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Mapping Leader and Leadership Development: A Practitioner-Oriented Dialogue Tool for Strategic Deliberation

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Abstract

The dialogue map represents an innovative educational framework that outlines various strategies for leader and leadership growth, designed to foster discussions on enhancing leadership capacity. The objective was to design and evaluate this dialogue map. Development occurred through an iterative procedure that incorporated existing literature, insights from leadership development specialists, 45 interviews, 16 survey responses, and 6 workshops conducted across three major organizations involving managers, professionals, and HR experts. The dialogue map takes the form of a table divided into five categories: developmental relationships, developmental assignments, feedback-centered practices, educational initiatives, and self-directed learning. Each section includes approaches aimed at both individual leader improvement and collective leadership advancement. A total of 33 methods are detailed. Pilot testing revealed that the dialogue map improved understanding of available development options and encouraged more intentional decision-making regarding growth initiatives. The dialogue map offers a structured synthesis of collective leadership development approaches in addition to individual growth strategies. This makes leadership development more inclusive by emphasizing practices that can occur as part of daily routines, both within and outside the workplace, at personal and group levels.

Keywords: Leader development, Leadership development, Collective leadership, Management, Professional training

Introduction

When human resource professionals and senior executives aim to systematically design leadership development systems, they must evaluate current organizational needs [1-3] and identify opportunities for meaningful developmental experiences to guide leader and leadership growth effectively. Studies indicate that HR managers and program designers often request interventions misaligned with organizational goals—for instance, opting for an individual-focused program when a collective leadership approach would yield better outcomes [4]. Moreover, stronger communication and dialogue about available leaders and leadership development practices are needed [5], suggesting limited awareness and utilization of such methods.

This article addresses that gap by presenting a comprehensive framework encompassing multiple leader and leadership development strategies. The dialogue map, grounded in theory and empirical data, outlines not only how individuals can enhance their leadership capacities but also how professional groups can collaboratively strengthen leadership practices. The emphasis on collective leadership development remains an emerging research domain warranting deeper investigation [6, 7].

Experiences and methods that facilitate leader and leadership development
This study begins from the premise that both leader and leadership growth result from rich and varied developmental experiences [3, 8]. Leader development refers to the growth of an individual, while leadership development encompasses a

shared or group-oriented process [3]. Such development can arise from numerous professional activities, including structured education, leadership programs, mentoring, coaching, teamwork, professional networking, experiential learning on the job, and changes in responsibilities. Although much of this learning occurs within the workplace, experiences from personal life or early years may also shape leadership qualities [9]. Some transformative experiences may stem from unexpected or even adverse circumstances—such as job loss or unfair treatment [10]. The study focuses particularly on the developmental opportunities that can be deliberately fostered by senior leaders, HR specialists, consultants, and individuals themselves.

Selecting suitable experiences and methods

Designing impactful leader and leadership development programs requires careful selection of appropriate strategies and approaches [11]. Research in this area has primarily focused on the choice of methods and their organizational impact [12, 13]. However, there remains a tendency to rely on conventional program structures [14], despite evidence suggesting that applying multiple techniques enhances learning, transfer, and outcomes [15, 16]. A large-scale meta-analysis covering 335 leadership training and development programs demonstrated that practice-based learning produced stronger outcome improvements and was equally effective in content transfer. Moreover, programs employing at least two distinct methods outperformed those relying on a single approach [16].

The most contemporary approach in leadership development emphasizes facilitating learning from shared work experiences—individually and collectively—rather than separating participants from their work environment. Yet, a key question remains: how familiar are individuals with the range of potential experiences and methods available for advancing leader and leadership development?

Currently, no universally recognized framework exists to organize or map these various methods, though several studies have attempted to list or prioritize developmental tools and learning sources [5, 9, 17-19]. Some research has involved leadership practitioners rating specific methods [17, 20], while others have attempted to categorize and visually map development techniques [3, 14]. However, these efforts typically target researchers or HR specialists focused on curriculum design, rather than managers or employees seeking to strengthen their own leadership capabilities.

One well-cited framework classifies leader development strategies into five broad types: developmental relationships, challenging assignments, feedback mechanisms, structured educational programs, and self-directed learning activities [3]. These encompass the general distinction between formal programs and informal learning processes such as experiential or self-managed development [21]. The model was derived from extensive empirical research involving over 1,000 interviews in which professionals identified the experiences most beneficial to their growth as leaders—such as mentoring, demanding tasks, adverse situations, academic learning, and personal experiences [10]. Since it would be unethical to intentionally impose hardship, this category lacks a direct equivalent, though feedback derived from difficult circumstances can be considered as part of the same developmental process [3]. Nevertheless, this framework omits leadership development methods at the collective level, despite their acknowledged importance [3]. With the exception of Cullen-Lester *et al*. [20], few works have provided comprehensive overviews of such approaches.

The rationale for this research is twofold. First, there is an evident shortage of scientific publications that summarize available experiences and techniques applicable to workplace-based leader and leadership development. Furthermore, few studies have explored how employees perceive or utilize these different approaches. Second, insights from an interactive project investigating leadership development needs revealed a practical demand for a structured mapping of leader and leadership development methods. This study forms part of a larger project designed to produce scientifically robust yet practically useful knowledge [22]. During the project, it became apparent that many participants were unaware of existing development methods, while both managers and staff often requested additional leadership training. HR professionals also observed that expressed needs were not being adequately addressed. Consequently, the need for a framework that could facilitate discussions about available development methods—integrating both individual and collective dimensions—became clear.

Aim

The purpose of this research was to design and evaluate a dialogue map that organizes leader and leadership development methods. The intention was to offer a clear overview of approaches that can help navigate leadership challenges and promote growth at both individual and collective levels. The term dialogue map reflects its dual function: as a reflective tool for individuals and as a communication aid within organizations. A secondary aim was to describe how staff in the participating organizations experienced the methods incorporated into the dialogue map. This study contributes to the broader literature by refining and extending existing classifications of leader development practices.

Methods

Design

The research adopted an interactive methodology in which scholars and practitioners jointly generated scientifically sound and practically relevant insights [22]. Interactive research emphasizes continuous mutual learning between investigators and participants throughout all stages of the process. The work formed part of a larger project on leadership development carried out in three major global or national organizations characterized by technological innovation and project-oriented operations. These companies represented the metal cutting, software engineering, and infrastructure sectors. Qualitative methods were applied in constructing the leader and leadership development framework, with adherence to the COREQ 32-item checklist to ensure methodological rigor [23]. The initial phase produced a framework—subsequently named the dialogue map—which was then subjected to pilot testing and evaluation.
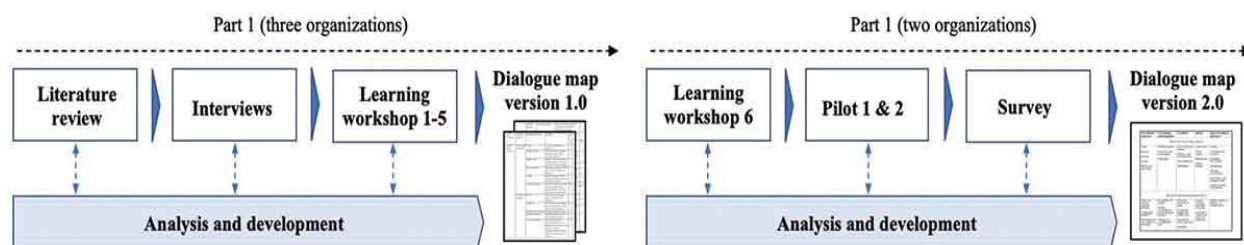
Figure 1. Overview of the research design regarding data gathering, analysis, and interpretation

Data collection

Information for this study was gathered from several sources, including interviews (summarized in tables) and a series of collaborative workshops involving leaders and staff from the three organizations. The process developed gradually, being refined in response to emerging analyses, and consisted of two key phases. The initial phase aimed to grasp the existing practices **(Figure 1)**. Each organization went through three consecutive rounds—beginning with one-on-one interviews, then moving to analysis, and finally, presentations and collective reflections held during learning workshops with relevant members. Every organization hosted one internal workshop, complemented by two inter-organizational sessions. The subsequent phase involved both a learning workshop and a pilot initiative within two organizations, where a dialogue map was designed. This stage extended from August 2018 to April 2019.

The project team comprised a leadership professor (principal investigator), a senior PhD researcher in engineering and adult learning, and a PhD student with a consulting background in leadership and organizational change. The senior academics had no earlier affiliations with the participating organizations. The PhD student—experienced in conducting research interviews in similar contexts—handled all interviews. Although this researcher had once worked as an external consultant for one organization, there were no personal connections with any respondents. Both male and female members participated in the research team.

During phase one, the selection of interviewees was coordinated with individuals possessing detailed organizational knowledge, who also assisted in scheduling. A purposive sample was designed to ensure diversity in roles and hierarchical levels. Of the 49 invited individuals, 4 declined due to lack of time, leaving 45 respondents (16 women and 29 men). The sessions took place at participants' workplaces. Among them, 10 held management titles (executive, middle, or first-line), 11 worked as professionals (e.g., team or project leaders, HR experts, or technical specialists), and 24 carried dual duties (15 combining new leadership with professional roles, and 9 combining new leadership with managerial duties). Other senior figures, such as executives and HR personnel who were not interviewed, still took part in the workshops.

The ethical procedure began with a formal agreement with all three organizations, defining rules for confidentiality and publication. Those involved were informed about the ethical standards governing participation. In the first phase, each potential interviewee received an email explaining the study, which was reiterated during their interview. After receiving this information, participants provided verbal consent, and confidentiality was guaranteed by the interviewer. In the second phase, participants in the pilot study filled out a questionnaire that included their name, title, and organization, meaning anonymity was not maintained.

Semi-structured questions were used in phase one, as they were suitable for identifying leadership challenges and developmental needs. The guide included questions on difficulties, self-assessed needs, and support mechanisms for leadership growth. A pilot interview tested the guide prior to use. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and identifying details were coded to maintain anonymity. Interview durations ranged between 37 and 101 minutes (average 68 minutes). Transcripts were not returned for participant validation, though feedback on early analyses was collected during learning workshops. In two organizations, participants also completed a table derived from initial interview findings from the first organization. The dialogue map presented in **Figure 2** was refined through two earlier versions (developed within organizations 1 and 2) that served as the foundation for interviews in organization 3.

To assess the usability of the dialogue map, a pilot test was performed by integrating it into a leadership course at organization 1 and into annual reviews and leadership meetings at organization 2. Data collection first involved conversations with one

key person from each company, who gathered initial responses. In organization 1, this was a senior HR strategist overseeing the course; feedback was obtained verbally from 18 participants. In organization 2, a senior manager conducted the pilot within appraisal and team settings, obtaining verbal input from 20 people. The pilot dialogue map resembled **Figure 2**, though it lacked ten illustrations. Later, a questionnaire containing four-point rating scales (1 = not at all, 4 = to a great extent) and two open-ended questions was distributed to 48 participants, of which 8 from each organization responded (33% response rate).

Analysis

The analysis in phase one employed an iterative three-step model—data reduction, organization, and conclusion [24]. After reviewing interviews from the first organization, the principal author recognized the benefit of developing a framework summarizing different methods alongside interpretations of their application. Analysis was narrowed to the identification of method instances, which were then organized and presented during a learning workshop using a Methods of Leader Development table [25]. The first workshop revealed that participants desired varied suggestions for leadership development techniques, while managers and HR professionals mainly viewed such efforts as HR-driven. Consequently, both groups expressed the need for a comprehensive, multi-method framework.

In the second organization, interviewees received a revised version of the table and were asked about their knowledge and experience with each method. Because employees used both Swedish and English, the document was bilingual. Once all interviews were processed, another seminar was held. The same steps were later applied in the third organization. Throughout the study, drafts were shared repeatedly with key members for review and feedback. Between two and three researchers took part in each workshop session.

Through the iterative cycle of gathering information from the three organizations, several modifications were made regarding how the data were presented. For instance, the original grouping of formal programs, derived from Conger [26], contained four kinds of leadership development initiatives: knowledge-based programs, skills training, feedback-oriented programs, and personal growth activities [25]. In their revised model, McCauley and colleagues [25] renamed knowledge-based programs as university programs. As the interviews progressed and results were shared back with the organizations, it became apparent that these divisions were impractical, since most programs combined skill-building, feedback, and personal growth, though in differing proportions. Consequently, the structure was simplified to include only internal, external, and university courses. Moreover, some categories were eliminated because participants were unfamiliar with the terminology. In this revision phase, categories were moved, adjusted, or deleted from the original framework. Minor adjustments included relocating leadership activities outside work from developmental assignments to self-activities, and adding a new entry titled reflection and daily feedback within the feedback group. The excluded categories—communities of practice, job rotation, action-learning projects, assessment centers, professional conferences, and trade shows—were methods that participants in the first phase neither used nor recognized.

A significant new contribution within the leadership development section was the addition of collective group activities designed to strengthen leadership practices. These items originated from the initial interview data and were refined across subsequent rounds, influenced by the literature on collective leadership [20]. In the earliest tables, the collective leadership segment did not include any subcategories.

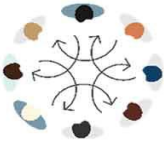The dialogue map took shape through a structured development phase aimed at sorting and categorizing leadership methods. This involved an intensive week of collaboration with Cynthia McCauley, a recognized authority in leadership development. During this stage, more methods were added. The evolving framework was also reviewed at a learning workshop with organizational stakeholders, where the researchers agreed to conduct a pilot test to examine its practical applicability. In summary, the dialogue map was created through an iterative process informed by previous research [20], expert consultation, and real examples drawn from the organizations. Within this interpretive phase, the first author handled data reduction and systematization of methods, while all authors reviewed transcripts and validated both content and structure. The way participants interpreted each method is presented in the Results section, which includes one representative quote per category. The organizations are labeled AA, BB, and CC, and participants are numbered 101–. Data from the questionnaire were summarized using descriptive statistics, while the open-ended responses were examined via content analysis (coded AA1–8, BB1–8).

Results

The dialogue map is formatted as a table that lists 20 individual leader development methods and 13 collective leadership methods **(Figure 2)**. A defining aspect of the model is that it outlines how an individual can enhance personal capabilities while also showing how a team can develop shared leadership capacity. All approaches are categorized into five groups: developmental relationships, developmental assignments, feedback-intensive processes, formal programs, and self-

development activities. **Table 1** provides brief definitions and explanations of each method. The main body of the findings describes participants' experiences using these methods, while usability outcomes are summarized at the end of the section.

Figure 2. The dialogue map represents methods for individual and collective leadership development

Table 1. Overview and description of leadership and leader development methods

Category of Methods	Type of Development	Subcategories of Methods	Description
Developmental relationships	Individual leader development	Managers	The "manager-as-coach" approach emphasizes guiding employees' learning and growth to enhance work performance.
		Colleagues	Learning from peers includes reciprocal peer-to-peer exchanges where colleagues in equivalent positions support one another's growth.
		Mentors	A mentor acts as a knowledgeable and trusted guide who provides advice and insight.
		Coaches	Coaches employ various coaching strategies to foster an individual's personal and professional development.

		Networks	Leadership networking focuses on sharing information, cultivating professional relationships, and strengthening mutual connections.
	Collective leadership development	Trust and relationship building	Group-based efforts designed to enhance trust and interpersonal bonds, promoting psychological safety within the team.
		Group coaching	A coaching process aimed at improving the development and performance of a group collectively.
		Networking with other groups and stakeholders	Intentional interaction and collaboration with other teams and external stakeholders to strengthen relationships.
Developmental assignments	Individual leader development	Temporary assignments	These are short-term roles or projects assigned for a defined duration.
		Expanded work responsibilities	Taking on new tasks, duties, or projects that go beyond existing responsibilities.
		Job moves	Transitions where an individual changes roles within or across organizations.
	Collective leadership development	New assignment to the group	The entire group is given new duties or projects to complete together.
		Problem identification and problem solving as a group	Joint efforts to define issues and develop shared strategies for resolving them.
		Temporary and cross-sectional teams	Teams formed from different units or departments that collaborate on cross-organizational projects.
Feedback processes	Individual leader development	Seeking feedback from colleagues	Engaging peers for constructive input after tasks, meetings, or presentations.
		Reflection on performance	Evaluating one's own work to heighten self-awareness and derive lessons from personal experiences, often supported by others.
		Performance appraisals	Formal evaluations conducted annually where supervisors assess individual performance and provide feedback.
		360-degree feedback	A comprehensive process where an employee receives evaluations from supervisors, subordinates, and peers.
	Collective leadership development	Reflection together as a group	Structured group discussions to review past events, explore causes, and identify improvements for future work.
		Feedback to the group from group members	Sharing feedback within the group on collective functioning and collaboration.
		Feedback from external stakeholders	Systems designed to gather insights and external perspectives from stakeholders outside the team.
		Debriefing	Post-project discussions aimed at extracting learning points from completed work.
Education	Individual leader development	Internal courses and programs	Organization-led training or courses developed and facilitated internally.
		External courses and programs	Learning initiatives delivered by universities, consultants, or other external institutions.
	Collective leadership development	Formal education together as a group	Group participation in the same educational sessions or training modules.
		Attending courses and conferences together	Joint participation in professional programs, workshops, or conferences to share common learning experiences.
Self-development	Individual leader development	Reading	Engaging with written resources, such as books or online material, to support personal growth.
		Lectures and seminars	Developing leadership understanding through listening, dialogue, and discussion-based learning events.
		Scheduled self-reflection	Setting regular intervals—daily, weekly, or otherwise—for personal reflection and self-assessment.
		Recovery	Activities aimed at restoring well-being and managing stress to sustain energy levels.
		Setting developmental goals	Establishing objectives that outline how to enhance one's leadership abilities and performance.
		Creating a personal leadership philosophy	Reflecting on one's principles and ambitions to define a personal leadership approach.
		Leadership roles outside work	Participating in community, sports, or family leadership roles that foster transferable leadership skills.
	Collective leadership development	Sharing new knowledge collectively	Exchanging insights and expertise through activities such as internal lunch seminars or guest speaker events.

Developmental relationships

Developmental relationships range from naturally formed exchanges to intentionally structured interactions aimed at developing either one individual in an asymmetric relationship (e.g., mentor, supervisor as coach) or multiple individuals in a symmetric relationship (e.g., networks, peer learning partnerships). Many respondents emphasized the importance of having "someone to exchange ideas with" (BB117) and reflected on how useful it was to discuss practices and receive constructive challenges.

Individual developmental relationship methods

Managers

Relationships with managers were frequently identified as important sources of learning and growth. The concept of the manager as a coach was familiar, though participants noted considerable variation in how effectively managers fulfilled that role. Since supervisors were not always equipped to provide solutions—especially concerning technical or specialized areas—asking open-ended questions was perceived as an effective way to stimulate employees' own problem-solving abilities.

Colleagues

Knowledge-sharing also occurred among colleagues, though only a few participants recognized the formal term peer-learning partners, which refers to mutual learning between two peers of equal standing. Nonetheless, respondents described scenarios such as two managers sharing an office or dual project leaders managing complex initiatives together, which they regarded as valuable developmental opportunities. Peer learning was further observed in leadership teams and everyday collaboration with skilled coworkers, suggesting that such learning emerged more from daily interactions than from organized leadership training programs.

Mentors

Participants noted that a person could both receive mentorship and act as a mentor for others. Mentoring offered a platform for exchanging ideas and receiving insights from more seasoned leaders within the organization. Several respondents emphasized viewing the mentor as an experienced role model whose guidance supports professional and personal growth. Mentors were generally described as being somewhat removed from day-to-day operations, providing objective perspectives, ideally from different departments. Mentorship arrangements were primarily reserved for senior leaders and were established as needed, in the same way external coaches were engaged.

Coaches

Coaches were most often external consultants or internal HR professionals. The benefits of coaching were described as enhanced work performance and better handling of professional challenges. Interviewees stated that coaches guided individuals through question-based dialogue, enabling them to identify their own solutions and broaden their thinking. They further explained that effective coaching involves a relationship that is both supportive and stimulating, promoting self-awareness and growth.

Networks

The most frequently discussed personal networks were manager networks, typically established through participation in formal leadership programs. Other mentioned networks included groups of women professionals or employees with shared occupational roles (e.g., technicians). Respondents indicated that networking for specific groups often occurred during courses, seminars, or meetings, yet also emerged informally, such as during lunch gatherings. Some professionals pointed out the absence of cross-level networks within the organizations, highlighting the difficulty of maintaining such connections once formal structures are concluded.

Collective developmental relationship methods

Trust and relationship building

Examples provided by respondents included activities aimed at building trust within teams, departments, and even across organizational divisions. The proposed team-building initiatives ranged from casual social events (after-work gatherings, bowling, celebratory dinners) to one-day events (kick-offs, organization-wide days) and structured group sessions (personality assessments, feedback exercises). Leadership development at this level focuses on fostering a shared capacity for trustful collaboration, encouraging members to contribute their knowledge for the collective benefit.

Group coaching

A coaching-oriented mindset was also perceived as part of the culture among management teams. Rather than being a formal requirement imposed on the team leader, it was understood as a mutual practice—something that all team members could apply and develop together.

Networking with other groups and stakeholders

Respondents acknowledged that collaboration between departments or units can be difficult, often resulting in the phenomenon known as "silo thinking." However, they also described successful examples, such as innovation-focused workshops promoting knowledge exchange across functional boundaries. Participants discussed strategies to connect with other groups and external stakeholders, such as using interviews and surveys to create conceptual maps that illustrate dependencies related to products and services. When networking occurred collectively, it represented a strategic choice for the group to initiate meetings with other teams—although individuals participated, the primary goal was intergroup collaboration and exchange.

Developmental assignments

The purpose of developmental assignments is to utilize new and demanding tasks intentionally as learning opportunities for individuals. This requires identifying suitable roles, challenges, and transitions for each person while framing assignments as tools for leadership development. While the organizations provided numerous such opportunities, these were seldom explicitly labeled as developmental for leadership. One participant remarked that this may be because "it takes a bit more vulnerability to ask for help internally and make use of everyday possibilities" (CC105).

Individual developmental assignment methods

Temporary assignments

Interviewees mentioned several time-limited tasks or projects, though only a few were intentionally structured to foster leadership growth.

Expanded work responsibilities

Taking on new roles, assignments, or projects was widely recognized as a key avenue for workplace development. Many participants described expanded responsibilities as a natural part of evolving job duties. While not always aimed directly at improving leadership capability, examples were cited of managers assigning employees to new roles in addition to their existing ones to promote skill development.

Job moves

Respondents explained that when an organization failed to provide sufficiently engaging opportunities, employees often sought new roles elsewhere. Job transitions could occur within the same company—either upward or laterally—or in external organizations. Participants generally felt that ample chances existed to take the next career step within their own organizations.

Collective developmental assignment methods

New assignments to the group

Receiving new assignments as a team suggested that existing strategies or methods were no longer adequate. Such initiatives often required tackling complex challenges that demanded input from multiple perspectives and collaboration beyond traditional hierarchies or even organizational boundaries. Examples could include technical innovations or social development projects involving several groups working jointly.

Problem identification and problem solving as a group

This theme slightly overlaps with the preceding one, as it focuses on a shared process of defining and resolving problems. During this developmental process, group members jointly explore and redefine the issue while modifying their problem-solving strategies as understanding evolves. Through such collaboration, the team strengthens its social capital and enhances collective leadership capacity. In doing so, the group engages in reflection about its own actions and learns to adapt or restructure behaviors based on these reflections.

Temporary cross-sectional teams

According to the interviewees, these temporary cross-functional teams were typically established by senior management. Such groups already existed within the organizations, primarily aimed at product-related work and problem solving rather than

being intentionally designed to foster leadership growth. Although collective action-learning projects could serve as a structured approach to leadership development, this method was not applied within the organizations studied.

Feedback

Feedback regarding various aspects of leadership performance was highlighted as a critical component of professional growth. Participants described feedback as indispensable and actively desired, though at times insufficiently practiced. As one participant stated, "Sometimes we hesitate to provide constructive feedback; unfortunately, it tends to be used mainly when something goes wrong" (BB117).

Individual feedback methods

Seeking feedback from colleagues
Participants shared multiple examples of how they both seek and offer feedback among peers. Occasionally, input came from trusted friends or close associates, while in other cases, structured feedback was embedded within leadership training programs.

Reflection on performance
Unlike annual performance evaluations, self-reflection was regarded as an activity that should occur frequently—daily, weekly, or periodically throughout projects—to ensure continuous learning and self-improvement.

Performance appraisals
Formal performance appraisals were conducted at least once per year, though participants had divergent opinions about their effectiveness. Some argued that these sessions served mainly as an update on current status and future intentions, offering little developmental value. Others viewed them as useful when they included goal setting and growth planning. A few respondents suggested that such appraisals should take place more frequently, for example, weekly or semiannually. These reviews often included a forward-looking component addressing upcoming plans.

360-Degree feedback
The 360-degree feedback approach was common in formal leadership education and as part of annual performance assessments for certain managers. It was valued as a means to obtain input from supervisors, subordinates, and peers. The process usually involves self-assessment, providing a comprehensive view of one's behavior and relationships. Some individuals in non-managerial leadership roles also expressed interest in receiving annual 360-degree evaluations.

Collective feedback methods

Reflection together as a group
Interviewees viewed collective reflection as an essential organizational practice, though they noted challenges in sharing lessons and applying findings across projects. This practice allowed teams time and space to collectively process ideas, aiming to boost innovation and creativity. Two organizations, for example, experimented with "Free Thinking Fridays" and seminars to encourage this culture. Other related activities included idea generation, decision-making about implementation, and preparing projects based on these ideas.

Feedback to the group from group members
Feedback also occurred within the team, as members discussed how effectively the group functioned as a unit. Such exchanges could happen during formal evaluation sessions or in informal feedback meetings designed to enhance teamwork.

Feedback from external stakeholders
Teams also required external input, making it necessary to design processes and systems to collect structured feedback from outside stakeholders, ensuring external perspectives informed ongoing development.

Debriefings
A debriefing involved team members reflecting on a recent activity or project to evaluate what succeeded and what could be improved. The goal was to help the group learn collectively from experiences and establish a shared understanding. Some teams reported that they regularly used debriefing techniques as part of their workflow.

Education

Educational initiatives were identified as a standard tool for leadership development, encompassing a variety of training and developmental interventions that all participants had encountered. As one respondent remarked, "We have plenty of courses for various purposes" (AA103).

Individual education methods

Internal courses and programmes
Large organizations routinely offer internal training and workshops tailored to particular roles or hierarchical levels. Most employees were familiar with these programs and regarded them as central to leadership development. However, participants emphasized that similar opportunities should also be available to employees without managerial titles.

External courses and programmes
External training programs, often provided by outside institutions or consultants, were primarily used for individuals with specialized development needs. Respondents noted that such opportunities were considered particularly valuable when specific topics were unavailable internally. In some organizations, top executives were even sponsored to attend international advanced courses involving travel abroad.

Collective education methods

Education together as a group
This method involved having entire teams—not just formal leaders—participate in shared learning experiences. The perceived benefit was that all members learned to apply the same frameworks and tools collectively, strengthening cohesion and promoting shared leadership practices. Such group-based education was viewed as crucial for fostering organization-wide leadership growth.

Going to courses and conferences together
Joint participation in external conferences or training events created shared experiences that facilitated smoother collaboration afterward. Since all participants received the same information and insights, teamwork back in the workplace became more effective compared to when only one leader attended a course individually.

Self-Development
Self-initiated learning was another route for leadership growth, often pursued during personal or flexible time. Nonetheless, organizations also provided numerous opportunities for employees to engage in such activities. As one respondent mentioned, "Reading—my supervisor shares books, but participation is up to you" (BB111). In this section, four additional methods related to self-development were identified as new contributions to leadership enhancement.

Individual Self-development activities

Reading
Reading was primarily portrayed as a personal initiative, although some managers actively recommended materials to their teams. Participants mostly mentioned books, but also referred to social media platforms and online forums as valuable resources. In one organization, specific leadership books were highlighted, while in another, an employee pointed out the absence of a leadership library.

Lectures or seminars
Speakers presented on leadership-related themes, either as invited guests or as part of conference programs. These sessions often featured contributors from other organizations, academic institutions, or consulting firms, who provided motivation and expert insight into leadership practices.

Scheduled Self-Reflection
Several participants described self-reflection as a deliberate technique to enhance their leadership skills. For instance, some set digital reminders or dedicate a few minutes each week for structured reflection, enabling continuous personal evaluation and growth.

Recovery

The recovery theme was introduced during the pilot phase, generating strong engagement among participants. Many emphasized the importance of managing stress and maintaining a healthy balance between professional duties, personal life, and relaxation as vital for sustainable leadership performance.

Setting developmental goals

Establishing developmental objectives was considered a way to enhance job satisfaction and strengthen leadership abilities. Some individuals created these goals independently, while others did so in consultation with their supervisors, who sometimes required such planning. Developing a personal leadership philosophy was also cited as an example of a self-initiated activity, as it demands deep reflection on one's leadership principles and desired behaviors. One leader described crafting her own leadership philosophy and later sharing it organization-wide, leading to its inclusion in leadership training programs.

Leadership roles outside work

Respondents discussed non-work settings that provided learning and growth experiences, including coaching sports teams, caring for animals, and family-related responsibilities such as parenting, all of which contributed to their broader leadership development.

Collective Self-development activities

Collective sharing of new knowledge and learning

Self-development activities sometimes took the form of group-based knowledge exchange, such as internal lunch seminars, where employees presented their expertise, or sessions involving guest lecturers. These practices encouraged collective learning and fostered a culture of shared professional growth.

Use of the Dialogue Map

The dialogue map was incorporated into both leadership courses and annual appraisal discussions in two of the organizations. Overall, it was perceived as a valuable framework that supported growth for individuals and teams alike. As one participant expressed, "It prompted me to reflect on all dimensions of my leadership and how to use my opportunities" (BB2). Participants found it somewhat easier to apply individually than within teams, which was anticipated since collective development was a relatively new concept for many. Another commented, "I appreciate the focus on teams and collective growth" (BB4).

The tool was seen as especially beneficial in annual performance reviews, though a few participants noted feeling overwhelmed by its variety of methods. Some emphasized the need for proper introduction and framing, as not all users were familiar with the entire framework: "I would need an introduction to the dialogue map for a clearer understanding" (AA2).

Discussion

This study's contribution lies in creating a dialogue map that organizes five distinct categories of leadership and leader development strategies: developmental relationships, developmental assignments, feedback mechanisms, educational activities, and self-development. The results extend prior research traditions emphasizing work-based experiential learning [10, 25], while offering a refined model.

The findings reinforce the idea that leadership growth emerges through workplace experiences, and that no universal model fits all learning contexts [27]. A key strength of this work is its comprehensive overview of diverse approaches organizations can adopt to stimulate learning and development.

An important benefit of the dialogue map is its capacity to raise awareness of existing methods and help individuals and teams integrate them into daily work routines. The pilot implementation suggested that the dialogue map effectively broadened understanding of leadership development opportunities, paving the way for future design of integrated development systems. For this publication, visual illustrations were added to the dialogue map to enhance its clarity and communication value.

Methodological considerations

One methodological advantage of this research was the large and diverse participant group, which included individuals holding various roles across three major organizations. The size of these organizations was beneficial since participants had firsthand experience with many of the identified approaches. Additionally, the iterative design process and feedback obtained during the pilot phase enhanced the reliability and richness of the findings. However, future research should explore the transferability of this framework, determining its applicability to smaller companies, different sectors, and varied cultural contexts, as well as identifying additional techniques relevant to such settings. Certain categories were omitted due to their lack of recognition in the Swedish environment, suggesting that further adjustments may be required in other cultural settings.

A limitation of the methodology was that the framework evolved progressively throughout the research; thus, some methods might have been presented in greater detail had they been identified earlier. Compared with earlier studies on leadership practices [1], this research expanded and refined several subcategories [25], illustrating concrete examples under each. Furthermore, the addition of a leadership development category represents a strength, acknowledging emerging trends within the discipline. To enhance its practical applicability, the dialogue map should be examined in different organizational contexts.

Leader development methods

The techniques categorized under leader development were generally well recognized among the respondents. This familiarity stems from their common use in leadership improvement. Prior studies emphasize that developmental relationships and challenging assignments are among the most influential sources of leadership growth across cultures, genders, and roles [10]. The participants reiterated the importance of having supportive and challenging relationships—ranging from casual exchanges of ideas to structured coaching arrangements. Hence, both formal and informal interactions within organizations can serve as valuable developmental mechanisms.

While coaching is increasingly practiced, opportunities can be further expanded through manager-as-coach models and informal peer networks [28]. Respondents observed that their organizations already offered numerous learning opportunities embedded within daily tasks and responsibilities, yet these were not always perceived as leadership development activities. This suggests untapped potential in using on-the-job challenges as intentional learning experiences.

For effective use, the dialogue map should be introduced, structured, and promoted within organizations. The selection of work-based training must correspond to organizational characteristics [29]. Communication—through strategic plans, staff meetings, intranet announcements, and informal discussions—is crucial for sharing lessons learned and fostering reflection [3]. Although employees are often assigned new tasks and responsibilities that expand their skills, these are seldom articulated as leadership development efforts; therefore, it is vital to explicitly highlight and discuss such growth elements.

The role of feedback is pivotal in fostering learning and achievement [30, 31]. Findings revealed that participants valued feedback highly, incorporating reflection and feedback practices into their routines. A new subcategory, "reflection and feedback in daily work," was included based on participants' descriptions of practices like meeting debriefs or scheduled reflection times. This focus aligns with the feedback culture model, which promotes continuous formal and informal feedback for performance improvement [32]. Such practices can strengthen 360-degree evaluations and annual reviews, making them more effective for leadership growth.

Participants also described experiences with a wide range of training sessions, including HR-organized programs and external courses, supporting findings that formal leadership training remains a cornerstone of leader development. Self-development efforts mainly involved reading and personal reflection, while the recovery category introduced during the pilot received notable appreciation.

Leadership development methods

The leadership development section represents the most novel contribution of this research. It was constructed through an iterative approach combining existing literature [20], expert consultations, and organizational evidence. This newly defined category attracted considerable attention during the dialogue map pilot [33], challenging the traditional notion that collective leadership—where leadership is co-created among participants—is undervalued [34]. Empirical studies have shown that introducing collective leadership models enhances employee engagement, job satisfaction, and team effectiveness [35].

In today's complex and dynamic organizational environments, collaboration and shared perspectives are increasingly essential. Many participants discussed trust-building practices, including both casual social activities and structured initiatives, emphasizing their role in fostering trust and psychological safety—key elements for strong performance [15, 36].

For collective leadership development to succeed, learning must occur within the group setting itself. This involves establishing shared norms and values, such as openness, mutual respect, transparent communication, and acceptance of diversity [37]. A recurring challenge was that while organizations already conducted such activities, they were not labeled or recognized as leadership development methods. This observation mirrors earlier comments that these practices have untapped potential for development if explicitly identified and communicated as part of a leadership strategy [37].

Implications

This study offers several implications for managers, HR practitioners, consultants, and others engaged in leadership development efforts. Within each category of methods, some approaches require greater resources and formal organizational structures, while others are easily initiated by individuals with minimal support. The methods that can be started on a personal level mainly involve shifting one's mindset and fostering new types of dialogue, rather than requiring additional time or financial investment. Consequently, leaders can examine each category and consider which relationships, assignments, feedback practices, learning activities, and self-development efforts are feasible within their current circumstances.

A key advantage of the dialogue map lies in its ability to raise awareness about the variety of available approaches and highlight what can be implemented both individually and collectively. Engaging in such discussions and reflective conversations with peers, supervisors, or coaches may further enhance this awareness. This represents a form of decentralized and broadened understanding of leadership and leader development, where the responsibility for growth becomes shared across multiple individuals rather than concentrated in one role.

At the organizational level, HR specialists design leadership development systems that align the different components contributing to effective leadership outcomes [25]. The selected approaches must be consistent with the organizational context and work environment [38]. Hence, the framework presented in this study can serve as a valuable resource for managers, HR professionals, and consultants in building comprehensive and effective development systems.

Finally, a significant implication is that the framework overview can encourage a wide audience within organizations to engage in constructive conversations about how leadership and leader development can be further enhanced.

Future research should investigate how these methods can be integrated to stimulate development, which combinations yield the best outcomes for different types of growth, and how to assess their effectiveness. As research on collective leadership development remains in its early stages, further studies exploring additional methods and applications are strongly recommended.

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