



# LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT SHOULD NOT BE RESERVED FOR THE FEW

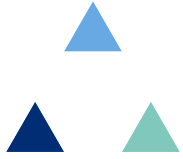
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Organizations increasingly need leadership capacity at every level as work grows more complex and collaborative, yet most leadership development still targets a small group of “high-potential” employees. New research highlights scalable, experience-based approaches that help employees develop leadership through everyday work.

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**Featuring**  
CIL Faculty Affiliate Ned Wellman





# Summary

Organizations consistently say they need more leaders at more levels, especially as complexity, uncertainty, and collaboration become central to modern work. Yet most leadership development efforts still focus on a small group of “high-potential” employees while overlooking the broader workforce. In a forthcoming paper in *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, Susan Ashford, Ned Wellman, and Josh Sweeten argue that resolving this tension necessitates a fundamental shift in how organizations think about leader development.

Wellman—Professor of Management and Entrepreneurship at Arizona State University and Affiliate of the Center for Innovative Leadership at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School—and his coauthors propose a scalable, experience-based approach that helps all employees learn how to grow as leaders through their everyday work. Their central insight is simple but powerful: leadership capacity expands when organizations teach people how to learn from experience and create systems that support that learning at scale.

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## The Leadership Challenge

Organizations today face a growing contradiction. Leaders regularly emphasize the importance of agility, collaboration, innovation, and distributed decision-making, yet many continue to rely on leadership development systems designed for a much different era. Traditional programs often identify a small percentage of employees as “high potential,” invest heavily in their development, and implicitly signal to everyone else that leadership is not their responsibility.

This approach creates more than a talent bottleneck. It narrows how leadership itself is understood.

In fast-moving organizations, leadership increasingly emerges through moments rather than titles. Employees influence teams without formal authority. Individuals step forward during crises, navigate ambiguity, coordinate across silos, and help others adapt to change. Yet many organizations continue to treat leadership as something reserved primarily for those already positioned near the top of the hierarchy.

The result is a system that often underdevelops the very leadership capacity organizations claim they need most. As environments become more uncertain and work becomes more interdependent, organizations require leadership that is more distributed, adaptive, and embedded throughout the workforce rather than concentrated in a select few individuals.

## Getting to the Source of the Problem

The researchers argue that many leadership development systems remain rooted in a “heroic” model of leadership. This model assumes leaders are exceptional individuals with rare qualities who can be identified early and prepared for increasingly senior positions.

While this assumption has shaped leadership development for decades, the authors note that research increasingly points in another direction. Effective leadership is not tied to one personality type, leadership style, or formal role. Instead, leadership often develops through experience, self-awareness, experimentation, and reflection.

The article builds on a longstanding insight in leadership research: people primarily develop leadership capabilities through challenging work experiences rather than classroom instruction alone. But the authors extend this argument further. Experience itself is not enough. Employees only grow from experience when they actively learn from it.

This distinction becomes critical.

Organizations frequently provide stretch assignments, new responsibilities, or difficult projects and assume leadership growth will naturally follow. The authors argue that growth depends less on the experience itself and more on whether individuals know how to interpret challenges, seek feedback, experiment with new behaviors, and reflect on what they are learning.

In other words, leadership development is not simply about exposing people to experiences. It is about helping people develop the capacity to learn from experience continuously.

### New Findings with Implications for Leadership Development

At the center of the article is a “flipped-script” model of leadership development that shifts attention away from elite programs and toward scalable systems that support growth across the organization.



The researchers identify several conditions that make leadership growth more likely.

First, employees must begin to see themselves as capable of leadership. The adoption of a “leader identity” matters because individuals who view leadership as part of who they are become more willing to experiment, take interpersonal risks, and engage in leadership behaviors even without formal authority

Second, leadership growth depends on motivation. Employees are more likely to pursue development when they see leadership growth as meaningful, connected to purpose, or aligned with the type of person they want to become.

Third, growth requires a mindset shift. Individuals who believe leadership ability can evolve are more willing to accept feedback, adapt their behavior, and persist through setbacks.

The article also reframes leadership growth as an ongoing cycle of learning rather than a one-time program experience. Effective development involves identifying a specific area for growth, experimenting with new behaviors, seeking feedback, adjusting based on what is learned, and reflecting on the emotional challenges that accompany growth.

Importantly, the authors emphasize that leadership growth often develops through small, intentional experiments rather than dramatic transformations. An employee may focus on listening more carefully in meetings, asking better questions, becoming more approachable, or responding to conflict differently. Over time, these incremental adjustments accumulate into more effective leadership practice.

The authors also argue that organizations now have new opportunities to support this kind of growth at scale through emerging technologies and more adaptive development systems. To explain how organizations can scale leadership development effectively, they introduce five dimensions of scale that move development beyond traditional training programs. Spread focuses on expanding access to leadership development opportunities across the organization, not only for employees already identified for advancement. Depth emphasizes meaningful personal growth by strengthening leader identity, self-awareness, and authentic leadership practice. Shift involves transferring ownership of development from organizational elites to employees themselves, encouraging individuals to actively direct their own growth. Evolution highlights the need for leadership development systems to continuously adapt based on participant feedback, changing organizational needs, and emerging technologies. Finally, Sustainability focuses on embedding leadership growth into organizational culture so development becomes an ongoing organizational practice rather than a temporary initiative.



Technologies such as AI coaching tools, digital feedback systems, peer learning platforms, and virtual reflection environments can help employees personalize their development while making leadership learning more broadly accessible. Rather than relying solely on episodic workshops or elite leadership programs, organizations can embed leadership growth directly into the everyday work of employees across the organization.

## What This Means for Leaders

The article ultimately challenges leaders to think differently about where leadership capability resides and how it develops.

One important implication is that leadership development should no longer be viewed primarily as a succession-planning exercise for future executives. Instead, it should be understood as organizational infrastructure that strengthens the collective capacity of people throughout the system to navigate uncertainty, collaborate effectively, and adapt in real time.

This shift changes the role of organizational leaders themselves.

Leaders become less responsible for identifying a select few “future leaders” and more responsible for creating the conditions under which leadership can emerge broadly. That includes creating cultures where experimentation is safe, feedback is normalized, reflection is encouraged, and growth is expected rather than exceptional.

The findings also reinforce the importance of psychological safety and developmental culture. Employees are unlikely to engage in leadership experimentation if mistakes are punished, feedback feels threatening, or leadership remains associated exclusively with hierarchy and authority.

The article further suggests that organizations should rethink the relationship between leadership development and inclusion. Traditional high-potential systems often reinforce existing power structures and overlook individuals whose leadership capabilities may not fit conventional expectations. A broader developmental approach may help organizations surface more diverse leadership perspectives and unlock leadership potential that formal systems routinely miss.

Perhaps most importantly, the research reframes leadership development from an episodic activity into a continuous practice embedded in work itself. Leadership growth becomes less about attending programs and more about how individuals interpret and respond to the challenges they encounter every day.



## A Different Way to Think About Leadership Growth

Ashford, Wellman, and Sweeten offer a compelling challenge to organizations that continue to approach leadership development as an exclusive investment for a small group of employees. In increasingly uncertain environments, organizations cannot afford to limit leadership growth to formal authority structures or elite talent pools.

The future of leadership development may depend less on identifying exceptional individuals and more on helping ordinary employees recognize their capacity to lead in the moments that matter most.

Organizations that build systems supporting continuous growth, experimentation, reflection, and shared leadership are likely to strengthen not only individual leaders, but also the collective adaptability of the organization itself.

Leadership, the authors suggest, should not function like a luxury good reserved for the few. It should be treated as a capability that organizations intentionally cultivate across the many.



*Access the full research paper here: Access the full research paper here: Ashford, S. J., Wellman, N., & Sweeten, J. R. (2026). Leadership should not be a luxury good: Scaling leader development for the forgotten majority. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*.*

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