Redefining the role of the leader in the reskilling era

To enable continuous learning, leaders will need to think and act differently.

Continuous learning in the workplace must become the new norm if individuals and organizations want to stay ahead. This places more demand than ever on leaders to take on a new role they might initially find unfamiliar—that of learning facilitator-in-chief.

Since 2016, the Consortium for Advancing Adult Learning & Development (CAALD) has sought not only to illuminate the big-picture challenges that the reskilling era poses but also to explore the implications for individual leaders. CAALD—a group of learning authorities whose members include researchers, corporate and not-for-profit leaders, and McKinsey experts—recently held its fourth annual meeting in Norwalk, Connecticut.

At one of the meeting's sessions, four CAALD members—Lynda Gratton, professor of management practice at the London Business School; David Rock, director of the NeuroLeadership Institute; Joe Voelker, chief human-resources officer at Stanley Black & Decker; and Tim Welsh, vice chairman of consumer and business banking at US Bank—discussed the mind-sets and behaviors that leaders must learn (and unlearn) in order to meet the needs of their people and their organizations in the age of reskilling.

It's harder to learn new things as an adult; the pain of making mistakes doesn't roll off as quickly as it might have when we were younger. So how can leaders foster an environment of psychological safety where employees are supported but still productively challenged? The members discussing this problem concluded that part of the solution may be for leaders to dial up their levels of empathy and humility and focus more on enabling the best in their people, rather than commanding it from them. What follows are edited excerpts of their reflections, which emerged from a conversation moderated by Ashley Williams, CEO and chief learning officer of executive education at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business.

Keeping an eye to the future

Lynda Gratton: When we think about reskilling, our minds immediately go to the idea that you do a program or a course, something concrete that upskills you. Actually, for most people, their capacity to reskill comes from the job itself. So the crucial role for leaders is to be thoughtful about the way they design jobs, how they allow their people to move across different types of positions at the company, and allowing those employees to build their skills and forge a navigable path.

Because for most people, it's likely that the job they're in now will not exist in the future—or at least not in the same form. So leaders need to provide ongoing momentum for people to use their agency to decide for themselves, "What am I going to do next?"

To give employees the insights they need to make informed decisions, it's also important for leaders to help people in their organization understand what's happening in the world—maybe not in 30 years' time, but certainly in three years' time. Data show clearly that people want some sort of insight about where they might be going in their organization and what role they might play in it or not. Leaders need to be transparent and honest about those changes, engaging in an adult conversation about what might realistically happen in the future and how it could affect employees.

Joe Voelker: I have the privilege of serving in a company that's been around for 176 years and has been at the leading edge of innovation, with many successes. Reskilling for our leaders is trickier, because the way they've done things in the past has worked. So we have to start working from the mind-set of, "If we don't disrupt our business, somebody else is going to do it for us."

It's about transitioning your culture so that leaders see the need for change, are rewarded for it, and are committed to lifelong learning—and unlearning, because what got them into their current leadership roles is no longer sufficient. The mind-set we're trying to drive is a focus on rapid innovation, not incremental innovation, about having the courage and confidence to drive innovation that may disintermediate the current core of our business but will ultimately ensure that the company will survive and thrive in the future.

Creating a safe space to learn
Tim Welsh: As leaders, we already know how to create the right environment for this shift to happen. Many of us already do this in our own families. We create a safe learning environment for our children. So why can't we be the same authentic, open leader at work as we are at home? Be honest but positive, painting potential opportunities for the future, and design the work and create the environments in which people can thrive. Because it's one thing to have the mind-set that the world's changing really fast, but if everyone keeps operating in cubicles, sitting in on conference calls, and going over PowerPoint slides, then your way of working is not matching up with your new mind-set.

We've had to change our entire work environment to create an atmosphere where people could fail fast. Now I'm seeing some of our colleagues do things that a year ago they thought were impossible. And it's all because they had a new sense of purpose and a more ideal environment. The work was redesigned, they had agency, and they were allowed to set their own goals.

Lynda Gratton: The leaders I see who are really building an organization that's adaptable, that's going to be able to upskill and reskill their employees over time, are those who not only are honest about their own failings but also create an environment of psychological safety for their employees so that they are comfortable making mistakes as they learn.

Adult learning is difficult. Anyone who has tried to learn as an adult has struggled with the sort of failures that, as children, we didn't notice so much. When you are learning as a child, it's really hard to tie your shoelaces, but everybody's finding it hard. As an adult, failure is really difficult, but it is a part of the unlearning process. So, how leaders demonstrate the ways that they think about failure is really important.

I know of one leader who sends a note to his managers saying, "These are the things that I've learned and thought about, and these are some of the things that didn't work so well." By doing that, he's communicating how to think about your own adult learning. I think that's a crucial role for leaders to play.

David Rock: The term psychological safety is often misunderstood. It doesn't mean everyone feels happy and delighted all the time. The best teams have some conflict and tension. They can challenge each other without anyone feeling that they're being personally attacked.

At work, people typically operate at different levels of threat response. Most people spend far too much time at level three—what you might feel when your boss is walking toward you with a scowl on their face, alarms are going off, and you can't think straight. A skilled leader should know how to create an atmosphere where people are at a steady level one or two—akin to just knowing your boss is in the building or on your floor—so they can effectively do their work without unnecessary stressors.

Cultivating a service-leadership approach

Tim Welsh: We may need to think about a whole new definition of leadership, a whole new set of attributes that a leader should have for this new working environment we're talking about. Most of all, we need humble leaders—in part, because increasingly they will need to be enablers of others, not in charge of others. This requires a very different mind-set. In a world of reskilling, a leader will be a person who needs to act in service to others, empowering a group of employees to do things on their own.

Joe Voelker: In my experience, it's the hardest for midlevel managers to shift to this new model of the leader as facilitator, with a more growth-oriented mind-set. They often feel the most threatened. Before, they had more relevance; they like being in charge. And, suddenly, with a shift to a more nonhierarchical environment, all that is going away. That's why creating a positive narrative is so important. Because if you can give them something to aspire to—a new role, not an eliminated one—where they are more of a positive enabler for their people, helping them do better, it helps them to more successfully make that transition as a leader in the organization's new way of working.

Lynda Gratton: I think another trait that will be increasingly important for leaders to have is empathy. Every single trend we see for the future—be it demographic, social, or technological—leads to greater divisions within society. None of the trends we look at actually brings people together. What we know is you develop empathy for others by spending time with people who are different from you. One of my concerns about being a leader today is that, more often than not, you live in a neighborhood with other rich leaders. Your friends are just like you. Your kids go to school with other children just like them. It's fundamentally difficult to empathize with the other—whether it's people from different socioeconomic, educational, racial backgrounds and so on.

David Rock: Earlier this year, we did some research on what even just a little bit of power does to the brain. Essentially, what it does is it reduces your empathy. You can begin to treat people as objects, you're not thinking about the risks of your actions, and you do things that are stupid and wrong. In an era where it's all too common to treat people as numbers—literally dehumanizing them—the leaders and organizations that will succeed are those that put human values at their core. Q

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