

# A VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM'S IMPACT ON EMPLOYEE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AT A HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATION

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## **Abstract**

In this study, we explored the effectiveness of the virtual organizational leadership development program at Mayo Clinic. The purpose of this study was to explain how a virtual leadership development program impacted employee leadership efficacy. The research questions addressed how the program affected participant promotions, how the program learning objectives were implemented by participants, and how the program impacted participants. Collection tools included satisfaction surveys, interviews, and data reflecting promotion rates. Participants appreciated the advantages of the virtual format of the program and the quality of the instructors. They completed the program with enhanced communication skills, the ability to influence positive change, and increased self-awareness. Opportunities for program improvement included incorporating real-world projects to give participants the ability to practice the leadership skills taught, the ability to be paired with a mentor, and a second part to the program to explore the leadership competencies at a more advanced level.

**Keywords:** Healthcare, leadership, virtual, technology, organizational, education.

## **Introduction**

Mayo Clinic, a large interdisciplinary educational healthcare organization, was the study site where we explored how the use of a virtual leadership development program impacted employee leadership development by assessing the promotion rates of those who completed the program as well as the satisfaction rates of participants and their supervisors. The specific area of interest for this study was a program offered by the organization's human resources department—a virtual leadership development program. The program targets employees who are interested in advancing their leadership skills but who do not have a leadership title.

## **Background**

The virtual leadership development program was established in 2016. Its purpose was to prepare candidates for future leadership roles in the organization by equipping them with appropriate skills and competencies. Since the program's inception, no formal assessment of its effectiveness had taken place prior to this study due to competing priorities. Without an exploration of the data associated with the program, it was not known if the program was successfully achieving its goals. This hindered continual improvement of the program without data to support enhancement. The problem was that data existed but had not been analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the virtual leadership development program. The purpose of this study was to explain how an existing virtual leadership development program utilized at a healthcare organization impacted employee

leadership efficacy. The program was developed to create an engaging learning opportunity for employees interested in leadership roles within the organization. Leaders at the organization rely on this perpetual building of knowledge for continued organizational success.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How did the organizational virtual leadership development program affect participant promotions at Mayo Clinic?
2. How were the organizational virtual leadership development program learning objectives effectively implemented by participants?
3. How were the organizational virtual leadership development program learning objectives effectively implemented by participants from the supervisor's perspective?
4. How did the organizational virtual leadership development program impact participants?

## **Methods**

In the current study, we utilized Charmaz's (2014) constructivist approach to grounded theory. In this view, grounded theory includes iterative logic with a focus on flexible application of the research design. Theory using this research design is based on data directly from those who experienced the phenomena being researched. The data combined with the researcher's investigation generates the explanation and theory. Grounded theory provides guidelines for research that are systematic, yet flexible for data collection and analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, for the purposes of this study, we utilized the grounded theory design to examine the virtual leadership development program's effects and identify the impact the program has had on participant promotions and participant and supervisor satisfaction rates. It is through interactive and comparative inquiry, which is the coding of numerous comparisons of data<sup>1</sup>, that this study explored whether the virtual organizational leadership development program was indeed developing leaders. The perspectives of the virtual leadership development program participants and supervisors were evaluated in this study. Institutional Review Board approval for the study was acquired from the organization.

## **Participant Selection Logic**

Criteria for selection of participants included theoretical sampling which is a data collection process involving the simultaneous collecting and coding of data. This process drives the decision-making for data collection and is central to grounded theory which ensures that the research produces a theory that is truly grounded in data.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the processes of data collection, coding, and analyses are performed concurrently, and the data directs the researcher in what to collect next.<sup>1</sup> Using this method, the researcher must remain open to following the data and potentially revising

what is being asked of participants; hence, semi-structured interview questions offer some flexibility.

## **Data Collection**

Surveys, interviews, and data reflecting promotion rates were the primary data utilized in this grounded theory study. Researchers who use grounded theory typically use interviews as the primary data collection technique.<sup>1</sup> In this research study, we conducted interviews and collected data from surveys and human resource systems. Grounded theory research also focuses on comparing data systematically and allowing categories or themes to emerge as it is collected rather than waiting until all data is received. While the survey and systems data in this study were received in totality at once, we remained true to the concepts of grounded theory and coded interviews as they occurred by immediately transcribing the recorded interviews and codifying themes.

## **Data Analysis Procedures**

For the developers of the virtual organizational leadership development program to understand the perspectives of program participants and their supervisors as well as the impact of the program, a three-fold approach to research was utilized in data analysis: (1) satisfaction survey results from participants and their supervisors were collected and analyzed; (2) interviews of participants were conducted and analyzed; and (3) promotion rates were extracted from the human resource system for all program participants and analyzed.

The satisfaction surveys were already in existence as all participants and their supervisors had been requested to complete surveys since the first cohort in 2016. The questions were not altered to ensure the consistency of the data collected from all cohorts for inclusion in the study.

## **Results**

In this study, participants were selected based on their completion of the virtual organizational leadership development program. All those who had previously completed the program were included in the collection of existing study data which included participant and supervisor satisfaction survey results and promotion rates. The participant list included 435 people who had completed the program at the time data collection for the study commenced. Two additional cohorts were scheduled after the data was collected and were not reflected in the study results. Participants were employees of Mayo Clinic who were not in a formal leadership role at the time of enrollment in the virtual organizational leadership development program. Supervisors of participants were also included in the participant selection for the study as they also completed satisfaction surveys to provide feedback on their perspectives of the impact of the program on participant leadership skill enhancement. Both program participants and supervisors were from diverse areas across the organization which offered an enterprise-wide perspective as displayed in [Table 1](#).

The study also incorporated interviews of participants. An invitation to participate in an interview was sent to all program participants via e-mail. The first 12 participants to respond with an interest in

participating were selected for interviews. This was consistent with the recommendation that 12 interviews are sufficient for most research studies to gather data and generate themes on participant perspectives and experiences. Guest, Bunce, & Johnson (2006)<sup>3</sup> Charmaz (2014) concurred with this recommendation and it proved to be true as saturation was reached within 12 interviews when no new ideas were being shared by participants. Participants interviewed represented all geographic locations of the organization, again providing an enterprise-wide perspective in data collection through interviews as displayed in [Table 2](#).

## Summary of Findings

**Follow-up Survey to Participants.** Of the participants who completed the virtual organizational leadership development program, 149 completed the follow-up survey, which was sent via email immediately following program completion, a 34-percent response rate. The results of that survey are outlined in [Table 3](#). Based on the responses, 82 percent indicated they were applying what they learned in the program. Regarding receiving coaching and support from their supervisor in applying their newly acquired skills and knowledge, 57 percent said they had received the support they needed. In addition, 75 percent stated that the program had supported them in their career development.

**Follow-up Survey to Supervisors.** Of the participants who completed the virtual organizational leadership development program, 130 of their supervisors completed the follow-up survey which was sent via email 60 days following program completion, a 30-percent response rate. The results of that survey are outlined in [Table 4](#). Based on the responses, 83 percent indicated their employee was applying what they learned in the program in their current role. Regarding providing coaching and support to assist their employee in applying their newly acquired skills and knowledge, 88 percent said they had provided the support they needed. In addition, 81 percent stated that they valued the communications from the program throughout their employee's cohort, stating it had helped them coach and support the employee through the process.

**Post Program Survey to Participants.** Of the participants who completed the virtual organizational leadership development program, 284 completed the post-program survey which was sent via email three months following program completion, a 65-percent response rate. The results of that survey are outlined in [Table 5](#). Based on the responses, 93 percent indicated they developed skills and gained experiences that aligned with organizational leadership capabilities of inspiring values, engaging colleagues, bold and forward thinking, and driving results. Regarding identifying and practicing skills related to change agility, influencing without authority, building relationships, team dynamics, and communicating effectively, 91 percent said they had met these objectives. In addition, 97 percent stated that the program had helped them differentiate and recognize the impact of leadership with a coaching mindset versus management.

When asked about engagement in self-assessment opportunities in preparation for future

leadership roles, 94 percent indicated this had been accomplished in the program. Also, 83 percent of participants believed that the format of the program was conducive to their learning style and preferences. Regarding the time commitment both in and outside of class, 90 percent of program participants believed it was just right and did not need any changes. The majority of participants, 66 percent, thought that program participants should be allowed to miss only one session and watch the recording to receive credit for program completion.

On a scale of one to 10, with 10 being the highest, when asked their level of confidence to apply what they had learned, 98 percent scored greater than five. Five is the mid-point on the scale which would be considered average. In this study, we looked at those scores considered above average. Regarding their level of commitment to apply what they had learned, 100 percent scored greater than five. In regard to expecting positive results from applying what they had learned in the program, 98 percent of program participants scored greater than five. When asked if they would recommend the virtual organizational leadership development program to others, 96 percent scored greater than five on a scale of one to 10.

### **Promotion Rate Results**

Of the participants who completed the virtual organizational leadership development program, 30 participants were promoted to a formal leadership role with direct reports after completion of the program, a 7 percent promotion rate, which is displayed in **Figure 1**. Of the 30 participants who were promoted, three were promoted while enrolled in the program. The average time to acquire a promotion after completion of the program was seven months. In addition, 103 participants were promoted to a role with increased responsibility, but not a formal leadership role with direct reports, a 24 percent promotion rate of informal leaders. In total, 31 percent of those who completed the virtual organizational leadership development program received promotions, while 69 percent of participants did not receive promotions of any kind. Both participants and supervisors indicated that potential to move into formal leadership positions was hindered by limited opportunities for advancement within the organization, rather than the effectiveness of the program.

**Research Question 1.** *How did the organizational virtual leadership development program affect participant promotions at Mayo Clinic?*

All participants interviewed cited organizational barriers associated with a lack of opportunities for advancement rather than promotion rates being connected to the effectiveness of the virtual organizational leadership development program. This common theme was repeated in the participant satisfaction surveys. Promotion rates indicate that 31 percent of participants were promoted after completion of the program, 7 percent of those to formal leadership roles, while 69 percent of participants did not receive a promotion after completion of the program.

**Research Question 2.** *How were the organizational virtual leadership development program learning objectives effectively implemented by participants?*

The four objectives were: (1) develop skills and gain experiences that align with the organization's leadership capabilities; (2) identify and practice skills related to the leadership capabilities; (3) differentiate and recognize the impact of leadership (coaching mindset) and management; and (4) engage in self-assessment opportunities in preparation for future leadership roles.

Based on the participant post-program survey, 93 percent indicated they developed skills and gained experiences that aligned with organizational leadership capabilities of inspiring values, engaging colleagues, bold and forward thinking, and driving results. Regarding identifying and practicing skills related to change agility, influencing without authority, building relationships, team dynamics, and communicating effectively, 91 percent said they had met these objectives. In addition, 97 percent stated that the program had helped them differentiate and recognize the impact of leadership with a coaching mindset versus management. When asked about engagement in self-assessment opportunities in preparation for future leadership roles, 94 percent indicated this had been accomplished in the program.

All of these questions were designed to measure participant achievement of objectives and all were over 90 percent favorable. Likewise, in the interviews participants believed that leadership skills were identified and communicated well, self-assessments were beneficial, and coverage of the coaching mindset was the most effective component of the program. The weaknesses identified in achieving program objectives included, opportunities to practice and develop leadership skills with real-world scenarios which could be worked through. Those interviewed indicated that post-program mentoring as well as a second level to the program would be helpful.

**Research Question 3.** *How were the organizational virtual leadership development program learning objectives effectively implemented by participants from the supervisor's perspective?*

Based on participant supervisor feedback on the follow-up survey to supervisors, the majority, 83 percent, believed that their employee was applying new skills and knowledge attained from participating in the virtual organizational leadership development program. Another 15 percent of supervisors were neutral on the subject, while 2 percent did not believe that the participant was applying skills and knowledge from the program.

**Research Question 4.** *How did the organizational virtual leadership development program impact participants?*

Based on the data collected and presented in this research study, the program impacted participants in multiple ways. According to the follow-up survey to participants 82 percent indicated they were applying what they learned in the program, 57 percent said they had received the coaching support they needed, 75 percent stated that the program had supported them in their career development. Likewise, in the follow-up survey to supervisors 83 percent indicated their employee was applying what they learned in the program in their current role. In the participant interviews, interviewees indicated that the program was helpful in building their knowledge base of

the leadership capabilities ascribed to at the organization and benefitted them with increased self-awareness and an expanded network.

## Conclusion

The study results indicated that overall participant and supervisor satisfaction rates with the virtual organizational leadership development program were high. Participants appreciated the advantages of the virtual format of the program and the quality of the instructors. They completed the program with enhanced communication skills, the ability to influence positive change, and increased self-awareness. Based on promotion rates, 31 percent of participants received promotions after completion of the program. Opportunities for program improvement included incorporating real-world projects into the curriculum to give participants the ability to practice the leadership skills taught, the option to be paired with a mentor, and a second part to the program to explore the leadership competencies at a more advanced level. The findings of this study contribute to the existing body of literature with insights into the experiences and perspectives of participants of a virtual organizational leadership development program at a healthcare organization.

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