

Why Leadership Development Feels Broken: And How We're Fixing It - Josh Bersin

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Executive Summary

This article, authored by Josh Bersin, addresses what it characterises as a systemic failure in corporate leadership development — a market exceeding \$14 billion annually yet producing persistent pipeline gaps. Bersin argues that the traditional 'Leadership Pipeline' model, built on hierarchical, stepwise progression and positional authority, is structurally misaligned with contemporary organisational realities characterised by flatter structures, cross-functional teams, and accelerated career timelines. The author's central argument is that leadership development must shift from long-form programmatic approaches to a more agile, experiential model organised around four dimensions: Education, Experience, Exposure, and Evaluation. Key evidence cited includes statistics on leadership bench strength (14% of companies report a strong bench), a DDI/EY study linking formal mentoring to 20% lower turnover and 46% higher leadership quality, and the author's personal professional observations. The article concludes by profiling several technology vendors — including BetterUp, STRIVR, Mursion, Glint, and others — as representative of a new generation of solutions addressing these gaps. The author discloses an advisory relationship with BetterUp, a material conflict of interest that affects the objectivity of vendor assessments.

Key Insights

1. Only 14% of companies report a strong leadership bench, and 64% identify developing next-generation leaders as their top talent challenge, suggesting systemic inadequacy in existing development models.
2. The traditional 'Leadership Pipeline' framework, premised on slow hierarchical progression and positional authority, is characterised as increasingly misaligned with organisations that are flatter, more agile, and where individual contributors hold significant influence.
3. A DDI/EY study cited in the article associates formal mentoring programmes with 20% lower turnover, 46% higher leadership quality scores, and roles filled 23% more quickly — positioning coaching and mentorship as high-leverage development interventions.

Practical Takeaways

- The 'Four E's' framework — Education, Experience, Exposure, and Evaluation — is presented as an organising structure for redesigning leadership development that moves beyond formal programmes toward continuous, on-the-job learning.
- The article documents a shift among performance management platform vendors (Glint, BetterWorks, CultureAmp) toward 'action platforms' that embed real-time feedback and developmental nudges into daily workflows, representing an integration of performance management and leadership development.

Frameworks Mentioned

Leadership Pipeline — A hierarchical leadership development model attributed to Ram Charan, describing five progressive leader types from Individual Contributor through Managing an Enterprise, each requiring distinct skill development.

9-Box Grid — A talent assessment tool used to separate current performance from future leadership potential, typically mapping employees on a grid used for succession planning and promotion readiness decisions.

360-Degree Review — A multi-source feedback methodology in which leaders receive performance and behavioural assessments from peers, direct reports, and managers, referenced here as a component of the Evaluation dimension.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article draws on credible macro-level data points (leadership bench statistics, DDI/EY mentoring research) and reflects genuine practitioner experience with a coherent central thesis. The Four E's framework is accessible and internally consistent. **Limitations:** The article conflates industry observation with vendor promotion, particularly in the extended treatment of BetterUp, where the author discloses an advisory role — a direct conflict of interest not adequately contextualised. Several statistics are presented without precise source attribution (e.g., the 14% bench strength figure, the two-thirds 'new leadership model' statistic). The transition from analytical commentary to vendor catalogue undermines the credibility of the second half. The HPE organisational restructuring example (managerial levels reduced from 62 to 15) is asserted without citation. The article does not engage with contrary evidence or alternative interpretations of the leadership development crisis. Classification as analysis is partially warranted, but the vendor profiling sections function closer to sponsored content.

Organizational Practice

The article describes organisations reducing managerial hierarchy (citing HPE's reduction from 62 to approximately 15 managerial levels), promoting leaders before full readiness and supporting on-the-job learning, deploying VR-based simulations for soft skills development, integrating real-time employee survey data into manager coaching dashboards, and adopting network-based coaching platforms that match leaders to external coaches at scale.

Strategic Implications

The article reflects a broader industry movement away from cohort-based, multi-year leadership programmes toward continuous, technology-enabled development embedded in daily work. The profiling of 'action platforms' that combine goal-setting, feedback, and micro-learning signals a convergence between performance management systems and leadership development infrastructure. The emphasis on coaching scalability — particularly AI-matched coaching networks — points toward democratisation of development access beyond senior leadership tiers. The framing of leadership as a craft learned through doing rather than a qualification earned through programmes has implications for how organisations structure promotion criteria and readiness assessments.

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