

PREPARING LEARNERS



Set the Stage for Vulnerability

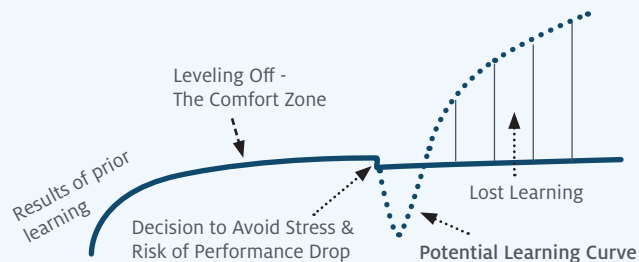
We are most open to learning when we are made appropriately aware of our developmental needs and when we are pushed beyond our current comfort zone. We are most capable of learning through relationships and interactions with others. Being open to those relationships requires vulnerability.¹⁶ Decades of learning theory have explored the role that awareness, challenge, dissonance, and connection with those who may have more or different experience can all inform our processing of new information and experiences and our incorporation of that information into our leadership mindsets. Understanding the perspectives of others, and seeing ourselves through our interactions with others, are shifts that provide powerful learning opportunities, but that can also be stressful or uncomfortable.

At CCL, we refer to the stress and discomfort of new learning as a “going against the grain” moment that will yield exponential benefit, particularly when compared to the potential for lost learning by avoiding the learning experience. **If we take the time to process, engage, reflect, and learn from an uncomfortable moment, we stand to rebound significantly further than if we avoid learning out of fear of the discomfort.** This is known as adopting a learning (or growth) mindset.¹⁷ Rather than presume that our abilities are static and unchangeable, we recognize that we are on a path of perpetual development, informed by each new experience and piece of feedback. We recognize that mistakes present opportunities for understanding, reflection, and cultivation of new skills. **Moreover, networks present opportunities for deeper growth experiences through mistakes** – by providing a multitude of connections for help seeking when an individual encounters a challenge to deliberate strategic use when individuals need help evaluating new strategies to use.

ANATOMY OF A LEARNING EXPERIENCE



AVOIDING A LEARNING EXPERIENCE



“So having other CEOs with which you can share some of your learnings, your struggles, your successes, your pain, your achievements, your challenges, is a very helpful part of growth as a leader. And then sort of pulling on and sort of maintaining relationships with those people over years and building a certain trust with them that is one not of competition but one of partnership in the work is I think what I’m referring to. And to a certain extent, I think the power in these transformational experiences come from being given the opportunity to actually get some learning and best practices in the field but not from a [conventional] way but actually in doing exercises, breaking out in dyads or triads, working closely in some sort of simulated way. ... Any training program that does that well does that in a way that is long-lasting and it’s something that you can pull back in moments of crisis or in moments of difficulty into the work you’re doing.”



How can programs provide experiences that put leaders in a learning mindset, or even an “against the grain” moment? A key way that leadership development programs, and cohort-based programs in particular can foster these moments is through feedback. Feedback within cohort-based programs can arise from experiential activities, role-playing, video-recorded activities, or 360-surveys. We cannot know how others see or experience us until we have an opportunity to obtain feedback. Sincere advice and honest feedback are priceless gifts that deserve to be delivered with extreme wisdom and care. Feedback furthers a network because it furthers the relationships that build the web of the network.

Cohort programs are uniquely positioned to create a space for vulnerability and communal support in which participants can be encouraged to reflect on their own leadership and/or life struggles and leverage them to extract new learning and personal strength. These spaces can be safe *and* brave. Safety can allow for comfort in expressing the range of emotions experienced while being vulnerable or marginalized, and brave requires acknowledgement of power differentials and asks learners with privilege to be open to learning.¹⁸ Cohort-based programs can provide trust-filled relationships that can support feedback, processing of information such as 360s or other observations of behaviors, and techniques such as accountability partners or peer-coaching to help implement new strategies to support behavior change.

Preparing learners through vulnerability connects to network challenges and networked leadership due to the roles that communication, interdependence, and relationship building play in networks. Complex sector-level challenges will require collaboration across a variety of organizations, sectors, and other silos that may exist. Preparing learners for feedback, encouraging them to adopt a learning mindset, and helping them get comfortable with discomfort is a critical component of preparing them to engage, build, and persist in their network outside of the program.

