment to exchange perspectives and experiment with new skills, under guidance of the ESMT Berlin program faculty (diverging).
- A **'behavioral change' layer** to connect content to impact, offering participants tangible ways to use the skills they explored in the 'labs'. Crucially, participants selected the three "application challenges" they felt were most relevant to their role, encouraging both personalization to their own working context and learner autonomy.
- A **'support' layer**, leveraging multiple relationships (from ESMT to colleagues and supervisors) to provide advice, feedback, and accountability for the changes.

Don't hope for results—drive them!

The program generated a huge emotional momentum for behavioral change.

FIGURE 2: THREE-LAYER LEARNING JOURNEY DESIGN FOR TRATON'S MANAGEMENT EXCELLENCE PROGRAM



What gets measured, gets done. For decades, learning and development professionals faced a challenge: even if they wanted to shift their role from 'conveyer of wisdom' to 'driver of performance improvement', they often found themselves in the dark about what happened once participants left the seminar room.

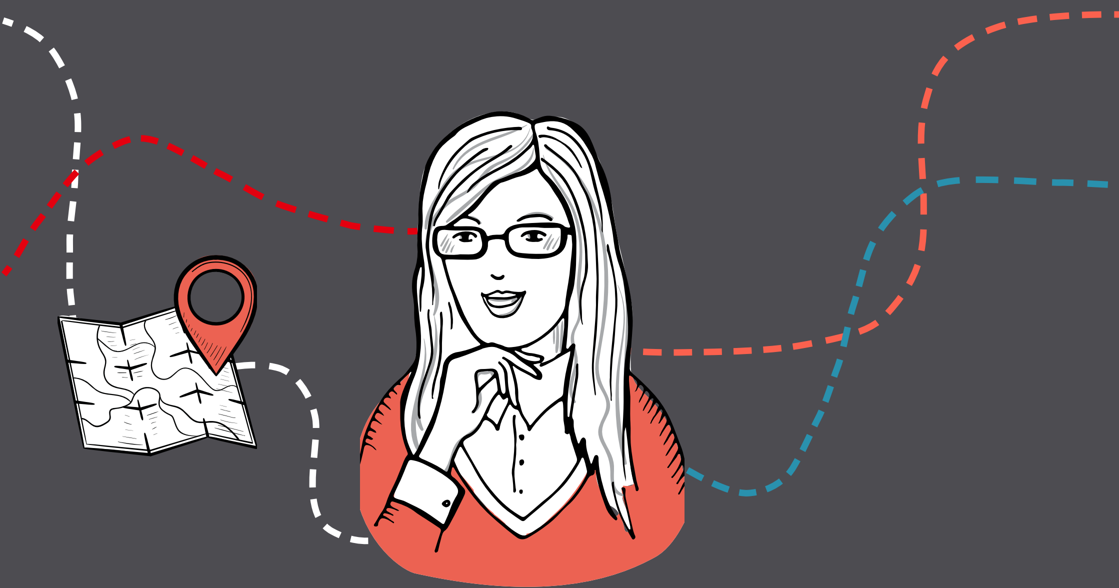
Advances in digital learning platforms and video conferencing software have made more ambitious, long-term, and impact-focused learning journeys a possibility. By leveraging the analytical features of the Promote® online learning platform, the program team were able to monitor in real-time the progress of each individual participant's asynchronous learning and application challenges. This not only helped identify who needed more support from ESMT or their TRATON line manager, but also formed the basis of a weekly online progress meeting to reflect on learnings and application. The result was a continual fine-tuning of the learning journey to better match desired outcomes and adapt to new information.

As the ten months came to an end, the program team realized that as well as fulfilling the defined performance outcomes outlined in the impact map, the program generated a huge emotional momentum for behavioral change among the participants themselves, but also among TRATON senior management. When the program was awarded Gold in EFMD's prestigious Excellence in Practice Award (www.globalfocusmagazine.com/how-traton-uses-training-to-accelerate-its-global-champion-strategy/) in 2021, the whole team felt deeply honored to have had these accomplishments recognized… and above all, motivated to further research and experiment with impact-driven program design.

A previous version of this paper appeared the May-June 2022 edition of the European Business Review.

Individualized Learning in Executive Education

Accommodating the modern learner



An increased focus on co-creation in program design seeks to better meet the needs of the modern knowledge worker, setting a new standard for leadership development.

Mandy Hübener, Bianca Schmitz, Bethan Williams

In these changing times, engaging in career-long learning has never been more vital

Studies show that the vast majority of knowledge workers feel they do not have enough time to do their actual jobs, let alone step away from their desk for formal training. Over 40 percent of employees' time is reportedly spent on tasks that do not tangibly help them achieve their professional responsibilities. Their workflow is frequently disrupted—often, ironically— by a notification on one of their multiple collaboration tools. As a result, 1 percent of the working week is all they feel they can devote to professional development.[1] Meanwhile, digital disruption and increased automation has created an unprecedented skill gap in the global jobs market.[2] In these changing times, engaging in career-long learning has never been more vital.

The heyday of off-the-shelf, syllabus-led executive education is over.

Ambitious young managers are increasingly taking their professional development into their own hands, eschewing the rigid syllabus of traditional executive education in favor of micro-learning platforms such as LinkedIn Learning. These online platforms offer flexible, mobile learning, with the individual in the driving seat.

The return on investment (ROI) of these expensive leadership development programs has been called into question. Companies rightly demand ways of measuring change, in performance or behaviors, in the years following their purchased program. Executive education providers must search for those answers.

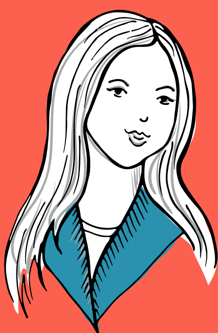
1 Deloitte Development. "Leading in Learning. Building capabilities to deliver on your business strategy." https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/HumanCapital/gx-cons-hc-learning-solutions-placemat.pdf (accessed February 22, 2023)

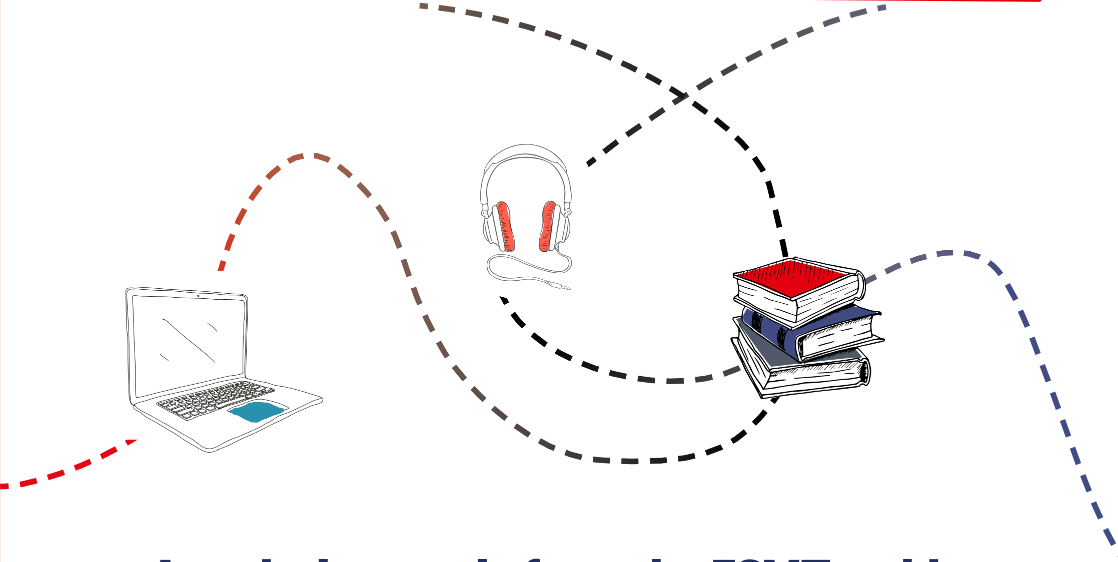
2 Word Economic Forum. 2016. "The Future of Jobs. Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution." www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs.pdf (accessed February 22, 2023).

A new standard in leadership development

The problem is not a lack of expertise at top business schools, but the way some of their business has been conducted. After communicating their transformational agenda, clients often let faculty decide on the content and design of leadership development programs, while the executive participant remains more or less anonymous until the very first coffee and icebreaker session. Highly-motivated participants may proactively try to relate the learning objectives to their own (very personal) career roadblocks and team dynamics. Others may switch off when they perceive topics to be unrelated to their own needs. Either way, the content is often in danger of being processed on an intellectual level only, however engaging the topic or the trainer.

Clearly, as executive educators, we need to maximize the impact of our offerings. We cannot afford to brush off accusations of irrelevant content and academic bombast. Instead, we must set the bar for a new standard in leadership development, upending the top-down nature of certain business models and shifting the focus to individual participants.

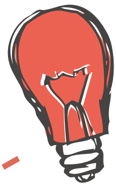




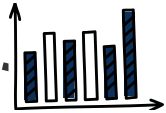
A typical example from the ESMT archive

Typically, a few weeks before a program begins, the client's learning and development lead sends the full names, job titles, and email addresses of the program participants—and little more. Useful information for printing name badges and certificates, perhaps, but no insights into the people behind the job titles.

In 2019 Mandy Hübener and Bianca Schmitz, both program directors at ESMT Berlin, entered into talks with Allianz—one of the school's most regular clients—about an accelerated leadership program for the insurance giant's top HR talents. The ESMT team decided to shift the focus of the program design process, so that participants' differences were placed front and center. "At first glance the particpants' profiles looked very similar", explains Mandy Hübener. "These men and women held similar positions across the company's various business units, with similar years' of service." However, it soon became clear that the cohort was extremely heterogeneous. "In a traditional client partnership, we would only be told that these individuals had all demonstrated potential to take over senior executive positions in HR", adds Bianca Schmitz. "Before we met them we really didn´t know what that potential meant to each participant."



The ESMT program team advocated for a complete co-creation between Allianz's learning & development (L&D) lead, the participant, and the ESMT teaching faculty. As financial sponsor, the L&D lead would continue to represent the client's interests, and define the end goal of the program—in this case, defining the core competencies that their HR potentials needed to demonstrate before stepping up to senior leadership roles. A pre-program baseline assessment was conducted for every participant, ensuring their own interests were represented before the design process kicked off: How confident did they feel in each core area? What specific challenges were they facing? What qualities would their ideal mentor possess? These self-reports were aggregated with more objective performance measures, such as the 360° feedback survey from their colleagues, direct reports, and line managers. The ESMT team was then able to map a personalized learning journey for each individual, designed to run alongside the expert-led teaching on mandatory topics.



In these so-called 'ad-hocracies' leaders are less able to rely on formal authority, and must learn to flex their style depending on the context.

The data that the two program directors gathered at this stage proved invaluable. It became clear that the participants had followed diverse career paths and had demonstrated different strengths, since progressing through the company. Crucially, the data also revealed significant variances in the competency areas, which the participants felt less confident about performing in their future role, and as such, in the program's personal learning objective for which they were each about to embark upon.
In addition, Allianz and ESMT scheduled four individual guided development conversations for each participant at key moments in the learning journey (a unique feature of this program). These candid conversations helped keep participants accountable to their own specific goals and facilitated a continuous open dialogue between the business school, the client, and the executive student.

Meeting the needs of the modern knowledge worker

Lateral career moves are increasingly common and job descriptions increasingly fluid. Many mid-career professionals in agile organizations are being trusted to take on more responsibilities, without receiving a formal promotion. Businesses operating in a 'VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous)' environment demand a high degree of autonomy, initiative, and ownership from their executives. In these so-called 'ad-hocracies' leaders are less able to rely on formal authority and must learn to flex their style depending on the context. Without proper training and support, many will struggle to keep up with the pace of change.

The needs of the modern knowledge worker are therefore very specific, increasingly divergent, and above all, changing very quickly. Education providers have two key challenges: First to get better at recognizing and meeting individuals' needs, in terms of content and learning format; and secondly, to ensure that what is taught is transferred from the classroom to the office.

Directing more resources towards individualized learning will help the executive education industry meet both of these challenges. Learnings are more likely to be transferred if the content of a customized learning journey is personalized. Encouraging program participants to apply what they have learnt between formal teaching sessions, will help bridge the 'skills transfer gap'. There is ample evidence that interleaved practice and elaboration is one of the most powerful techniques for making learning stick.

Irrefutable ROI

Hübener and Schmitz have now co-created several programs with a range of clients. Each has followed a similar ratio of expert-led classroom teaching to fully-personalized, data-driven learning journeys with plenty of high-touch elements:

Regular 1-on-1 coaching or mentoring sessions for self-reflection—to keep abreast of progress and evolving needs and as an accountability mechanism.

Curated learning content and activities—in the form of specific readings, job shadowing opportunities, mentorship programs, mini challenges, and project assignments.

Unlimited access to a pool of self-paced online modules specific for each individual with guidance via pre-defined learning paths or topic clusters.

The collaborative effort between sponsor, education provider, and participant function like a continuous conversation. The individual learning journeys drawn up at the beginning of the partnership were treated as 'first drafts' allowing for changes to be made based on individuals' evolving needs.

Having worked more closely than ever before with individual participants, Hübener and Schmitz are firm believers that the ROI for their clients is irrefutable. The experiment has proven successful several times, so the program directors now feel confident that this level of customization is a scalable business model for ESMT. Recent developments in online learning have meant many aspects of the learning journey can now be achieved in pre-recorded videos or virtual seminars. The ESMT team was inspired early on by low-cost, data-driven customization techniques used in targeted marketing, and soon realized this allowed more spend-per-head on high-cost, high-impact content such as one-to-one coaching. What was prohibitively expensive a few years ago has now become possible in a blended format.

To guarantee maximum ROI for its clients, executive education needs to fulfil some key criteria. The content must be tailored to individuals' profoundly personal career paths, knowledge gaps and blind spots, and the format must also suit the learning style and working context of each participant (podcasts, TED talks, print—no learning method is invalid). Self-paced online modules are a good step in this direction, allowing a decoupling from the rigid corporate calendar or the availability of teaching faculty. But individualization must also mean creating regular opportunities to reflect on and assimilate new skills and knowledge. Furthermore, executive participants should feel they have the toolkit and the support network they need to continue their learning journey long after they leave campus.

A previous version of this paper appeared the March-April 2021 edition of the European Business Review

Same, Same...
But Different

Remodeling an executive education journey for remote learners

How bringing in new EdTech capabilities helped to navigate the Covid crisis.

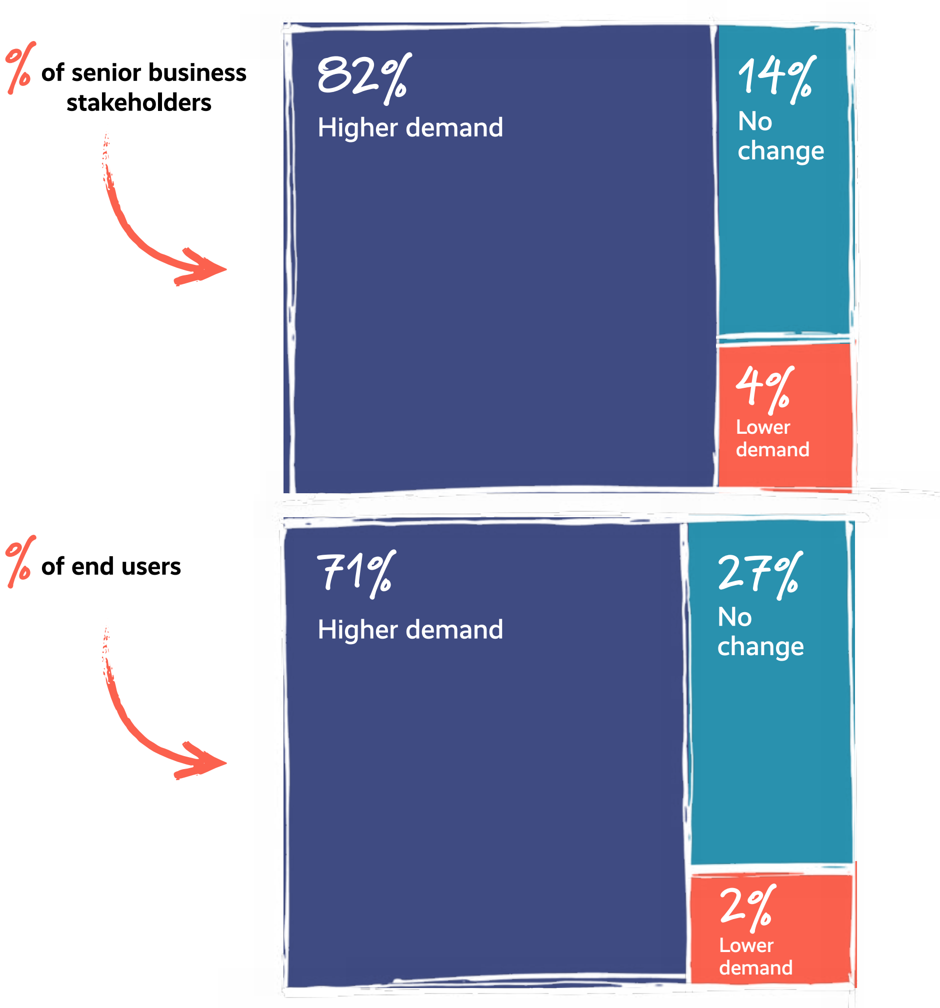
Nan Guo, Josefine Raasch,
Olivia de Paeztron, Bethan Williams

The lingering stigma of ‘online learning’ for executives

Clearly, some of the changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic are here to stay—the executive education industry, in particular, has been shaken to its core. Whilst digital learning tools played a modest role in most business schools’ offerings for many years, the past two years have seen an unprecedented investment in bespoke learning management systems (LMS) and digital classroom technology to allow teaching to continue. In retrospect, the sudden cancellation of all face-to-face programs on the ESMT campus was a watershed moment. At the same time it provided us with the opportunity to radically overhaul the business model and unleash the creativity of faculty and program facilitators. The pay-off for months of uncertainty and risk-taking has been a once-in-a-generation learning curve. Thanks to a healthy dose of honest feedback from clients and a culture of trial and error, we have come to learn how remote learning can match or even surpass a campus-based learning journey.

FIGURE 1: DEMAND FOR DIGITAL LEARNING IS INCREASING

Changes in demand seen at the start of the pandemic



Source: Gerner, M. 2021. "The transformation of workplace learning." Digital learning, March 23, 2021. p.15.

Necessity is the mother of all invention

Planning an executive education program in those early months of 2020 turned out to be far from simple, even for the most seasoned of program teams at ESMT Berlin. It wasn't just the logistics of learning new technologies overnight that proved a challenge. The executive education department found itself having to first tackle a series of assumptions about the inferiority of learning online. The real job in those early months became: how can we convince disappointed executives that a virtual learning journey could be just as transformative for their companies and for their career and get everyone back into a growth mindset?

The select group of Irish executives enrolled in ESMT Berlin's 2020 run of 'Enter the Eurozone' (ETE) program provided a great case study here. The award-winning pilot in 2019 had taken executives from nineteen Irish SMEs and supported them in drawing up a detailed entry strategy for a Eurozone market. Openings for the second run in 2020 were highly sought after, especially as the Brexit deadline crept closer—but nobody could have predicted months of successive lockdowns across the continent. Program director Nan Guo and her client, Irish government agency Enterprise Ireland, were left with no choice. The entire learning journey would have to move online.

The first step? Identifying and tackling some common assumptions about online learning—assumptions they knew many of the incoming executives would share.

ASSUMPTION #1

“It is much easier to lose focus and motivation when learning online.”

% of those who begin an online course and drop out before completion

You’re taking part in a live webinar in your home office, and an email notification pops up in the bottom-right corner of your screen. Since your inbox is only one click away, do you take a quick look? Most likely, you do. Most of us can’t seem to help it.

When studying on a self-paced learning journey (for example, reading through a case study or watching a pre-recorded lecture) it can be even easier to get distracted. When you cannot regularly see and hear from others on the same learning journey, it also feels much harder to overcome the temptation to multitask. That’s why most students enrolled in MOOC (massive online open courses) struggle to stay accountable to their goals in the long run. A study carried out by academics from MIT indicates that, on average, a staggering 96% of those who begin an online course dropped out before completion.[1]

Program director Nan Guo was conscious of these potential pitfalls, when she

1 Reich, J and J. A. Ruipérez-Valiente (2019). “The MOOC pivot”. Science 363: 130-131.

mulled over how to create a Covid-safe version of 'Enter the Eurozone' program. Very early on, she decided that the constellation of the original program team would need shaking up if she was going to succeed in creating a learning journey that matched the success of the face-to-face pilot. Olivia de Paeztron and Josefine Raasch Raasch, learning designers specializing in digital education, and Marina Petrova, a media designer specializing in video-based learning journeys, were brought on board to help the program team maximize learners' engagement and retention of knowledge.

Since attention is such a limited resource, the team focused first on the curation of content. Reproducing face-to-face lectures verbatim in text and images would have resulted in information overload for the remote learner. Instead, concepts were distilled into learning 'nuggets' made up of short videos, interactive activities, and optional readings, which could be slotted into one lunchtime or evening study session. Participants were then prompted to reflect and apply their learnings as soon as possible to their own market entry plan, which would be submitted at the end of the program. In Nan Guo's words, the team's strategy became "minimizing input to maximize output."

UX design principles also played a key role in integrating storytelling into this four-month learning journey. Purposeful touchpoints were marked out with visual icons in a consistent graphic narrative on the learning management system (LMS), helping the executives monitor their own learning progress and set manageable goals. The team also made sure to integrate a high density of interactive activities using specialist tools such as Padlet and MURAL to prompt transfer of knowledge to the executives' own business context.

The program's regular live teaching sessions did not escape the attention of the EdTech experts either. Transferring a classroom-based workshop into a webinar can all too easily result in a 'point and pontificate' lecture with little opportunity for meaningful peer-to-peer interaction. Regular bursts of small-group discussions in virtual breakout rooms can provide temporary respite, but there are several other pedagogical techniques that have also proved to keep live sessions stimulating, from virtual games to foster friendly competition, to shared collaboration spaces where the faculty and executive students brainstorm and co-create visual aids in real time. According to the EdTech experts, the key question they asked themselves became "What can we do in the next live session that will surprise our audience and keep them switched on?"

ASSUMPTION #2

"It is much harder to build meaningful and productive relationships in an online learning setting."

A major pull factor for the 2019 run of the ETE program had been the opportunity to share knowledge and find support in other like-minded Irish entrepreneurs. Without face-to-face icebreakers and lively dinner events in Europe's capital cities, the team organizing the ETE program 2020 had to come up with new ways to create networking opportunities. Moreover, the lecturers, coaches, and facilitators would also need to find new ways to get to know the diverse set of companies and individuals in the incoming cohort.

How might you get a conversation started, if you can't bring up the restaurant's exquisite coq au vin or the unseasonably cold weather? It turns out that it ***helps to lead by example (see Figure 2, Phase 1).***

In the case of ETE 2020, the program team made sure to introduce themselves on the new digital learning platform first. The program director, program manager, and the lead coach each

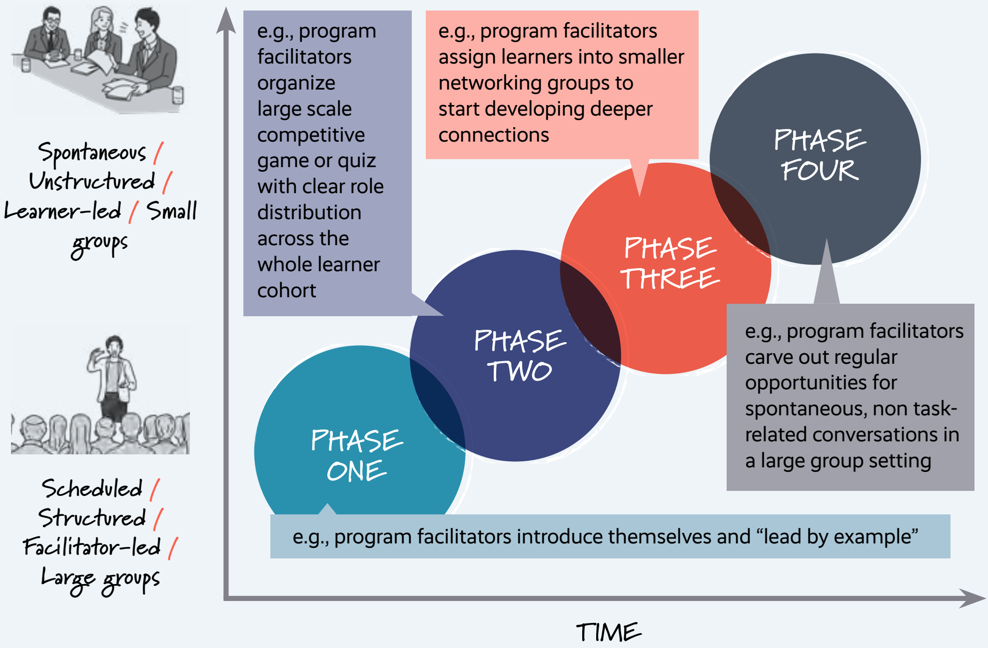
> **The high-energy, spontaneous nature of interaction that came about as the teams tried to crack the codes set a precedent for future live sessions.**

uploaded a visual story about themselves, with video footage showing their daily routines, their professional backgrounds, and their roles in the program preparation. These short videos proved much more compelling and informative for the incoming participants than a dry curriculum vitae format—and the Irish executives were quick to follow suit with their own inventive self-introductions. One even shot theirs from the top of a high voltage electric tower which really did make for a brilliant conversation starter in the online forums!

The faculty and speakers invited to the program also gained rich context from these videos to leverage in their own live webinars; instead of just a brand name and a job title, they caught a glimpse of each participant's working environment, production site, and company products.

Still, the primary intention behind networking opportunities on an executive education program has always been peer-to-peer learning. Sharing a photo of your dog napping under the desk is only going to get the group so far—it merely opens the door for more productive discussions. ***As such, the next stage is all about setting some precedents (see Figure 2, Phase 2).*** In the early stages of an online program, when the proverbial ice is still slowly thawing, interactions must be designed meticulously in advance. At first, participants tend to be anxious not to fall victim to micro-delays in the conferencing software and accidentally interrupt one another, so the facilitators of a live session need to provide a structure to interactions. In the case of ETE 2020, a team-based escape game in breakout rooms worked wonders: crucially, everyone knew their role in the proceedings from the start and shared a common goal. The high-energy, spontaneous nature of interaction that came about as the teams tried to crack the codes set a precedent for future live sessions. What is more, the debrief session with professional communication coaches after the game also meant that each individual gained some self-awareness about their own virtual communication style.

FIGURE 2: STEERING PEER-TO-PEER NETWORKING IN AN ONLINE LEARNING JOURNEY



Once past the hurdle of the first few live sessions, it is time to steadily introduce more non-structured and non-task related interactions to build on the nascent trust in the group (see Figure 2, Phase 3). Chit-chat about weather and holidays before and after the teaching session will help to break down the barrier of the screen. As facilitators, it is enough to simply log into the Zoom room ten minutes before and stay behind ten minutes after the session, as you would on-campus. As more participants dial in to the call, a lively ongoing conversation about Michael's electric guitar collection in his home office will encourage more voices to chip in, and the session is likely to start on an energy high.

Last but not least, it is essential to purposely carve out regular time for activities in smaller groups (see Figure 2, Phase 4). In video calls with more than five participants, it is unlikely that everyone will get a chance to speak, and some voices will always tend to dominate. With only one audio stream, peer-to-peer networking stagnates and remains at a superficial level. To avoid this, participants of ETE 2020 were assigned to more intimate ‘learning groups’ that would meet regularly, allowing a much deeper level of connection. Each was headed by a business advisor with prior experience in the Eurozone, both to facilitate the discussion and maximize learning opportunities. Compared to a face to face context on campus, setting up this number of separate meetings was certainly an administrative challenge for the program team, but the results were clear to see in the relationships and support network that emerged by the end of the four-month program.

ASSUMPTION #3

“Scalability is always at the expense of customization”

A final common concern is that online learning tends to sacrifice customization in the pursuit of scalability and cost efficiency. In general, the online learning format is still largely associated with MOOC-style university courses for a mass commercial audience, such as those available on Coursera or LinkedIn Learning.

For business schools, however, online learning should not mean the program team hands participant care over to algorithms. Far from it. Algorithms are valuable only in that they take over a lot of the heavy lifting—that is, tracking attendance, monitoring progress, and marking multiple-choice quizzes. Automating these administrative processes can free up resources for more frequent and meaningful face-to-face interactions in the form of 1-on-1 coaching

For business schools, however, online learning should NOT mean the program team hands participant care over to algorithms.

sessions, virtual networking events, and individualized project feedback. As such, online learning modules at ESMT Berlin often offer a higher degree of individualization than campus-based equivalents.

Both ESMT and the client Enterprise Ireland knew that passively reading about a generic framework for, say, value propositions would not much help a small Irish telecoms company plan their first foray into the Spanish market. Too much depends on the industry that the SME belongs to, the maturity of the existing market in the targeted Eurozone market, the skills and experience the team can draw on…the list goes on. Therefore, Nan Guo and the Edtech team's response to the question of scalability vs. customization was as follows: Provide a concise, general introduction to the full range of tools or methods, but then prompt each SME to immediately apply this knowledge to their own business reality and assess how they leverage the tools to meet their SME's own specific targets.

By transferring ownership in this way, the 'Enter the Eurozone' program was able to serve a diverse range of clients without overwhelming any of them with irrelevant information or taking up an undue amount of teaching resources.

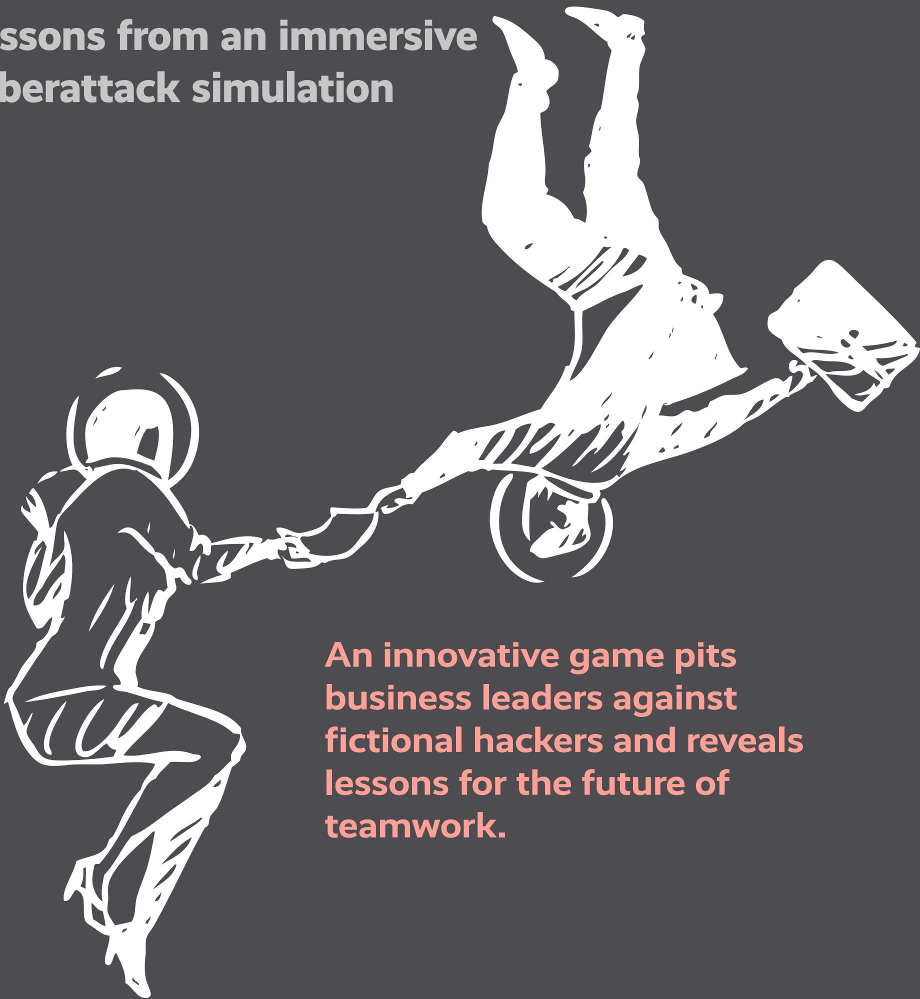
Completing an online learning journey

The 2020 run of ESMT's 'Enter the Eurozone' program was a prime example that 'going digital' does not have to translate to a net negative for the executive student.

For Nan Guo, the most important lesson she took home was exactly what she had been saying to her executive students for years: learning never ends! As government and company policies evolve in the wake of the pandemic, the way all of us navigate the virtual world continues to change, requiring learning and development specialists to upgrade the way they design and deliver programs. If there is a fool-proof formula for success, it is to carefully build a team of professionals who genuinely care about the outcomes of the learners, and who see themselves as lifelong learners too.

The Future of Teamwork

Lessons from an immersive cyberattack simulation



An innovative game pits business leaders against fictional hackers and reveals lessons for the future of teamwork.

Nora Grasselli, Bethan Williams

Business News

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Cyberattack!

Berlin, January 2020. A group of executives is ushered silently into a conference room. With little in the way of preamble a grim announcement is made: their company is under cyberattack. Anonymous hackers have sent a series of cryptic demands, which must be carried out within the next 30 minutes or else the company's entire client data will be public.

And that's not all. Like many in its field, the firm has recently looked to expand its international client base and is now operating across three different locations. The hackers have sent fragments of their demands to each office, meaning each local team has only part of the information required to untangle and crack the series of coded messages.

A deathly hush falls upon the room as this news sinks in, and then—a flurry of action. But exactly what kind of action may come as a surprise. iPads, paper, scissors, and felt-tip pens are quickly distributed. A countdown clock is projected onto the conference room wall.

This was not a real cyberattack (this time!) but a game—a learning simulation that replicates the type of unexpected crisis that business leaders dread. *The Virus* is a digital tool co-created by Nora Grasselli at ESMT Berlin, a leading expert in organizational psychodynamics. Based on an escape-roomesque scenario, it has been carefully designed to facilitate breakthrough learning around the particular challenges of leadership and teamwork in the modern age.

From invisible hackers threatening to release confidential data, to an invisible biological enemy, such as the coronavirus, today´s business leaders are faced with a new and sometimes frightening set of existential crisis situations, each demanding impeccable teamwork if the company wants to survive intact.

How do we achieve impeccable teamwork when the nature of working in teams has undergone such seismic change over the past decade?

Modern teams tend to be spread out globally, interrelationships between team members are more complex, and communication is typically virtual. These are all realities, which make fast decisions and effective action much harder and leading teams a tougher challenge than ever. These realities are carefully reproduced in the design of Nora Grasselli´s game and then explored in a guided debrief session with participants after the game has ended.

As teams search for solutions during the 30-minute game, each player can learn a huge amount about themselves in the context of the modern team setting, while faculty observers gain new insights into how teams like these can be successful.

Three major shifts in modern team dynamics

MORE GLOBAL

In today's globalized economy projects are regularly planned, debated, and carried out in offices across the world.

MORE VIRTUAL

We are spending more time collaborating with each other online, regardless of our physical distance from fellow team members.

MORE LIQUID

We are seeing much more liquidity in all teams, and especially virtual ones—with individuals frequently swapping in and out—due to lower group boundaries fostered by digital communication technologies.

How virtual is your team?

% OF TEAM MEMBERS WORKING VIRTUALLY

+

% OF TIME WORKING VIRTUALLY

+

DEGREE OF VIRTUAL DISTANCE

Source: Schweitzer, L. and L. Duxbury. 2010. "Conceptualizing and measuring the virtualityof teams." Information systems journal 20 (3).

Replicating the modern team environment

For the executive education department at ESMT Berlin, the vision was to create a digital learning tool similar to a physical escape room, allowing exploration of managerial response to the challenges faced by modern-day teams. 'The Virus' is an immersive app-based experience—rather than literally putting their heads together to solve problems, players download the app, and are then separated into smaller groups to be placed in different rooms, or connected virtually via conferencing software. The 'escape' in this case is not from a room, but from invisible hackers threatening to release confidential client data.

The role of leadership

There is a 'golden rule' that is reflected in much of what the ESMT faculty teach: different types of projects require different leadership approaches. In a crisis situation such as the one simulated in 'The Virus', a flexible leadership mindset is absolutely essential.

With the sound of a countdown clock ticking away in the background, it is vital that the team—now split into three separate groups, or 'global offices'—rallies together to quickly identify and implement the most efficient approach for each task.

Without the formal protocols, hierarchies, and personal alliances that exist in a real-world organization, the players are free to establish their own framework for communication and task distribution. Stronger voices often take control, others tend to fall into line, and the organizational structure that emerges at the outset will often persist throughout the game. Typically, participants don't take time to discuss the organizational structures they will use to process and share information. The minority of teams that do define their roles and adjust them according to the task tend to complete the game in the fastest time.

Different circumstances require different leadership approaches, and the ability to be flexible and adaptive is invaluable.

Centralized vs. decentralized

For certain tasks it is more efficient for the unique information, which the teams have in front of them, to be collected in one place. Without one of the teams collating this data and analyzing it holistically, it is far more difficult to solve the riddle. In this way it represents a typical 'HQ task'—one which requires a bird's eye view to tackle effectively.

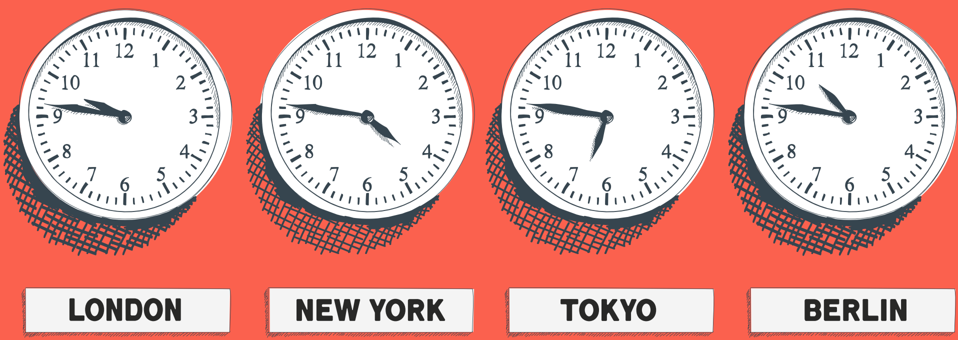
However, to complete one of the other tasks the players must make use of local context—information from the physical environment near each group. This task is much quicker to solve, when the three physically-distanced groups focus on their own data-set and work in parallel in their "local offices". The golden rule applies again: different circumstances require different leadership approaches- the ability to be flexible and adaptive is invaluable.

The need to desynchronize

Teams working across time zones with different national holidays cannot—and should not—follow a project plan in a strictly synchronized and linear fashion. To do so is to waste time, and deadlines are likely to be missed. Periods of desynchronization are vital, in which some parts of the team are trusted to take a step back from the collaborative space to work independently on their own contribution, whilst other team members look ahead to prepare for upcoming tasks.

Even within the half hour that players are "under cyber-attack" in this game, they can experience the benefits of desynchronizing sometimes for the sake of efficiency. One of the tasks involves deciphering the meaning of an enigmatic sentence, which turns out to be different for each player. If the physically-distanced groups default to analyzing each one as a group, or realize too late that they are all looking at different sentences, they are likely to waste valuable time.

"We are one team, we have to stick together" is a long-standing myth that causes teams in both physical and virtual settings to create distraction. The most successful teams in the game are those who manage to agree together on a process that allows all three "local offices" to work simultaneously within their own context at least some of the time.



Processes rule

It is especially critical in virtual project teams to create crystal clear structures and processes. With outward pressures on time and resources, as is often the case in fast-paced teams, this often falls by the wayside.

In an office environment you can pop over to someone's desk to share knowledge, check capacities, and monitor project progress in a non-intrusive way. This grants team members a view of potential upcoming delays in the project pipeline.

In a virtual scenario, we too often lose these insights and find ourselves unaware of what others are currently working on. Regular task-related discussions can help here. What? Why? How? and Who?—these simple questions can be key for virtual team success.

Less seriousness, fewer preconceptions, and more experimentation are vital behaviors for innovation.

Play in the executive classroom

Moving away from the old-school case study approach to executive education, Nora Grasselli puts a lot of the success of her teaching sessions down to 'gamification'. Rather than passively reading about another company's dilemmas, participants get the chance to experiment and play within the safe space of a fictionalized scenario. Instead of reflecting on abstract theories, they are thrown into an unpredictable and active situation, working in a team made up of real human beings.

The licence to play is rare enough in normal adult life, let alone in our professional lives. Here it allows participants to be less serious, have fewer preconceptions, be more open to experimentation, and more relaxed about potential failure. These happen to be tendencies that are vital ingredients for innovation.

Nora Grasselli was influenced in her attitude to teaching by the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, who studied the role of play in early childhood developmental processes. Winnicott put forward the concept of "potential space", where everything that exists in the real world can be reinvented to create something new. Building on Winnicott's ideas, Grasselli's game allows its executive players to become more open to experimenting with the unknown, to breaking down or bending rules, and making space for potential failure.

Donald Winnicott, British psychoanalyst, 1896-1971

The licence to play is rare enough in normal adult life, let alone in our professional lives.

For ESMT students and executive education participants who have already taken part in Grasselli's sessions, the sense of fun and adrenaline they experienced during gameplay also heightens their memory of what they learned. The story-led interface of the app builds a sinister characterization of the unseen hackers, quickly uniting the group of executives against a common enemy. Indeed, it would be clear to an outside observer that the executives really do want to 'beat the hackers.' The stakes feel high, even if on a rational level everyone is aware that it really is 'just a game'.

Leadership in a Digital Age

What are the skills needed to lead a digital transformation today?

Research-based insights into managing and leading a digital transformation from ESMT Berlin.

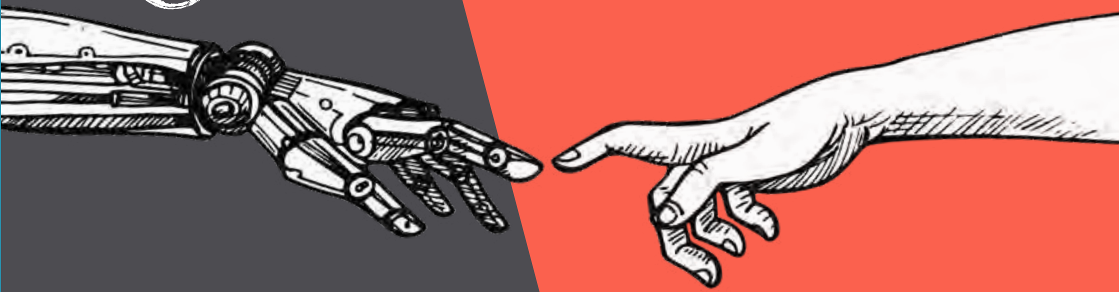
Angeliki Papachroni, Hannes Gurzki,
Bethan Williams

The scene depicted above has played out in countless meeting rooms across the world. Few strategy discussions pass by without mentioning the urgency of implementing a digital transformation. However, when we engage with senior leaders from different organizations and functional areas at ESMT Berlin, we often hear the following concern: What exactly does "digital transformation" mean for me as a leader in this company, and how will it impact my everyday work?

As a business school, supporting organizations with major transformational projects is our bread and butter. However, programs specific to digital transformation on the broader executive education market tend to focus either on the technical aspects of the challenge (e.g., unleashing the power of disruptive technologies) or on general change management methods and tools from the pre-digital world.

In order to lead a digital transformation initiative, senior executives need to be comfortable with *both* the digital side of the project (the technology, or 'nuts and bolts'), and the transformational side (the people, or 'change management' challenge).

Senior executives need to be comfortable with both the digital and the transformation side.



THE DIGITAL SIDE (TECHNOLOGY-SIDE)

While senior executives at the helm of a digital transformation initiative may possess a sound understanding of the strategy behind their plans, many would still benefit from digging deeper into the core mechanisms of the technologies they plan to introduce. After all, many come from non-technical backgrounds, and may therefore unknowingly use imprecise terminology when communicating digital strategy down the organizational chain. Often, a digital strategy may not clearly define whether the new technology will enhance current processes or redefine the rules of the game leading to further confusion and resistance to change. Being specific can help reduce confusion, uncertainty, and slower progress of the transformation process.

THE TRANSFORMATION SIDE (PEOPLE-SIDE)

Managers who fully understand the technological landscape in their field may still find it challenging to convince their teams why the proposed change is necessary or lay out how the change will affect day-to-day operations. Even after successfully whipping up the initial momentum for change, some managers struggle to gain the legitimacy and support needed for the new measures to be successfully rolled out across the entire organization. Knowing how to successfully empower and lead your team is a key building block for any change process.

Identify the transformation journey

Based on our experience at ESMT Berlin, digital transformation approaches fall into at least one of these three key areas, moving from process optimization to reinvention of the business model.

Enhancing products and services: Using digital technology to enhance the current product/service portfolio, thereby improving value for the customer.

Examples of this pathway could be the Digital Concert Hall of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, which offers live streams and exclusive content of the orchestra via digital-only channels.

Improving internal processes: Using digital technology to optimize the current business and improve overall efficiency.

For example, Amazon Prime Now was made possible after a concerted effort to improve Amazon's storage and delivery processes with new technologies. The changes made it possible for drivers to deliver purchases within two hours to addresses at selected locations.

Reinventing the business model: Using digital technology to create a new market, or an entirely new opportunity for revenue generation based on a novel value proposition.

One example here would be Netflix transforming their business model from a retail video distributor to a global integrated media player.

The examples mentioned above provide interesting showcases of the differences in length, speed, and complexity of different digital transformation initiatives. Clearly defining those is a critical step in the transformation process as different opportunity areas for digital transformation (from digitization of existing products and services to the transformation of the business) also require a different set of competences and organizational resources.

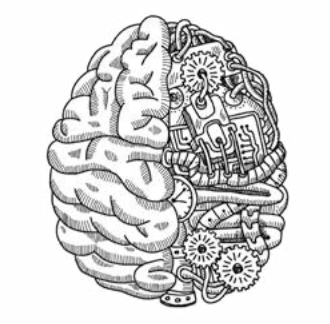
Anticipate leadership challenges

A leader's functional area typically influences one's views and perceptions of what "digital transformation" means as there is a natural tendency to focus primarily on the leadership challenges associated with this function or area of expertise.

Below are some examples of typical challenges we hear from our executive education participants in different business functions:

Strategy leaders strive to have a helicopter view of the industry trends that have the potential to disrupt their markets and business models. Their leadership challenge during a digital transformation may find form in ensuring that a transformation strategy is embraced by all key stakeholders, even those who insist on the "traditional ways of doing things" that typically protect the status quo.

Marketing and sales leaders look for technologies to strengthen the brand and establish better customer relationships. Since they have a strong external focus, their leadership challenge during a digital transformation may be to translate bold ideas into scalable processes on an operational level.



Human resource leaders focus on how different technologies can increase employee engagement, efficiency, and/or the sharing of knowledge. Their leadership challenge may be to increase the visibility of the digital transformation initiative and get high levels of engagement from all functional areas.

Technology leaders are concerned with how the latest technological developments could be deployed in their organization. Their leadership challenge during a digital transformation is often related to communicating the value or use cases of new technology both internally and externally.

Operational leaders are concerned with using digital technologies to refine business processes and enhance product and service offerings. Their leadership challenge during a digital transformation may be to get adequate buy-in from the entire organization and ensure long-term compliance to the new processes.

Such varied interpretations of the slippery term “digital transformation” from different functional leaders can lead to piecemeal approaches, silos, and miscommunication, all of which have potential to impair progress and even cause hostilities in the long-term.

> **There is often great value in looking beyond one’s functional area.**

Try a different vantage point

There is often great value in looking beyond one’s functional area and approaching the initiative from another angle. In order to fully unlock the potential of digital transformation across the entire organization, it is always hugely valuable for each individual leader to understand the perspectives of other key players who are implicated. Only then will they be in a position to anticipate and address any resistance from those who are looking at the digital transformation journey from a completely different angle.

At ESMT Berlin we have found it helpful to conceptualize the different perspectives as distinct roles: the strategist, the marketer, the lean guru, the technologist, and the orchestrator. Taking on these roles helps senior leaders to get a richer understanding of how different perspectives complement each other during a digital transformation.

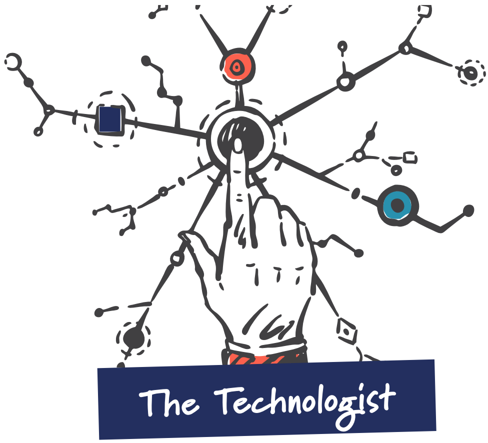
Different vantage points can bring thought-provoking questions to the fore:

1. **The strategist perspective**: How can we enhance our value proposition or processes using digital technologies? How can we transform and reinvent our business model?
2. **The marketer perspective**: How are consumer needs changing? How can we better connect with our consumers and address their needs?
3. **The lean guru perspective**: How can we use data to continuously improve our operational efficiency? How can we translate digital opportunities into scalable processes on the operational level?
4. **The technologist perspective**: What will be the next major technological disruption in our market? Can we create value adopting this technology and if so, how?
5. **The orchestrator perspective**: How can we empower and support teams during the process of transformation, which often requires employees at all organizational levels to step outside their comfort zones? How do we tackle resistance to change in the short-term and inertia in the long-term?

Work together with academic and industry experts

ESMT Berlin has recently released several programs specifically for top and middle managers currently working on digital transformation projects. These executive education programs focus on supporting business leaders in their understanding of *all* the potential vantage points listed above, regardless of the specific functional area that the individual executive currently works within.

New technologies are of course a key driver of a digital transformation. The need to understand these technological changes is what differentiates leading a digital transformation initiative from other change management scenarios covered in a general management program.



As such, program participants in this type of program are invited to first focus on the leadership challenge of **the technologist**, who will play a crucial overarching role in informing all strategy discussions.

The open-enrolment program, Leading Digital Transformation (LDT) begins, for example, with a session known as the 'DigiTech Quiz'. This live quiz allows faculty to gauge how comfortable incoming executives feel with the key technological and societal shifts that have shaped business in the past three-to-five years. The lighthearted and competitive format doubles up as an excellent icebreaker activity for the incoming cohort of business leaders. But, at its core, this session is really about helping executives identify any gaps in their knowledge on recent developments in AI, blockchain, and quantum computing and their current applications across different industries.

Next, program participants move on to explore the role of **the strategist** in any given digital transformation journey. These early sessions, during the first day or two of the program, will ask participants to verbalize the bigger picture behind their own organization's plans in a way that is easily comprehensible for outsiders, that is, other program participants. Being able to do this really is a prerequisite for putting complex strategy into action at an operational level! Even a minor strategy change can

Varied interpretations of the slippery term "digital transformation" can lead to piecemeal approaches.

completely recalibrate the playing field, discussions often ensue about what executives might need to think about if they want to avoid common missteps along the way.

Then comes the role of **the marketer** in a digital transformation journey. Customer needs and desires are constantly evolving and are often completely disrupted by emerging technologies. ESMT faculty use these sessions to cover the trends influencing consumer behavior today, and explore how taking a marketer's perspective can unlock hidden growth areas for their business. The key underlying question is this: how can technology enable companies to craft more personalized value propositions and target these more accurately to the right audience?

Participants in the LDT program will then move on to look at typical leadership challenges in a digital transformation initiative from the perspective of **the lean guru**. Very often a pressing need to simplify operations is a key driver for a digital transformation effort and the lean gurus act here as champions of these internal changes. Faculty guide the executives through discussions of case studies where leaders of this type of change initiative

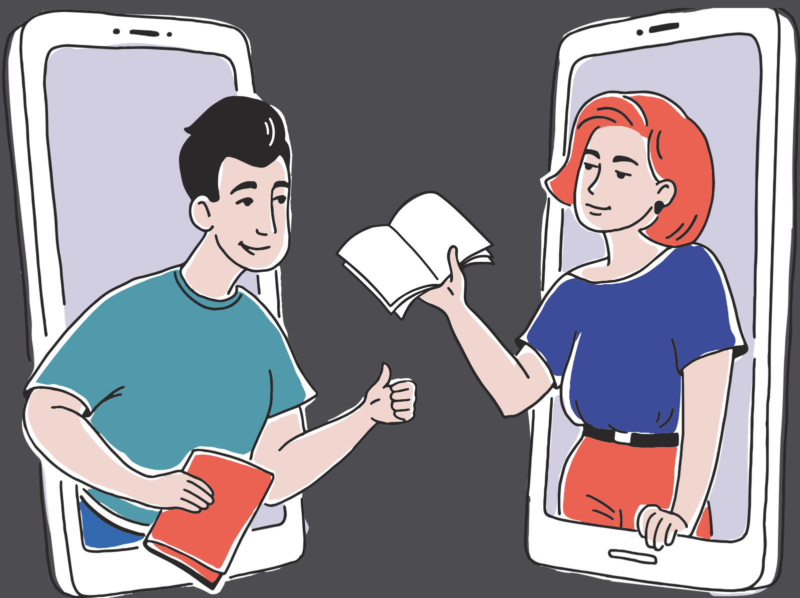
succeeded or failed in streamlining processes, realizing synergies, or creating a truly agile ecosystem.

In the final sessions of the LDT program, participants consider the leader's role as an **orchestrator** of a digital transformation process. How can specialist teams best be supported in the implementation of a long and complex digital transformation effort? Using various thought exercises, faculty emphasize leading with openness and frankness, particularly when it comes to the ever-present risk of failure. In a complex transformation, not everything will work out as planned. However, failure can be an excellent teacher if it is recognized and treated as such. Leaders who openly acknowledge the that the unknown is an inherent part of change and create a culture of psychological safety, will help to make the transformation credible and inspire teams to take charge of their own journey. While it may sound like an old adage, we see plenty of evidence that accepting failure is one of the most underexploited levers in the cultural part of a transformation.

Actively taking on five diverse perspectives over the course of a program prepares leaders much more effectively for the challenges they will likely face on any given digital transformation journey. Adopting the different "hats" to analyze proposals from different perspectives can prove fruitful in two major areas. Firstly, it can discipline leaders in seeking out the latent, but nonetheless powerful, forces inside and outside the organization that might disrupt ongoing processes and change the rules of the game. Secondly, exercises such as these can help senior executives to open up to new possibilities inherent in their own rapidly-changing fields. In the exchange with faculty and peers from other industries, they are introduced to novel ways of continuously evolving their value propositions, processes, and organizational hierarchies in the ongoing race to keep up with rapid technological change.

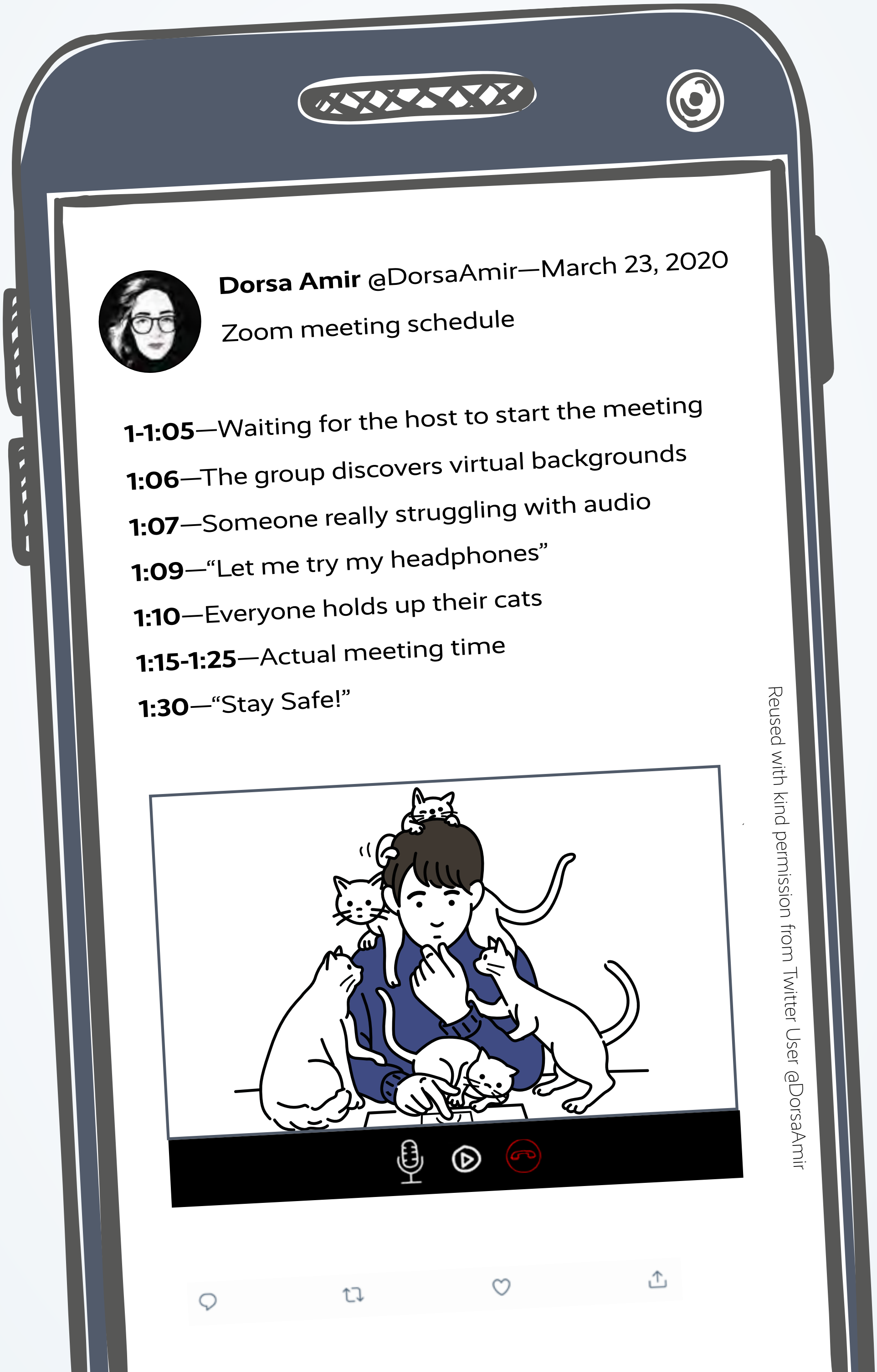
Lights! Camera! Interaction!

Why we cry at movies and what Hollywood can teach us about virtual communication



Tips for effective virtual communication in the "new normal".

Nora Grasselli, Bethan Williams, Geoff Church



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Bored to tears

Communicating in the virtual world is hard—really hard. But why? Because on an emotional and sensory level, we are deprived of the cues that make communication in the physical world so rich and engaging. Nick Morgan points out in his 2018 book *Can You Hear Me?* that even the bandwidth of our vocal tone is reduced, cutting out a lot of the emotional nuance.[1]

We have all been suffering from Zoom gloom recently, yet the technology itself cannot be entirely to blame. When we sit in front of our screens to catch up on our favourite television series, we become utterly absorbed in the experience—often going through a rollercoaster of emotions. Even sitting alone on our sofa, we laugh, we cry, we exclaim in indignation, and we call our friends as the credits roll to unpick and debrief.

The multi-billion-dollar movie and television industries are clearly testaments to the power of video as a way to communicate with audiences.

1 Morgan, N. 2018. Can you hear me? How to connect with people in the virtual world. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.

Can we learn from the world of movie making to help us unlock the potential of online meetings?

From stage to screen

In answer to the question above: YES! There is so much we can learn about online communication from Hollywood. This idea has in fact been at the core of Geoff Church's teaching practice since video conferencing went mainstream. As the co-founder of Dramatic Resources, Geoff Church and his team of fellow actors and directors have spent years developing pioneering interactive workshops for executives. Drawing on their expertise in the performing arts, they help business leaders to enhance their "stage presence" in the theater of work.

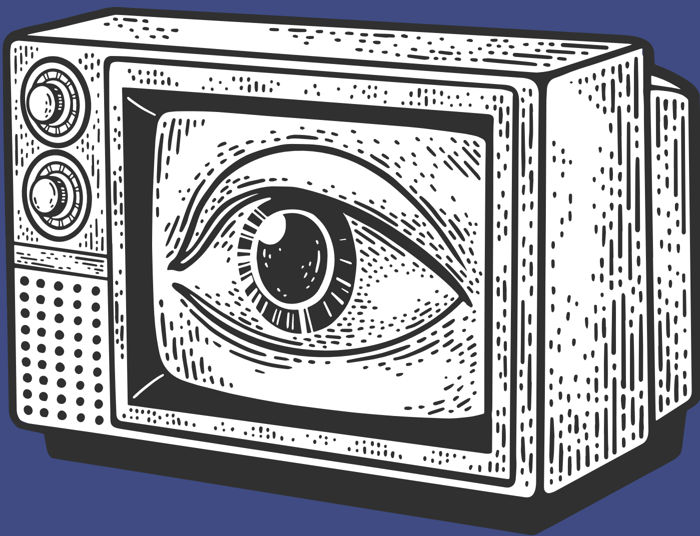
ESMT Berlin has been collaborating with Dramatic Resources for many years on some of its flagship leadership development programs, and a number of company-specific learning journeys. Small groups go through an iterative rehearsal process with a dedicated actor/trainer, giving each participant an opportunity to recognize the impact of body language, facial expression, and vocal tone.

As business communication has shifted to the virtual meeting room, so too has the focus of ESMT Berlin and Dramatic Resources' collaboration. Nora Grasselli, program director at ESMT, emphasizes three familiar challenges that leaders face in the virtual space:

1. **Clarity:** We get confused and misunderstand each other online.
2. **Engagement:** We get bored and pay continuous partial attention (a term that Linda Stone, who is a tech writer and consultant, coined in 1998).[2]
3. **Connection:** We get lonely, miss our fellow human beings.

2 Stone, L. 2014. "Beyond Simple Multi-Tasking: Continuous Partial Attention." https://lindastone.net November 30, 2009. https://lindastone.net/2009/11/30/beyond-simple-multi-tasking-continuous-partial-attention/

The camera is said to photograph thought, and it is the screen actor's job to create intimacy with the viewer through the camera lens.



With the advent of film and television, the performing arts had to go through their own digital transformation. On stage, an actor projects their energy outwards, making their emotions and passions clear to those at the back of the auditorium. On screen, however, an actor has to invite the viewer into their world. The camera is said to photograph thought, and it is the screen actor's job to create intimacy with the viewer through the camera lens.

Similarly, we should think of our communication in virtual meetings as inviting people in—that is, making space for interaction and intimacy—rather than broadcasting outwards.

Early movie makers understood this. But how exactly did they achieve the transition from stage to screen?

The first golden rule of movie-making: Evoke emotion!

The truth is, we have to care about what we are watching on the screen. The movies we love and come back to again and again all have some elements in common: the main characters are flawed and therefore vulnerable. They also care about something outside of themselves—maybe they are in love, trying to support their family, or on a mission to save the world. We cannot help but get caught up in their story.

Like a Hollywood actor, we need to tap into viewers' emotions to guarantee engagement with our on-screen selves. It sounds obvious, right? But what about that senior executive we all know who has taken to hiding behind his shared screen on Zoom, reeling off his bullet points?

How can we put emotion back into the equation? It is a real challenge, particularly in a high-pressure context such as a sales pitch or quarterly review.

First and foremost, you need your audience to be able to see the emotion.

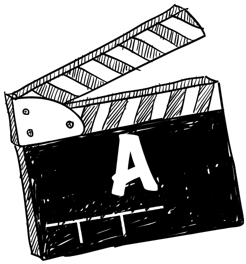
According to the team at Dramatic Resources: "It's not enough to be passionate about your subject, you have to show it—through your eyes, your facial expression, and the animation of your voice." This is of course much trickier via a webcam. First, your audience can see less of you and second, being expressive when you are talking to a computer screen can feel unnatural. Also, unlike Jennifer Lawrence, you do not have a team of lighting engineers and camera operators working around you to help create intimacy with the viewer.

It's not enough to be passionate about your subject, you have to show it—through your eyes, your facial expression, and the animation of your voice."

Here are some simple steps to make sure your audience can read your emotions:

- **Make sure your face is well lit**—Sitting backlit with a window behind you puts your face in shadow and will immediately alienate you from your audience.
- **Look at the lens**—Eyes are the windows to the soul, after all. To create eye contact in a video call you need to look at the camera lens, not at your screen. This is easier said than done, so try putting a sticker next to your webcam lens to remind you where to look.
- **Fill the frame**—We don't want to be looking up your nose, but filling the frame with your head and shoulders will make you feel closer to your audience and creates intimacy.
- **Use expressive body language**—Standing up whilst giving a pitch or presentation will give your voice and visual presence more energy and give you the freedom to move and gesticulate more.

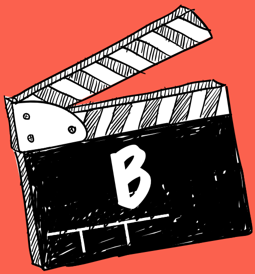
Beyond expressing our own emotion, we also need to actively include and manage the emotions of others. Nora Grasselli teaches an ABC of virtual emotional intelligence:



AUTHORIZE EMOTION

We tend to focus on task-related information when working together online, which does not leave space for emotions. You must therefore deliberately introduce the discussion of emotions into your virtual workspace.

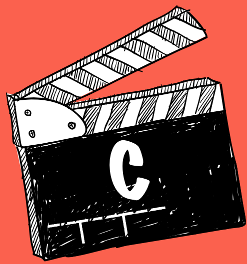
- **Share intent**: When we communicate face-to-face, we communicate on two levels: we share content, and we share intent. Intent is the purpose of our message—what we want to achieve with our words. Be clear about your intent and share it using emotional language: "I'm excited by this" or "I felt daunted at first." Others will follow your lead.
- **Check-in:** Consider setting up an emotional check-in for your team to share how they are feeling at the beginning or end of each meeting, using simple tools like a traffic light system or word cloud of single words.



BE AWARE OF THE TACIT

In a physical meeting room, we often feel we can read the room. Virtually, this feels almost impossible, but there are tools you can use to try and recreate that sense of the 'tacit'.

- **Define expectations**: Set some ground rules for virtual meetings—for example, how people should indicate they have a question or remark—and then observe how people behave. You don't need to draw up a full handbook, just a few bullet points on etiquette will do the trick. Notice any deviance from the norm, as this is often someone wanting to express a different opinion.
- **Tune into the underlying dynamics**: Who is speaking? Who is not? What are the relationships? What emotions are just below the surface? Take notice of people smiling, frowning, leaning in and drawing out, unmuting and muting again. We recommend a second monitor in gallery view here—it allows you to monitor reactions even if you are sharing your screen. You may even consider feeding back your observations for a reflective review with your team.



CARE AND BE COMPASSIONATE

Asking yourself and others to share more emotion is also asking for more vulnerability. To foster more emotion in meetings, you must again step out of the task-focused mind-set every now and then and have the courage to ask people how they feel about the tasks they are engaged with.

- **Acknowledge contributions**: Let others in the meeting know that they are valued, and what for.
- **Provide support**: Ask questions, listen to answers and validate different perspectives. You don't have to have all the answers, so sometimes skip the advice and avoid judgement. Instead try to understand where that "strange" comment comes from and what the people need from you.

The second golden rule of movie-making: Involve the audience!

To care about what happens next, we have to feel involved in the story. Movies achieve this by presenting the viewer with choices and dilemmas. Al Pacino once said that he decides which movie scripts to accept by analyzing how many big choices his character has to make.

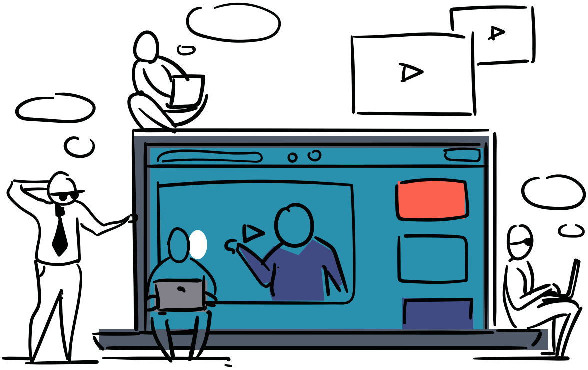
When an on-screen character faces a dilemma, we go through that journey with them. Which wire should they cut to diffuse the bomb? Should they tell the truth now or keep quiet? At each twist in the plot, we imagine what we would do in that situation—and all the while adrenaline is pumping through our veins, heightening our senses, and keeping us gripped to our screens.

Of course, your average business meeting will not be a Hollywood blockbuster, but there are ways you can heighten the experience:

- **Start with the problem**—We know from neuroscientific research that to spark a desire to collaborate, a story must first grab our attention by presenting a point of tension.[3] Consider something like this as an opener to your next virtual meeting: "I thought our clients would love the opportunity of being able to reach out to us online. But the first feedback was the exact opposite. Only 2% of our clients used the interface—and even they were unsatisfied!"
- **Emphasize the team**—Focus your meetings on the choices you need to make as a team, rather than the choices relevant only to certain individuals—or worse, presenting them with ready-made assignments.
- **Connect to a larger purpose**—The highest-grossing movies of all time are successful because their storylines have an underlying message with universal resonance. Remember to communicate the bigger purpose behind your team's daily activities, rather than focusing all your meeting time on the operational details.

3 Zak, P. 2014. "Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling." Harvard Business Review Online. www.hbr.org/2014/10/why-yourbrain-loves-good-storytelling

Interactivity is about moving away from 'leading from the front' towards creating an environment where others feel able to share and contribute.



Reaching beyond the pixels: Initiate interaction

There is nevertheless one dimension where you have the edge over Hollywood; you can get people actively involved in how the meeting plays out.

In his book, *Coaching for Performance*, Sir John Whitmore demonstrates why interactivity should be the new metric for meeting success.[4]

WHY ACTIVITY AND INTERACTION MATTERS

	TOLD	TOLD AND SHOWN	TOLD, SHOWN, AND EXPERIENCED
RECALL AFTER THREE WEEKS	70%	72%	85%
RECALL AFTER THREE MONTHS	10%	32%	65%

4 Whitmore, J. 2009. Coaching For Performance: Growing Human Potential and Purpose --The Principles and Practice of Coaching and Leadership. Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Try these strategies:

- **Talk less!**—If your team is not able to get a word in edgeways, you will never find out if anyone had a valuable contribution to make. Our attention span is especially short online, so planning for 20 minutes of slides and 10 minutes Q&A will lose you your audience. Instead, try to get everybody's voices heard in the meeting early on, ideally within the first five minutes.
- **Cold call**—We have all thrown an open question to a virtual group, only to be met with an awkward silence. Without the cues we rely on in face-to-face meetings, we struggle to avoid talking over one another, and so prefer to stay quiet and hope someone else responds. Directly calling on individuals avoids this awkwardness and means you bring a wider range of voices into the conversation.
- **Create structured rapport**—In the online world, we miss the spontaneous conversations in the corridor before and after meetings. At the beginning of each call, try asking each attendee to share their thoughts on a topic for sixty seconds each. For example, 'My trickiest client this week', or 'My favourite local restaurant.'
- **Use breakouts**—Use this invaluable function to divide the airtime, giving your team the chance to explore issues in smaller groups and collect individual feedback.
- **Delegate**—Give your meeting attendees an active role in the proceedings. For example, rotate the role of designated moderator or devil´s advocate. The latter is especially useful for inciting debate and avoiding bad decisions!
- **Utilize technology**—Shared whiteboards, interactive polls, and virtual collaboration spaces, such as MURAL are must-haves for your meeting toolbox.

You need to practice, get feedback, then practice some more. Don’t just leave it to chance!

Practice makes perfect

The shift from stage to screen was not easy—the earliest successful movie makers were true innovators who tried new things, made mistakes, and most importantly, practiced.

The expansion of online meetings offers opportunities to connect more deeply with remote teams, but it also means taking some risks and rehearsing new skills, which might feel uncomfortable at first. Geoff Church is fond of saying that drama is about making and offering strong choices: “To do this, you need to practice, get feedback, then practice some more. Don’t just leave it to chance!”

From an academic perspective, Nora Grasselli refers to Pfeffer and Sutton´s work: “It is the knowing-doing gap that we want to bridge in our collaboration with Dramatic Resources.[5] ESMT works with leaders on building knowledge, but knowledge is useless if you can´t put it into practice.”

5 Pfeffer, J. and R. Sutton. 2014. The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge Into Action. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Participant involvement in executive education

Championing “Triple Ownership Programs” (TOPs) in executive education.

How to achieve ownership among program participants and their sponsors and why doing so can lead to better program outcomes.

Christoph Burger, Bianca Schmitz, Bethan Williams

What do you associate with the word "campus"?

For most of us, beside the happy student memories, there are aspects about university life that we were actually glad to leave behind. Perhaps your mind jumps to that particularly stuffy lecture theatre, with its regimented rows of uncomfortable seats. Or perhaps to a particular professor, who could monologue for hours and hours…and seemed oblivious to the (dire) mood he created in the classroom. Maybe you have a specific emotional memory instead; for example, the stomach-curdling anxiety you felt as you crammed facts for your final exams.

Rules, regimented schedules, and rote learning all dictated by one lecturer, standing at the front of the room. Is this what adult executive participants have come to associate with campus education in later life too?

Ownership

For ESMT faculty member Christoph Burger, more than two decades of experience in executive education have revealed a simple truth: actively and consistently involving participants in proceedings is a magic ingredient if you want to create real impact. Allowing the individuals in his classroom to shape what and how they learn has proved a shortcut to getting complete buy-in, and tends to expedite the type of intervention that the program seeks. This ultimately translates to higher levels of focus and motivation in the group, stronger networking, and a longer-lasting impact for each individual.

Arriving on campus for the first day of a leadership development program, executives can often feel anxious and ill at ease. During the week ahead, they will not play their usual professional role. Instead, they are back in the role of “student”. A little adrenaline is normal and indeed very helpful in the learning process; personal development takes place when we step outside our “comfort zone”. However, the program team certainly does not want anyone to fall over the precipice from the “learning zone” into the “panic zone”. As such, Christoph Burger takes the earliest opportunity to make it clear that the participants will share ownership and accountability in the program design and implementation. In short, he gives them back their agency.

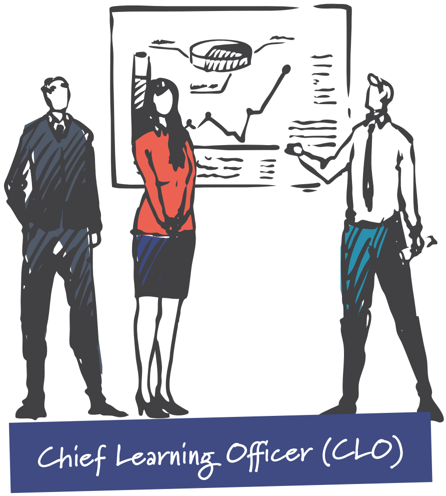
Personal development takes place when we step outside our “comfort zone”.

Sharing accountability

In the opening remarks of an executive education program, participants expect to hear a number of things from the program director: some details about their professional background, why they developed this program, how the next few days will play out (crucially, when they will get coffee breaks or time for important phone calls!), and what they should hope to achieve by the end.

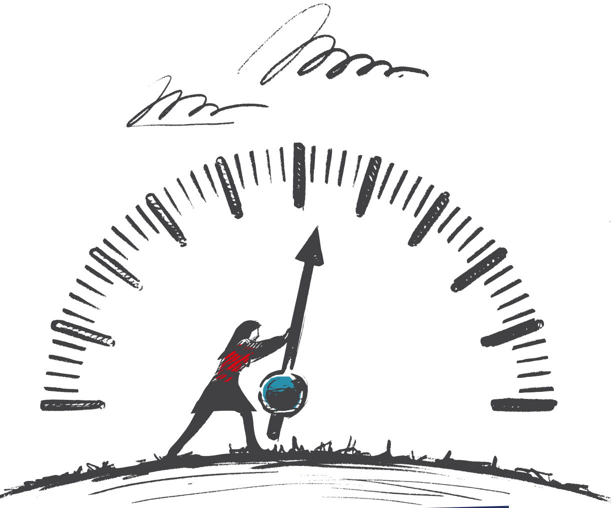
Participants of a typical open program at ESMT Berlin hail from vastly different industries, functional areas, and business cultures. Several may be silently wondering: Should we be on a first name or last name basis with the program team and with each other? Will I be allowed to take an important call from my boss during teaching time? What should I do if I am running late? Not actively addressing the fact that different social conventions exist can lead to anxiety and even discontent in the group. However, it is also important to consider how the answers to these questions are defined and communicated in the executive education classroom setting.

Christoph Burger likes to avoid any hint of a hierarchical relationship between himself and the participants. As such, he empowers the group to pick a Chief Rules Officer (CRO), responsible for facilitating these important conversations and ensuring they remain lighthearted. The CRO, for example, will take care of asking participants to return to the classroom at the end of each coffee break. The role can change hands each day if the group so wishes, or the consensus may even be that “there are no rules”. The simple act of appointing a CRO, dissociated from the program director, is enough to make participants feel they share accountability for the atmosphere in the classroom. Christoph notes that this discipline and engagement actually tend to increase.



Once the program is underway, another key issue for the program director is to find the right balance between teaching the academic theory and exploring immediate practical relevance on the individual and organizational level. There are no hard-and-fast rules to divulge here. The correct proportions will differ from topic to topic, and from participant to participant. Teaching the same workshop to diverse groups of individuals requires a high sensitivity to the group's expectations, which may change as the days go on. It has become common practice to write participants' expectations on a flipchart at the beginning and come back to them at the very end. Christoph Burger prefers, instead, to allow a Chief Learning Officer (CLO) to shape the program agenda. This individual is empowered to become the voice of the group, and they report to the program director if there is a feeling among participants that too much or too little emphasis is being placed on X or on Y. The CLO may also choose to run regular reflection groups to debrief on lessons learned, which also double as a valuable insight for the program director into how the sessions were perceived.

A client's internal speakers and/or experts may be invited to enrich a customized program's schedule and broaden participants' perspectives on the company vision. To ensure maximum output, assigning one or two moderators from the participant group helps to align the content with the group's specific needs and expectations; these moderators may of course rotate their responsibilities at any point. Alternatively, Christoph sometimes asks participants to invite their own idea of an interesting speaker. He recalls one memorable example where his group chose to invite a priest to talk about leadership: "The priest had been in Rome to attend an event with Mother Theresa. Apparently, the church was packed and everybody was wondering where she was. The crowd



Chief Happiness Officer (CHO)

became nervous… It soon became apparent, however, that Mother Theresa was holding the entrance door open! What a wonderful leadership message."

Participants who opt for a program at a world-leading business school also expect opportunities to build their professional network. Here too, Christoph Burger likes to give participants autonomy on how this will happen. He often creates "networking groups" to plan the evening events during a multi-modular program; in doing so, participants learn a lot about individual and cultural preferences. The highlight of one particular such program was when the participants organized a farewell dinner and chose to invite company board members too. By working together on a shared project like this, participants regularly report building much deeper connections with their peers and their sponsors.

The principle of sharing accountability can even be extended to sports and recreational activities. A Chief Happiness Officer (CHO) becomes responsible for getting the room into the right frame of mind for transformative learning. CHOs are given a lot of creative freedom with their remit. They may choose to fire up energies in the early morning with a blast of an 80s power ballad, lead a short physical workout, or set up a competitive team building exercise for the post-lunch energy lull.

> **A Chief Happiness Officer (CHO) is given a lot of creative freedom**

Project work and participant cases

Project work is another area where a program director can grant participants real autonomy, and there are various ways to integrate it into a program's design. For client programs, the board could provide the group with some pre-defined topics. Such topics are usually broad and of strategic importance, such as "internationalization strategy" or "trend analysis in X market". The desired outcome is often a final presentation to the board just before the end of the program, which doesn't have to mean a "point and pontificate" PowerPoint presentation either. Past programs at ESMT Berlin have seen presentations in the form of short films and role-plays.

However, getting the board involved does also carry an element of risk. Every now and again the board's expectations of the project scope prove extremely high and not easy to fulfill. As such, it is the program director's task to manage board members' expectations on potential outcomes. After all, participants in a leadership development program are not full-time consultants on one particular company issue. It is also advisable to emphasize that, in the best case, the board will be able to build on the initial ideas presented by the groups.

The program director may alternatively choose to directly ask the participants for topics of relevance. This approach can boost participant buy-in and also allows the board to get a fresh perspective on what really drives their top talent.

Christoph Burger aims to combine both the bottom-up and the top-down approaches, when leading a customized program for a client. He starts with a kick-off meeting where participants learn effective brainstorming methods and plan their team roles. In parallel, board members are asked to field potential topics as well. On learning that a group of motivated, up-and-coming employees will be available as consultants on these projects, board members tend to become very creative indeed, and propose several topics beyond the current cycle of the program. The program director then aligns the project proposals with the learning objectives of the program: choosing one project from the participants, one from the board, and one topic both groups had mentioned. An important addition to the proceedings is a sponsor nominated by the board, who helps to define the scope of each project and ensures relevancy for the organization. This helps Christoph Burger to avoid disappointment or undue stress among the participants or the board.

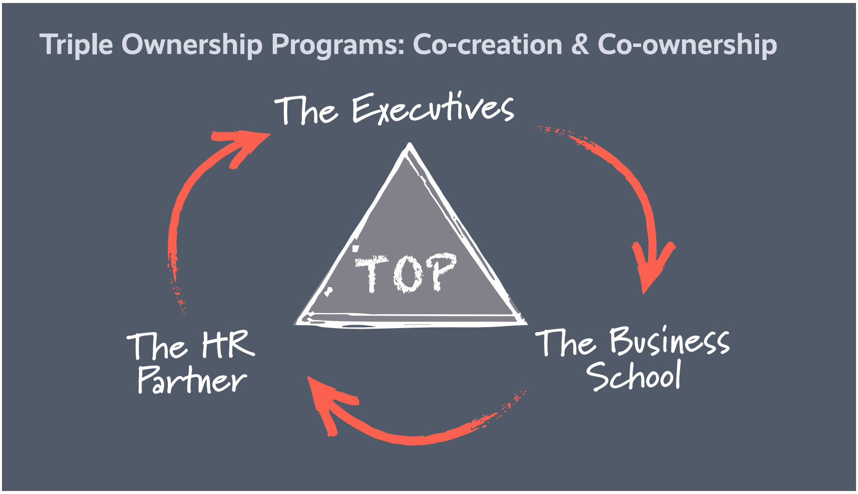
Harnessing new technologies

We can now also turn to a wealth of classroom technologies to more actively involve participants in a particular topic. Mentimeter is brilliant for collecting and visualizing votes and opinions, whereas MURAL and Miro facilitate infinite-scale brainstorming. Christoph suggests inviting participants to experiment with these tools themselves in smaller study groups, so that they may subsequently introduce the tools into their own team meetings after the program. Quiz tools such as Kahoot, and virtual simulation games such as The Virus game, have the power to make reflection or content recaps into a competitive sport.

New technologies also generate new ways to inspire busy executives, both in the classroom and in their free time. Christoph Burger likes to integrate relevant podcasts, YouTube channels, TED talks, or Netflix series into his pre- and post-program reading lists. He finds that this dissociates solo learning time from the concept of “homework”, rather, the preparation time is more about priming conversation starters. In a modular program, C-Level or unplugged talks can be dotted throughout the program agenda to help participants review key program elements, leading to lively group discussions in the breaks.

A co-creation and co-ownership process between the business school, the HR partners, and the program participant.

Of course, if the Covid crisis has taught us anything, it is that there are also limitations to technology… a year of virtual wine tasting sessions on Zoom has without a doubt confirmed that the prospect of networking is definitely much more attractive when you can sit physically together!



The future is TOP

By empowering participants to become the CRO, CHO, or CLO of a program, Christoph Burger explicitly shares responsibility for classroom learning and engagement with the group that will ultimately benefit from it. This group, of course, encompasses both the individual executives, who seek personal development and career progression, and the client HR partners, who sponsor the seats in good faith that the investment will bear fruit for the firm.

Christoph uses the term "Triple Ownership Program", or TOP, to describe this new gold standard in the executive education industry. The magic of a true TOP is that the business school, the client HR partner, and the executives all get the opportunity to reflect on what they need. When we look beyond the tongue-in-cheek role titles to the general atmosphere they create, it becomes clear that they make room for a much flatter classroom hierarchy. Emphasizing triple ownership from day one also helps break the association between being "on campus" in a classroom and being a passive listener.

At ESMT Berlin, the program director is thus no longer a single, dominant force in program design and execution, rather a facilitator of a co-creation and co-ownership process between the business school, the HR partners, and the program participant. For Christoph Burger there is an additional benefit to this model: even after twenty years in the industry, he gets to have a completely unique experience every time.

A previous version of this paper appeared the March-April 2022 edition of the European Business Review.

ESMT Berlin is the highest-ranked business school in Germany and Top 10 in Europe. Founded by 25 leading global companies, ESMT offers master's, MBA, and PhD programs, as well as executive education on its campus in Berlin, in locations around the world, online, and in online blended format. Focusing on leadership, innovation, and analytics, its diverse faculty publishes outstanding research in top academic journals. Additionally, the international business school provides an interdisciplinary platform for discourse between politics, business, and academia. ESMT is a non-profit private institution of higher education, accredited by AACSB, AMBA, EQUIS, and FIBAA, and is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion across all its activities and communities.

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