



Is Gamification Serious Enough for Leadership Development?

A global survey of CEOs and senior executives conducted by Ashridge Business School in the UK, revealed less than 8% percent of the senior executives polled believed that their organizations are effectively developing leadership skills¹. Developing the complex and hard-to-measure skills—such as negotiation, business acumen, and communication—that are expected of leaders is no easy task. The conventional approach is to offer a training program consisting of seminar- or classroom-based learning. But organizations widely report a low rate of success with such training programs.

A growing number of organizations are looking beyond conventional training for their high-potential and leadership-ready employees. Among the more innovative solutions in consideration is gamification. A survey conducted by Talent LMS found that 89% of those surveyed would respond better to an e-learning program if it incorporated a points system². Gamification has a tremendous impact on learner motivation and engagement, and a system of points, badges, and levels are proven tools to ensure learners complete training programs.

But can gamification be a suitable solution for the serious challenges of leadership development? The answer: yes, gamification can be the engine powering higher levels of engagement and motivation for leadership programs. Specifically, gamification can help tie together various modalities into a cohesive, immersive experience that enables learners to experience first-hand the challenges of being a leader.

Here are four reasons why gamification is an effective tool for leadership training

1. Context

A 2014 McKinsey article explored how the lack of context was one of the reasons leadership programs fail³. To be successful, training should be mapped closely to the business context that a future leader is being groomed for. This context is closely linked to the overall business strategy, the organization's values, and business priorities. Gamification helps reinforce the business context through the use of storytelling techniques. For example, a gamified solution that requires learners to revive a fictional company's flagging business.

Gamification can be even more powerful when it places learners outside of their environment in a new "world" that is unfamiliar, but aligned to the same principles they would apply in their work. A gamified solution developed for one of MPS Interactive Systems' clients, a global oil and gas giant, was based on leading a mountaineering expedition, and involved elements of managing resources, prioritizing goals, and taking strategic decisions.

2. Practice

It is widely agreed that learning and integrating new skills or behaviors requires repeated application to and practice in real-world situations.

Any gamified learning approach encourages the application of knowledge. This is because gamification at its heart is closely related to the "learning by doing" principle. Gamification solutions also are structured to reward replaying or revisiting learning content. Since learning takes time and is a gradual process of assimilating information into pre-existing mental models, gamification can help with spreading out learning over time, allowing repeated opportunities to revisit learning and enhance skills and knowledge.

3. Collaboration

Allowing learners to engage with peers provides significant gains through discussion, idea generation, feedback, and support. It also allows learners to teach others, to share knowledge, and gain insights in return. Collaboration becomes even more relevant for leadership training, since it closely emulates the cross-functional exchange of information and ideas that is required in a real work setting.

Gamification is a great enabler of collaboration when learners must work with teams to complete tasks or earn points. This team-based gamification aspect was one of the key highlights of a solution developed for a food manufacturing client of MPS Interactive Systems. Having one's own performance linked to overall team performance proved to be a huge driver of motivation and engagement for the company's employees.

4. Memorability

Another aspect of learning that gamification influences is the emotional connection with the learning material. By providing an innovative learning experience, gamification also has an impact on learner retention. An emotionally engaged learner is much more motivated to develop new skills and behaviors. The more memorable the experience is, the more learners emotionally connect to and remember it. While this point is applicable for training programs in general, leadership programs are aiming to develop much more complex skillsets and behaviors. As a result, training that is innovative and memorable will have an even higher success rate in meeting its learning objectives.

A gamified solution that incorporates all four of the above factors delivers a powerful leadership training program. Developing such solutions also requires an understanding of the various triggers that influence a learner's experience. An effective gamified approach is able to influence both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational aspects. It also correlates with the higher needs in Maslow's hierarchy, such as development, self-esteem, accomplishment, progression, and self-actualization.

Leadership programs demand higher levels of involvement and engagement from learners, and gamification can be the catalyst to a more exciting and enjoyable learning experience. By employing gamification mechanics, companies ensure that not only are their future leaders engaging more with their training programs, but that it translates into real business results and outcomes.

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