

WHITE PAPER

# Expanding the Leadership Equation

## Developing Next-Generation Leaders



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## *WHEN should leadership development START?*

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# Introduction

For a long time, leaders have asked where the next generation of leaders will come from? And for a long time the same formula has been applied: Identify those high potentials in high school, college, or in the workforce and provide that select group leadership development opportunities. Given the ongoing state of local and global challenges and the need for a more collaborative approach in addressing them, the Center for Creative Leadership's Leadership Beyond Boundaries (LBB) initiative has been exploring ways to expand the leadership equation, empowering more people to contribute and address the challenges that come with interpersonal interaction in work, in the community, and with friends and family.

One focus of the Leadership Beyond Boundaries initiative is early leadership development. But what do we mean by *early*? One answer CCL has been hearing for years comes from senior leaders, as they leave our programs wishing they had been able to benefit from a leadership development experience much earlier in their lives. Couple this statement with comments from youth, leadership development practitioners, principals, and educators in schools and universities and a fairly consistent theme begins to emerge—that leadership development could occur much earlier and be provided to a broader audience.

Prompted by this theme of earlier and broader leadership development initiatives, we began to ask several questions. When should leadership development start? What are the most important competencies to focus on in developing young leaders? Do our current leaders see young people as having what is needed for success? Have young people been able to develop the competencies organizations need in their entry-level workforce or that they will need to lead organizations and society forward? What impact would a broad investment in younger audiences have? Would it help them learn more about themselves and others, and propel them on an increased path of purpose and impact?

A subset of these important questions was the focus of a 2012 CCL Leadership Insights survey, the results of which are summarized in this paper. This online survey of business, government, nonprofit, and education leaders focused on the following:

1. the age a young person should commence his or her leadership journey
2. whether leadership development should be part of the regular educational curriculum
3. how widely it should be offered
4. leadership qualities that managers want to see in young people entering the workforce
5. what excites managers and what concerns them about the young people they employ today

We received responses from 462 individuals from all sectors of the economy, at all organizational levels, and across the age range. Fifty-seven percent of respondents were male and 43% female. The majority of respondents (52%) were between 34 and 49 years of age while 36% were age 50–64. Thirty-seven percent work in organizations with fewer than 500 employees, while 27% were from organizations with over 10,000. The majority of respondents (53%) work in the corporate sector, although a sizeable number were from public or nonprofit-sector organizations (10% education, 9% government, 10% nonprofit). Finally, most respondents were in managerial roles (48% had manager or director titles, 14% vice president or executive vice president, 11% C-level). The vast majority (72%) were from the United States.

# Leaders' Perspectives on Youth Leadership Development

For years, CCL has been hearing from managers about how they could have benefited from a leadership development experience earlier in their lives; therefore, we asked survey respondents to tell us at what age they think leadership development should begin. Fully 90% believe it should start before age 18, with 50% choosing elementary school age or earlier. And virtually everyone (97%) believes it should start by age 21.

## Evidence from the Work World

CCL data from 462 global respondents



Over 95% of respondents believed leadership development should begin by age 21.

## At what age do you think leadership development should begin?

5 years old or younger	21%
Ages 6–10	29%
Ages 11–17	40%
Ages 18–21	7%
Over 21	4%

Contrast this with the fact that many people never participate in formal leadership development and most don't have the opportunity until after they are promoted into management. Yet there are many high-quality youth leadership development programs available today for high school and college students, but only a minority of youth participate in those programs at the time when they could obtain the most benefit from them.

And finally, the vast majority of respondents (84%) believe leadership development opportunities should be offered to **all youth**, and an even higher number (90%) feel it should be part of every student's educational experience.

Despite this widespread agreement, leadership development for all as a part of **every student's educational experience** is clearly not happening in the lives of most youth today.

# Most Important Competencies: Past, Present, and Future

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Since this survey clearly signals the need for leadership development to be for all youth and a part of every student's educational experience, the question of what to develop in young people is clearly important. Our survey addressed this issue by asking respondents to choose, from a list of 24 competencies, the top three leadership qualities

- needed now for young people entering the workforce
- seen as important for entering the workforce *20 years ago*
- important for youth entering the workforce *10 years from now*

The table below shows the five competencies most often chosen by these respondents for youth entering the workforce today and those important 20 years ago.

## Five Most Important Competencies: Today versus 20 Years Ago

TODAY		20 YEARS AGO	
Self-motivation/Discipline	44%	Technical Mastery	53%
Effective Communication	40%	Self-motivation/Discipline	46%
Learning Agility	29%	Confidence	32%
Self-awareness	26%	Effective Communication	31%
Adaptability/Versatility	22%	Resourcefulness	20%

By far, in terms of competencies needed *today*, self-motivation/discipline and effective communication skills were most frequently picked, followed by learning agility, self-awareness, and adaptability. Interestingly enough, when looking back *20 years ago*, self-motivation/discipline and effective communication were still among the top five seen by this group as most important. However, the highest frequency choice was technical mastery—a competency not at all among the top five competencies chosen as important today.

Other skills that appear in the “20 years ago” list but not in today’s include confidence and resourcefulness. This is not to say these qualities are no longer valued, but only that they have been replaced as top priorities by learning agility, self-awareness, and adaptability—the latter three being more critical in the fast-paced, global context in which most organizations operate today.

Looking at what these survey respondents believe will be most important in the future helps us see what needed skills may endure over time. Those that remain on the list 10 years from now include adaptability/versatility, effective communication, learning agility, and self-motivation/discipline.

## Most Important Competencies: 10 Years from Now

Adaptability/Versatility	29%
Communicate Effectively	26%
Learning Agility	24%
Multi-cultural Awareness	22%
Self-motivation/Discipline	20%
Collaboration	20%

Note that effective communication and self-motivation/discipline appear on all three lists and so may represent core and enduring competencies that certainly need to be the focus of development during the high school and college years. What is perhaps even more interesting are two competencies that appear on this future top 5 list: multicultural awareness and collaboration.

As organizations continue to grow in their global reach and increasingly use teams for the majority of work, these leadership skills gain in importance for entry-level employees as well as what our research shows for senior professional staff and for managers. These are also skills that increasingly are important for students and are ones that can easily be developed earlier in life through project-based learning in high school and during college years, as well as through early leader development experiences on the job.

## Focus on What's Needed Now: Differences by Sector, Size of Organization, Role in Organization

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In general, the results above hold up across sectors, large and small organizations, and regardless of the level or role of respondents. There are only a few exceptions. Respondents from the corporate sector were significantly more likely to choose *self-motivation* and *communicates effectively* as important *now*, as compared to the noncorporate respondents (Education/Government/Nonprofit combined). Although it does not appear on the *now* top 5 list, corporate respondents were more likely to indicate that *resourcefulness* is an important competency for young people entering the workforce.

We also saw significant differences across managerial levels in the likelihood of choosing *self-motivation/discipline* as important, with all managerial levels rating this higher in importance than people in professional/staff or individual contributor roles. And perhaps not surprisingly, the education/government/

nonprofit respondents chose *values driven* significantly more often than did corporate managers, although it did not make the top 5 list for either group. There was also one significant difference between those 35–49 and those 50 and older, with the older group more likely to choose *values driven*, as well. The emphasis placed on values by respondents from these sectors may not represent a gap in the skills of young people entering those careers because it is likely that youth who are more values-driven may choose careers in the public and nonprofit sectors.

Coupled with our competency timeline assessment, we posed two open-ended questions focusing on what excites and concerns respondents about the next generation of potential young leaders in their organizations today. The lists on pages 8 and 9 represent the most frequent themes seen in their responses.





## What excites leaders most about the next generation?

Their comfort/skill with technology and social networks for information/connectivity

Their creativity, openness, and fresh ideas

Their multicultural/global awareness and tolerance of difference

Their adaptability, willingness to learn, and acceptance of change

Their confidence and willingness to take a stand/challenge the status quo

Their energy, enthusiasm, dedication, and work ethic

Their ability to collaborate and work across boundaries

Their strong sense of ethics, service-oriented leadership, desire to make a difference

This first list is certainly impressive in terms of strengths people recognize in the next generation of leaders in their organizations. Connection to social networks, creativity, tolerance, the ability to work across boundaries, and adaptability are all important elements in making collaboration work. Those capabilities combined with multicultural awareness certainly situate this generation favorably when it comes to the ability to lead in the face of future global challenges. And youth in the workforce today seem well-poised in terms of many competencies chosen earlier as those needed for young leaders 10 years from now.

These elements also relate to the competencies seen as needed now as young people enter the workforce. To a great extent, we can conclude that our survey respondents appear happy with, and even excited about, the capabilities many in this next generation bring. However, one of the most interesting features of this survey is the way in which respondents' lists of concerns add an important dimension to the results.

## What concerns leaders most about the next generation?

Their unjustified/unrealistic sense of entitlement, need for instant gratification, and affirmation

Their inability to communicate effectively face-to-face/overdependent on technology

Their weak work ethic, focus/commitment/drive, not self-motivating

Their inadequate learning opportunities (mentoring, positive role models, training) to face future challenges

Their lack of decision-making skills, long-term perspective, ability to understand complexity

Their lack of a strong sense of values, ethics, social responsibility

Their lack of reflection, self-awareness, and maturity

Their overconfidence and inability to accept input or feedback; their limited viewpoint

By far the top concern our respondents voiced focuses on the sense of entitlement young people working today appear to have. In fact, entitlement and lack of work ethic were often mentioned together as chief concerns. The sense of entitlement is often blamed on how this generation was brought up (the trophy generation). Many commented that young people need to realize they must accumulate experience, pay their dues, and be patient.

There are also other items listed (above) that seem contradictory to what were listed as the factors respondents were most excited about. For example,

“energy, enthusiasm, and work ethic” is listed as a quality people are excited about, while “they lack a strong work ethic/drive/not self-motivating” is a top concern. Some of this reflects the different experiences people have had with youth and the fact that some people report having both kinds of experiences—sometimes referring to two groups of youths, those they are excited about and those they are concerned about. Of course, the younger workforce is just as diverse as any other segment of the population, and respondents may be seeing different capabilities in different kinds of organizations.



Another takeaway from this list of concerns is that respondents are clear about what competencies they would like to see young people getting more development towards. The ability to communicate effectively is one of the most enduring desired competencies, most often paired with a comment that youth are overdependent on technology to communicate. And the comments on self-motivated/disciplined are mixed, as we can see by comparing what excites leaders with what are their greatest concerns. Organizations in all sectors need leaders who can communicate effectively in person and via media, who are self-disciplined and able to motivate others, and who are agile learners with the ability to work effectively across boundaries.

However, there is also a clear sense of concern among these same respondents about potential young leaders not getting the development needed to face a difficult future. Many of our

respondents voiced concern about there being few visible positive role models for youth or younger employees amidst a sea of negative ones in the media today. Others mentioned their concern that young coworkers are not getting the development experiences, coaching, and mentoring needed to equip them to lead going forward into a much more challenging business environment and a future filled with complex problems. Here the blame was squarely placed on the organizations in which they worked and an educational system that is overly focused on academic test results.

The important point is that current leaders see great potential in the next generation. Yet young people in the workforce today have some significant development needs that require attention by employers and that could be addressed earlier by educators and youth leadership development professionals working together.

# Developing Next-Generation Leaders

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How can leadership development be expanded to all youth? How can leadership development be woven into the educational system? How do young people develop the skills they need to be more successful upon entering the work world? How do you make it affordable and accessible to all?

Although it is clear that organizational leaders want the education sector to engage youth in leadership development before they enter the workforce, educators are struggling to make ends meet and are focused on trying to meet stricter goals for student performance with fewer resources. While integrating youth leadership development into the curriculum of American education (most of the survey sample was from the US) seems to be one answer, the challenges here are immense—but not insurmountable.

According to our survey respondents, there is much more that can be done to prepare young people for entering the workforce and for those younger people in the workforce today. Many youth in both groups have the basic elements of leadership already in place, and many of our survey respondents were excited about that. However, there was also the concern that

young people are asking for too much too soon. These young people have probably received more formal leadership development in high school and college than their older coworkers and bosses ever did, and they are ready for more. So the important question is what's next for these fledgling leaders who are full of creative ideas and not afraid to challenge the status quo?

How do we develop this group of talented young people rather than suppress their ideas and block their enthusiasm? How do we accomplish this in our current economy and can we afford not to?

Another potentially interesting question is what role can business play in developing leadership skills in youth while they are still in school? Already, many business organizations and foundations provide financial support to youth leadership programs run by nonprofits, but those programs do not enroll all or even the majority of youth. Are there new and creative ways that educational institutions and business can partner together, leveraging their skills and resources to better prepare young leaders?



We think a multilayered, two-way, cross-generational leadership and mentoring intervention is one that deserves more serious consideration than it is currently given. There is a cadre of young people—either just in the workforce or soon to enter the workforce—who are comfortable with technology and the pace of change, have good multicultural awareness and adaptability, are willing to learn, and are eager to make a difference. And there are organizations that need those skills not only in their lower-level employees, but also in their leaders. The youth have much to offer in mentoring their more experienced and/or longer-tenured bosses and coworkers.



And of course, the more experienced leaders have much to offer the youth in terms of career direction, coaching for greater effectiveness in life and work, providing feedback on work tasks as well as how they are perceived, sponsoring them for development opportunities that will improve their abilities to communicate face-to-face, improving judgment and decision-making skills, and modeling ethical leadership as a positive role model. Working together in these ways, aspiring and established leaders alike would have an opportunity to enhance their abilities to cross boundaries, learn from difference, and increase their openness to the views and needs of others.

Organizations can benefit by way of established leaders helping youth take their fresh ideas and boundless enthusiasm and channel it in ways that bring effectively executed innovation to the forefront—and all with virtually no additional outlay of funds. And there is a growing body of research that shows good mentors learn and grow as leaders as much as mentees through their mentoring experience. While not everyone may be well-suited to be a mentor (good mentoring requires an openness to learning), mentor training can help people gain the self-awareness and skills to be effective, regardless of whether they are a young person mentoring an older person or vice versa. Our suggestion is that each individual in such a partnership see him or herself as the learner—in both mentor and mentee roles at various times in the relationship.



A leadership and mentoring intervention like this may potentially have more widespread reach, especially if mentoring were integrated into the educational curriculum and offered to all students. This could be one step forward and also a way to get all youth involved in some of the other types of leadership programs available to them.

We seem to agree that leader development should not start when individuals are promoted to their first management job, but instead should be something everyone benefits from at a much earlier age. For youth still in school, the challenge is to find ways to bring real leadership opportunities and developmental experiences into the educational curriculum in ways that build on what's already there and don't impose an additional financial burden. For potential leaders already in the workforce to continue their development, employers must provide real leadership opportunities and mentoring so young people can enhance their self-awareness as leaders, learn new skills, and also have opportunities to practice those skills in a real leadership context. The time for getting started is now.

Because the Leadership Beyond Boundaries initiative evolved out of CCL's innovation incubator, the team is not sitting idle in considering how to expand the leadership equation, how to develop leaders earlier, how to increase scale and reach more youth, and how to bring business and educational partners together. Ultimately, we find ourselves chasing the answer to the question, what would it take to make the world a place where all young people had access to leadership development, and what would the world look like if all young people had access to leadership development?

Already a few schools and organizations are beginning to collaborate to develop a culture of leadership that is grounded in a common leadership framework, philosophy, and governing framework. We are working with schools such as Ravenscroft School in Raleigh, NC, and Southern Methodist University's Lyle School of Engineering, using *The Leader In Me* curriculum.

We are interested in additional collaboration, learning, research, and cocreation opportunities with other organizations to expand the leadership equation. For more information, contact Joel Wright ([wrightj@ccl.org](mailto:wrightj@ccl.org)).

## References

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# About the Authors

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