Closing the Leadership Skills Gap – Where do you Start?

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It is clear from the many articles I have read and conversations held with people in leadership roles that leaders have been tested over the last 2 years in ways they had never imagined. Much has been written about the need for organizations to build capacity in their leaders and other employees. The debate is around what those capabilities should or need to be – and where to start.

I do think that debate over what are the most important skills or capacities to develop in everyone working at the organization is a good one. I suspect that there will be some set of common capabilities that will be settled upon once the dust settles and the reviews and research of what happened during the pandemic are completed. My concern, however, is that we can't wait for this to happen. The stakes and challenges are too high right now – in this moment.

I'll give you an example I read recently from a survey that McKinsey completed prior to the pandemic. Matthew Smith, McKinsey's chief learning officer, presented this startling information:

> *"We (McKinsey) find that 90 percent of companies believe they're going to have some sort of meaningful skills gap over the coming years. But only 16 percent believe that they're fully prepared to meet those skills gaps."*

If McKinsey found this to be true before the pandemic, how much more important is it now to start making progress on closing these gaps – and include some of the new capabilities and capacity that the pandemic has highlighted as critically important to succeed in this volatile and dynamic environment.

It starts with YOU!

From my career as a professional who has helped train and develop organizational leaders, I would say – it starts with you! You have to begin to develop yourself first. Then, and I believe this is one of the most important responsibilities of someone in a leadership position, you have to train and develop the people who work for you.
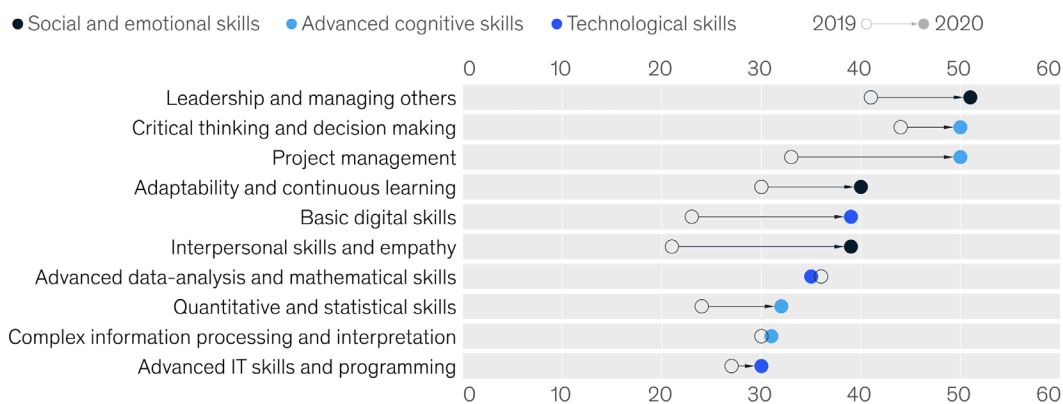
The first step is to make sure that everyone knows that learning is important. Kouzes and Posner, in their classic book *The Leadership Challenge* identified five key categories they found in successful leaders. The one of most importance to this article is Modeling the Way. The first of two activities they include in this key component of leadership is "Set the Example." How can you tell your employees that learning is important if you aren't willing to learn yourself?

Focus on Leadership!

In the July 2021 McKinsey Quarterly article "[Three keys to building a more skilled postpandemic workforce](#)," this crucial need for companies to develop their employees continues to be emphasized. In their research, the authors found "Fifty-eight percent of respondents to our recent global survey said that closing skills gaps has become a higher priority since the pandemic began, and 69 percent said their companies engage in more skill building than they did before the crisis."

Knowing where to focus this investment of time and dollars is necessary if companies want to ensure that efforts to close these critical skills gaps have the fastest and largest impact. Maybe surprisingly, the authors found that it is not technical skills that pose the greatest opportunity. In fact, they found the following: "Intriguingly, the skills companies prioritize most are leadership and managing others, critical thinking and decision making, and project management (Exhibit 1)."

Skills that companies have prioritized to address through reskilling,[1] % of respondents

● Social and emotional skills   ● Advanced cognitive skills   ● Technological skills   2019 ○——● 2020

	0	10	20	30	40	50	60
Leadership and managing others							
Critical thinking and decision making							
Project management							
Adaptability and continuous learning							
Basic digital skills							
Interpersonal skills and empathy							
Advanced data-analysis and mathematical skills							
Quantitative and statistical skills							
Complex information processing and interpretation							
Advanced IT skills and programming							

[1]Out of 25 skills that were offered as answer choices; n = 700.

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This information provides a roadmap for organizations on where to prioritize investments in developing their employees. Focusing on these areas of highest impact, while not neglecting basic technical training, is the best way to start closing the gap that exists between a leader's current and needed capability to lead.

The quickest way for organizations to efficiently provide their leaders with needed professional development opportunities is by working with existing providers to address their top leadership priorities. Many organizations don't have the time or expertise to design and build solutions. Taking steps now avoids the risks associated with allowing the leadership skills gap to continue. Additionally, organizations can leverage readily available resources of qualified providers, particularly benefitting from their broad and deep expertise.

It is clear that leaders and organizations are faced with immense challenges and opportunities. Those individuals and organizations that will succeed are the ones that are prepared (or are preparing) to meet and overcome the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities by closing the leadership skills gap. In my

mind, there is a short list of thing all leaders can do to help accomplish this:

1. Develop yourself as a leader
2. Create a learning culture in your department/division/unit and across your organization
3. Invest in the development of the people who work for you
4. Take advantage of key internal learning opportunities focused around organizational processes, technology, etc.
5. Leverage outside experts/programs/resources to develop the leadership skills and capabilities to succeed in this volatile and complex environment (like Inspirational Leadership at Kylemore)
6. Take the time to step away to learn

All of these will help you as a leader establish a culture of learning to address this critical skills gap. The results will be to significantly impact your and your organization's ability to respond and succeed. What leader doesn't want to be involved in this? And remember, it all starts with you!

Paul Slaggert is the retired Director of the Stayer Center for Executive Education at Notre Dame. He was instrumental in bringing Inspirational Leadership at Kylemore (ILK) to Ireland and continues to assist in the design and delivery of this unique leadership programme. The ILK experience combines all of the items presented in Paul's list above and is held at the best retreat and reflective location for executive programs that he has experienced at the famed Kylemore Abbey.