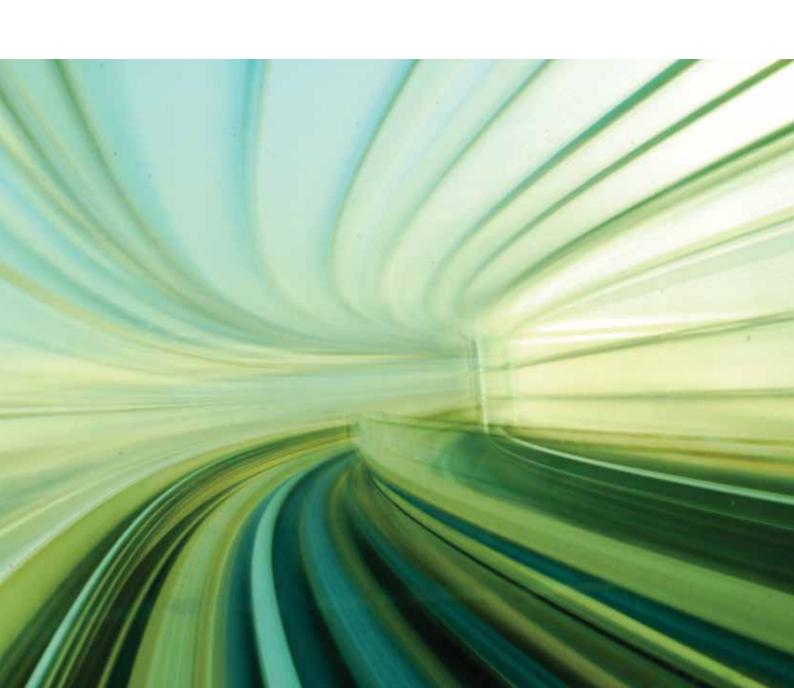
WHITE PAPER

Fast Track: How Top Silicon Valley Companies Accelerate Leadership Development



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"Quality of leadership matters, but it is covered up by success. You don't realize how much leadership matters until things go bad. And things will go bad."

-Ben Horowitz, Cofounder of VC Firm Andreessen Horowitz





Four years ago, I wrote a research paper called "Future Trends in Leadership Development." The paper became popular in various circles and I received good feedback from all groups except one—my friends in Silicon Valley said, "We like the research findings but . . . a lot of those ideas wouldn't work here. This place is different." So one year ago, we started a research project to answer the following questions:

Is developing leaders in Silicon Valley really different?

What are the most innovative methods being used?

What are the best methods, tricks, and tools that L&D practitioners can learn from and use?

The answer we found is that yes, Silicon Valley is different, and requires a different type of learning. We call this "Accelerated Continuous Development," or ACD. Based on our observations, we believe tech (and other) companies can create ACD by focusing on seven practices

- 1. Give leaders heat experiences.
- 2. Build ecosystems of peer-to-peer learning.
- 3. Company data + your culture = leadership hacks.
- 4. Develop leaders through three circles.
- 5. Design for time-poor leaders.
- 6. Build snackable and deep-dive solutions.
- 7. Protect your asset: Create a low stress, high energy culture.

Bonus: Become the world's best plumbers.

If you're ready to find out how to do this, read on.

Nick Petrie June, 2017



We found that Silicon Valley is different from other industries in several key ways

The Speed of Change

- The pace of change is breathtaking. Organizations might only have a three-month roadmap, since predicting anything beyond that is pointless.
- While ambitious organizations in other industries double in size in 10 years, tech companies often do that in one or two.
- The threat of disruption is constant and new players are always emerging. No one can stand still.

Competition for Talent is Immense

- Everyone wants the same people and they're in short supply.
- People can and do move around, so you need to have a great brand and company.

Culture is Treasured

- Companies are very proud of their culture and see themselves as unique.
- Cultures seem to closely resemble the values of the founder/s.
- Culture is used as a differentiator and a recruiting tool to attract talent.
- It's a challenge keeping a culture when 50% of employees may have been there less than a year.

Stress of the Work

- It's exhilarating work, but people feel massive levels of stress.
- The workloads are often enormous and people take on huge roles at a very young age.

What Tech Leaders Commonly Need

- Basic management skills (many miss these early on and it can follow them their whole career).
- Emotional intelligence and self-awareness of the impact their behavior has on others.
- Coping skills to deal with the massive levels of pressure.
- How to manage teams spread across the world.
- How to influence rather than just tell people what to do.

Tech Leaders Have an Allergic Reaction

- Off-the-shelf content that feels like a program and doesn't feel specific to their culture.
- Solutions that aren't based on research and can't be backed up with data or defended when challenged.
- Purely digital solutions—one surprising discovery was that tech companies use fewer tech solutions for development than corporate America does. Many tech leaders prefer face-to-face solutions!

Given all of the challenges just listed, what type of development do tech leaders need?



Tech leaders need to develop faster than leaders in other industries because they reach senior roles more rapidly and at younger ages. This calls for Accelerated Continuous Development:



Accelerated—People make bigger leaps because they become more skilled at extracting the development from experiences (that they're already having).



Continuous—Development doesn't happen sporadically in trainings, but continuously in an ecosystem of complex challenges, colliding perspectives, and reflecting on lessons learned.



Development—Leaders develop both horizontally (skills and knowledge) and vertically (more sophisticated and agile mindsets).

This type of development isn't easy, but the good news is that's what this paper is all about.

To Create ACD, Become Context Agnostic

In the new era of work and technology, previous models of development are becoming less relevant. Leadership development designers used to plan when and where their leaders would learn, but new generations of leaders don't need to be told. People can now consume learning and develop in any time in any context. If leadership programs once aimed for a certain percentage of learning in the classroom and a certain percentage on the job, the new model says, "Who cares where?"

Leaders might be watching a TED Talk on the bus, sharing best practice tips in a Facebook group or discovering how Reid Hoffman learns from a podcast. Become agnostic about the context where development happens. The future of development is about what is being consumed and how it is being integrated.

7 Practices for Accelerated Continuous Development in Tech



Give Leaders Heat Experiences

Heat experiences are the fuel of development for all leaders, but this is particularly true in tech where employees are smart, hungry, and learning agile. Heat experiences are tasks or assignments that have the following conditions

- 1. It's a first-time experience.
- 2. Results matter.
- 3. There is a chance of success and failure.
- 4. Important people are watching.
- 5. It is extremely uncomfortable.

If you are currently experiencing three or more of the above at work, you are probably in a heat experience. Examples of heat in tech include: managing a team for the first time, moving into an area outside of your field of expertise, or turning around an underperforming department. The best organizations are constantly giving their people new assignments to keep exposing them to more heat and learning.

"Between the time when I was architect and became a staff engineer, I grew the most. I was no longer responsible for doing things myself and was responsible for helping others.

I was so used to 'implementing' that I had withdrawal symptoms."

-Sanjay Dubey, Distinguished Engineer @LinkedIn

Why Heat Experiences Work

Research on expert performance across many fields has shown that what sets superior performers apart is the quality and quantity of their mental maps (small-scale 'models of reality' that we use to understand our world). Over time top performers develop highly complex and sophisticated maps of the situations they might face in their fields. These maps allow them to process large amounts of information quickly (despite the overload) and make faster, more accurate decisions in a given situation.

While most people are happy to become good enough, superior performers continually push themselves into heat experiences (e.g., bigger, more complex roles) that their current maps can't explain. This requires them to construct new, more accurate maps thus adding to the number they have available and further boosting their adaptability and performance.

Caveat: Some tech companies are so 'good' at giving their people heat experiences that they burn them out. People can handle only as much heat as they have support. Therefore you need to add the next key ingredient—a supportive ecosystem.

"The most useful part of manager training was realizing that others in the room were in the same position as me. Twenty percent of the class had the same challenges as me so we were able to talk them through together."

-Tim Worboys, Sr. Manager, Software Engineering, LinkedIn



Build Ecosystems of Peer-to-Peer Learning

"We don't have the gymnasiums of leadership development . . . or the equivalent of meeting up for a run with colleagues or friends. If we really want to scale leadership development we need to create a culture and ecosystem shift to support this continuous practice around development."

-Eugene Eric Kim @Faster than 20

Tech leaders love learning from their peers. Part of the Learning and Development practitioner's role is to create ecosystems of learning. Here are three best practice methods we observed:

Googler to Googler

Tech employees are sometimes so hungry to learn that it can be a challenge getting the content to them fast enough. Google addressed this by creating Googler to Googler. This program helps Googlers teach topics they are passionate about to other employees. A portal allows employees to upload content and assessments and either deliver the content themselves or call in a Learning and Development facilitator to help. It's from this method that Google's Project Aristotle was born, as well as the mindfulness program Search Inside Yourself. Allowing Googlers to share their passion and knowledge has meant leveraging resources that might otherwise lie latent.

Same Transition, Same Time

Another company found that its leaders learned a lot from peers in formal programs, but the cohort sharing would dissipate once back at work. This changed when they started to bring together small cohorts of leaders who were going through the same transition at the same time i.e., first time managers. These groups had so many challenges in common that they were able to share many lessons. Expensive consultants weren't needed as the learning was peerto-peer learning and in addition, when the HR team checked in 18 months later, the advice networks in the cohort remained much stronger and stickier than traditional training cohorts.

Diagnose Your Network:

Research shows that the quality of your network is the single biggest predictor of career success. The most effective networks, according to the research, are

Open—You know a lot of people who don't know each other.

Diverse—Your network crosses many boundaries.

Deep—You have strong ties with people.

Unfortunately, most leaders end up with networks that are the exact opposite: closed, homogenous, and superficial. The good news is that in an hour you can help a group of leaders diagnose their current network and plan simple changes to improve it. Leaders who do this build what Kathy Kram at Boston University calls a "Developmental Network." They don't have a formal mentor, but rather informal mentors or colleagues who give advice and support.

In what ways could you build an ecosystem of peer-to-peer learning in your organization?

"Networks are so important to our work we should be paying leaders based on the value in their networks." -Greg Pryor @Workday "Culture is part of almost every conversation that I am in—it is on the forefront of everyone's brains—the CEO tells us 'whatever you do don't f#*k up the culture."

-Anonymous



Company data + company culture = Leadership hacks

In corporate America, there is much greater acceptance of generic leadership development models i.e., situational leadership, or Myers Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®). But we observed that tech leaders have a much higher demand for two factors:

- Data-driven solutions.
- Solutions specific to my company culture.

Development solutions, therefore, should use data gathered from your company to teach leaders the hacks of the highest achieving managers.

"Technologists are pattern seekers. They would love L&D to tell them, 'Based on the data, successful leaders in our organization have these three characteristics.'"

-Greg Pryor @Workday

"Any solution must come from our culture and be specific to our culture or people will reject it."

-Richard Taylor @LinkedIn/Palo Alto Networks

Example 1: Google's Project Oxygen

A team at Google spent a year observing and analyzing behaviors of leaders to identify factors that differentiated the most effective people managers from the rest. They ended up with eight concrete behaviors, ranked by importance that the most effective leaders used. In addition, they discovered the three pitfalls most likely to derail you. These were then taught to people managers throughout the business.

Google's Project Oxygen

- 1. Be a good coach.
- 2. Empower your team and don't micromanage.
- 3. Express interest in team members' success and personal well-being.
- 4. Don't be a sissy: Be productive and results-oriented.
- 5. Be a good communicator and listen to your team.
- 6. Help your employees with career development.
- 7. Have a clear vision and strategy for the team.
- 8. Have key technical skills so you can help advise the team.

3 Pitfalls of Managers

Have trouble making a transition to the team

Lack a consistent approach to Performance Management and Career Development

Spend too little time managing and communicating

Example 2

Another approach is to use data to find the most common challenges your leaders face. CCL surveyed 300 leaders (100 in the C-suite, 100 senior executives, and 100 in middle management) from multiple organizations and industries. We asked each leader to name his or her three greatest leadership challenges, and we counted how many times different challenges were mentioned. The results are in the graphic below.

With this data, we could focus our time and energy on building solutions specifically to each level of leaders and their most common challenges. Do you have the data on what your leader's greatest challenges are? How would you gather it?

Leader's greatest challenges by level of organization

C-Suite	Senior Executives	Mid-Level Managers
1. Change (75 people) - Leading it (48)	1. Change (47 people) - Leading it (23)	Collaboration challenges (63) (with everyone)
- Culture change (16)	- Culture change (5)	2. Leadership styles and Skills (50)
- Coping with Change (11)	-Coping with Change (19)	(especially delegating, assertiveness)
2. Collaboration challenges (41) (especially with peers)	2. Collaboration challenges (46) (especially with peers)	3. Change (44)Coping with change (25)
3. Talent (36) - Getting and Developing	3. Leadership Styles and Skills (24) (especially Executive Presence,	- Culture change (10)- Leading it (8)
4. Communicating Vision and Strategy (35)	Assertiveness, Patience) 4. Talent (27)	4. Talent (26) - Develop
5. Leadership Styles and Skills (24) (especially Executive Presence, Patience)	5. Communicating Vision and Strategy (25)	5. Engagement of staff (22)

"I began to watch others, and the most successful architects became behavior models for me.

Over six months, it sank in. In order to scale my behavior, I would need to stop 'doing."

-Sanjay Dubey, Distinguished Engineer @LinkedIn



Develop Leaders Through Three Circles

"The people who develop the fastest have radical self-motivation and curiosity to push and explore."

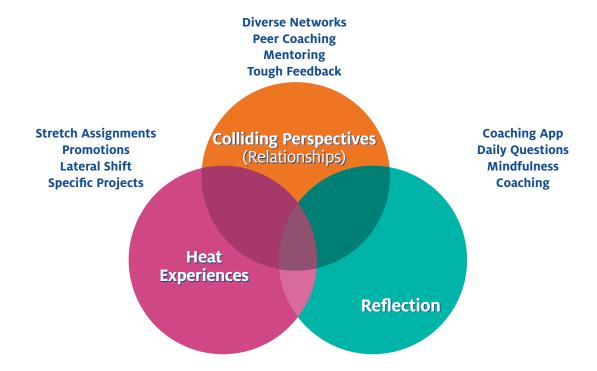
-Eugene Eric Kim @Faster than 20

In interviews with both learning and development practitioners and fast-rising leaders, it became clear that the fastest growing leaders aimed at the intersection of three circles:

Heat Experiences—They took on difficult, uncomfortable assignments that forced them to grow.

Colliding Perspectives—They sought out, listened to, and learned from people who were different from them.

Reflection—They integrated these experiences and new perspectives to advance their thinking.



How to Apply: Audit Your Current Leadership Development

Organizations need to balance these three circles to maximize the development of their leaders. To assess your organization, draw three circles and make the size of each circle proportionate to the focus leaders place on each. If you find that the Heat is huge, Colliding Perspectives is small, and Reflection barely visible, you have a clue about where your leadership development efforts need to focus more.

"When scaling quickly, reflection is critical. Every person should be asking—'What is the single most important thing I can be doing right now? Where can I create the most value?'"

-Joel Constable @Pinterest

"What would benefit me and the senior manager's I've spoken to most is a manager forum. A group of people like me who have challenges, and we could sit down and talk through them in a safe environment. You would think our company would have done this already, because it's free and easy, but we haven't"

-Anonymous Engineer



Tech leaders love learning but many won't engage with development efforts because they find them time consuming and disconnected from their work. The best solutions address these two issues head-on.

1. Snackable Learning

Adeption app—Action and Reflection

Imagine if you could take a leadership challenge you're facing and then see how thousands of other leaders approached that same challenge. Adeption is an app that does exactly that. If, for example, you select 'Resistance to change,' it will show you what actions other leaders took and the lessons they learned as a result. An algorithm also recommends research-based tools and tactics to try related to your challenge, i.e., leading change. You then take action and later get questions that cause you to *reflect* on your results and what you learned. This goes into a database for others to learn from. This method works because it's fast, low effort, and gives you immediate solutions specific to your challenge to try. It also scales development far beyond what face-to-face workshops can do.

Snackable Content

A lot of leadership challenges have known, proven solutions that can be quickly transferred (i.e., how to give feedback, how to run a performance review, or how to launch a team). Some of the most advanced practitioners we talked to now see one of their roles as "curators" of content. These curators scan the world for the best tools and solutions then package and host content (videos, podcasts, face-to-face, infographics) on easy-to-use platforms (either internally or on apps like the Knowtion example above).

With skill-based trainings, we're seeing a trend toward breaking up day-long workshops and replacing them with 2-hour modules that are run on-site and often. These short workshops allow the leaders to focus on mastering one skill at a time, such as giving feedback. These sessions are fast, culture-specific and require no pre-work or homework (just support to help implement).

2. To Make Programs Attractive, Use "Live Bait"

One leading company we interviewed was struggling to get its most senior leaders to engage in leadership development efforts despite the fact that the CEO had told them it was a priority. A breakthrough occurred when the Learning and Development team decided to invite customers to attend the programs.

Because the company was so customer-centric, formerly "too busy" leaders started attending the programs so they could get to know the customers and ask questions about their needs. This proved so popular with senior leaders that invitations were then extended to suppliers, regulators, and potential customers. The stakeholders were excited to attend because it gave them a chance to partner with this cutting-edge company and the leaders were excited because they got to work on their business challenges with the whole system in the room.

Different companies value different things. What or who do your leaders care about? How could you bring more of this into your leadership offerings?

"Many tech leaders missed the management fundamentals growing up e.g., giving feedback. But they are incredibly smart and committed . . . they pick up ideas very quickly so they can go a long way just on smarts. But if they keep progressing they tend to get stuck later on because they are missing the mental models they need."

-Greg Pryor @Workday



Snackable Versus Deep Dive Learning

"We need to get back to basics. Every leader needs to be exceptional at having oneon-ones, setting clear goals, and providing feedback and coaching on the team's progress to those goals. So few managers actively and consistently do this."

-Joel Constable @Pinterest

One of the most interesting moments in our research occurred during a conversation with two Organizational Development professionals from prominent Silicon Valley companies:

"At our company, our leaders are so busy that we deliver programs in 2-hour blocks," the first said. "All of our content is 'snackable' and can be consumed in very short periods of time. That's the new reality of development."

"That's interesting," the second person said. "Our leaders are just as busy but we have decided to do the opposite. The greatest challenge they face is complexity and we don't think you can help develop complexity of minds through 'snackable' content. Therefore we are taking them on a deep dive over nine months using complex mental models."

Who is right? One challenge many companies face is whether to design snackable solutions that managers want or deep dive solutions that many need. If you're wise, you'll conclude (as the two above eventually did) that you need both. The key is having the right blend so you can match the development need to the right delivery method.

Development Need	Needs	Deliver Using
Management fundamentals	 Giving feedback Performance reviews Difficult conversations	Snackable • Video • Podcasts • 2-hour workshop
• Leading in complexity	Systems thinkingStrategic thinkingInfluencing without authority	Deep Dive • Disruptive experiences • Mentoring and coaching • Peer-to-peer public learning forums

Takeaway: When developing leaders, you should be aiming for both efficiency and effectiveness. It's best to deliver skills training through short, snackable videos and practice sessions for efficiency. But the organizational dilemmas that many leaders face can't be solved by a TED Talk. These leaders need deep dive development spread over long periods of time with peers, mentors, and immersive experiences. Both snackable and deep dive development are essential for leaders, be wary of the trap of choosing only one or the other.

Does your organization have an outstanding blend of snackable and deep-dive solutions?

-Carl Sanders-Edwards @Jumpshift



Create a Low-Stress, High-Energy Culture

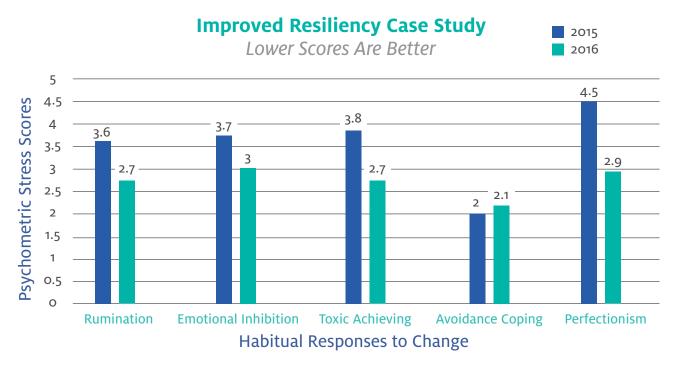
"VUCA environments are incredibly exciting and challenging. They push people to their outer limits—both mentally and emotionally—so managers need to be skilled in listening, mentoring, and coaching to help deescalate and provide focus."

-Kate Shaw @Airbnb

Silicon Valley leaders have the highest levels of stress that we've seen in any industry (measured on eight psychometric stress scales). Our hypothesis is that this is because they are promoted into extremely high-level roles at young ages. While leaders in other industries might spend 20 years developing coping skills and eventually become an executive at age 50, a Silicon Valley leader might be thrust into an equivalent role in their 20s or early 30s. The good news is that coping skills can be quickly developed using research-proven methods that reduce stress and increase resilience.

We taught the leaders of one high-pressure organization these tools in 2-hour workshops focused on physical, emotional, and mental resilience. The 120 managers practiced the techniques and then cascaded these to their teams in a process called "Each One, Teach One." The leaders ran a 1-hour meeting in which they showed short videos demonstrating the tools and then led discussions on how their teams could apply them. Within a month, the tools had been cascaded to 1,200 employees.

In the period between the first measurement and the second, they were forced to lay off 42% of their workforce. Despite this, their resilience results improved on all but one measure (which was already low enough). The company survived this high-pressure period and is now growing again.



Companies can reduce stress levels if they use the right tools and cascade these methods out to the front lines. For more on how to do that, see here.

"You can try to develop people, but if they aren't also rewarded for practicing the skills and behaviors you're developing, your efforts are undermined. That's why linking Talent and L&D is so important. People will typically behave the way they are incentivized to behave. We've made a big effort to recognize and reward our managers for their team's success."

-Joel Constable @Pinterest



Tech companies can also learn from other industries. Steve Kerr, who was the chief learning officer of GE under Jack Welch, told us that GE's reputation for developing leaders was so good that he constantly had visitors wanting to tour their corporate university at Crotonville and discover the secret sauce. At the end of the tour they would invariably turn to him and say, "I don't understand, it doesn't look that different from what our company does."

Steve would say, "We don't produce great leaders because we have the greatest programs, we produce them because we are the world's greatest plumbers. At GE, we decide on the behaviors we want to see from leaders then hook up all the plumbing: hiring, feedback, incentives, systems, culture, and promotions. All of it is connected together to drive the leadership behaviors that the business wants. Most companies do great trainings, but they forget to connect the plumbing and it all goes down the sink."

Example: Pinterest is one tech company that works hard to connect their "plumbing" to encourage a team-based culture rather than an individually-focused one. Employees are assessed on their impact on the team and rewarded according to that. Calibration discussions are all framed around how their teams are doing, not the individuals. This contrasts with other tech companies that often have a disconnect between the behaviors they say they want versus what they actually reward.

When you think about how your company hires, develops, incentivizes, gives feedback, and promotes, how well-aligned are these to drive the leadership behaviors that your company requires?



About five years ago, I was invited to a talk by two of the world's greatest organizational researchers. One speaker, a guru from Harvard, had dedicated his life to understanding strategy and the other was a Stanford professor focused on the future of work. (I've changed some details to protect the innocent.)

The Harvard guru went first. He laid out his research showing why strategy was important, what great strategy looks like, and why so many companies get it wrong. It was clear he knew his stuff. Any challenge we put up was succinctly swatted away and he had no lack of certainty in the correctness of his findings. It was a very informative presentation, but I couldn't help but feel that it was less an exploration of the topic and more a sharing of past knowledge.

The Stanford professor went next, and it felt different from the start. It was clear that he didn't have all the answers he wasn't talking about past research, but about what he was discovering right now. It felt like we were standing with him at the frontiers of the field looking out.

He explained that his research was like a giant jigsaw puzzle. He had maybe 70% of the pieces, but didn't yet know what picture they made up, or what shapes he was missing. Rather than tell us what the answer was, he asked us to join in and help. The energy in the room shot up immediately and people began to share trends they were noticing in their own organizations and experiments they were trying out. It was exhilarating. We finished by giving him (or ourselves?) a round of applause. He thanked us and said he was grateful, not for the applause, but for joining with him to add more jigsaw pieces to the picture.

This paper was a first iteration of taking that same approach for leadership development in Silicon Valley. While this paper focused on *current* best practices, in Round 2 we want to partner with a small group of organizations to innovate, test, and build the best practices for the future. Why wait to see what the future looks like when collectively we have the pieces to build it ourselves? If you work for an organization that loves to invent and wants to partner with others to shape the future of the field, we'd love to hear from you. Let's build!

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About the Author

Nick Petrie is a senior faculty member at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) in Austin, TX where he writes extensively about future trends in leadership development. His current focus is working with organizations to help them create more effective and efficient ways to develop busy leaders. A New Zealander with significant international experience, Nick has worked and lived in Asia, Europe, Britain, Scandinavia, and the Middle East. He holds a master's degree from Harvard University and is the author off the book Work Without Stress.

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