

Designing for Behavior Change: A Cohort-Based Leadership Development Framework

A case study in program redesign and impact measurement

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The Context

Community leadership programs face a common design trap. They bring together motivated, civic-minded people, expose them to interesting speakers and ideas, create genuine camaraderie – and then measure success by whether participants showed up and enjoyed themselves. Kirkpatrick Level 1: reaction. Did you like it? Good. See you next year.

For two years, I was embedded in exactly this kind of program – facilitating sessions, supporting participants, managing logistics, and observing what was and wasn't creating lasting impact. That sustained involvement gave me something more valuable than an outside consultant's assessment: direct, longitudinal knowledge of where the design was working and where it was leaving real behavior change on the table.

When I took responsibility for the program's third year, I had both the standing and the professional obligation to do something about it.

The Diagnosis

The program had genuine strengths. Participants were engaged. The community connections formed during the cohort experience were real. Facilitators brought authentic expertise. But the design had three significant gaps:

First, sessions operated as independent events rather than a connected learning journey. Participants experienced interesting content but lacked scaffolding to build competencies progressively over time.

Second, there was no intentional transfer infrastructure – nothing that systematically connected what participants learned in sessions to how they led at work or in their communities.

Third, evaluation stopped at satisfaction. Without measurement of actual behavior change, there was no way to know whether the program was developing leaders or simply providing an enjoyable nine months of professional networking.

The Design Response

The Year 3 redesign was built around a single organizing question: what has to be true about how this program is designed for participants to lead differently when it's over?

The answer produced a three-phase scaffolded architecture:

Phase 1: Personal Leadership Foundation (September–November) addressed the inner work that all effective leadership requires – self-awareness, emotional intelligence, personal values-based vision, and navigating uncertainty. You cannot develop others until you understand yourself. This phase built that foundation deliberately before asking participants to apply it outward.

Phase 2: Workplace Leadership Excellence (December–February) moved from internal development to interpersonal and organizational application – influence, trust-building, collaborative leadership, and communication across difference. Competencies developed in Phase 1 became tools applied in Phase 2.

Phase 3: Community Leadership Impact (March–May) extended that application to the broader systems participants operate within – reframing assumptions, strategic storytelling, and legacy commitment. By this phase, participants had the internal foundation and interpersonal skills to think about systemic impact rather than individual performance.

SCAFFOLDED FOR BEHAVIOR CHANGE
A THREE-PHASE LEADERSHIP
DEVELOPMENT ARCHITECTURE

PHASE 1: PERSONAL LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION

SESSION 1 / Self-awareness & emotional intelligence

SESSION 2 / Values-based vision & goal setting

SESSION 3 / Resilience & navigating uncertainty

PHASE 2: WORKPLACE LEADERSHIP EXCELLENCE

SESSION 4 / Influence & building relationships

SESSION 5 / Communication & conflict

SESSION 6 / Building trust & collaboration

PHASE 3: COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP IMPACT

SESSION 7 / Reframing assumptions & group narratives

SESSION 8 / Storytelling for creating change

SESSION 9 / Leadership legacy & community commitment

Each session was designed not as a standalone event but as a deliberate step in a progression. Prior session content was explicitly connected to current content. Application challenges between sessions created accountability for transfer.

Critically, real community scenarios from the program's regional context grounded every competency in the actual leadership challenges participants faced – not generic case studies imported from somewhere else.

The Measurement Infrastructure

Kirkpatrick Level 3 evaluation – measuring actual behavior change in workplace and community contexts – requires intentional design from the start, not post-program survey scrambling. The Year 3 program built measurement in from the beginning through quarterly impact assessments that documented how participants were applying leadership competencies outside of sessions.

This produced something the program had never had: evidence. Not just participant satisfaction scores, but observable performance improvements documented over time.

KIRKPATRICK'S FOUR LEVELS OF LEARNING EVALUATION	COHORT 1	COHORT 2	COHORT 3
LEVEL 1: REACTION The degree to which participants find the training favorable, engaging, and relevant to their jobs	✓	✓	✓
LEVEL 2: LEARNING The degree to which participants acquire the intended knowledge, skills, attitude, confidence, and commitment based on their participation in the training			✓
LEVEL 3: BEHAVIOR The degree to which participants apply what they learned during training when they are back on the job			✓
LEVEL 4: RESULTS The degree to which targeted outcomes occur as a result of the training program			

The Results

Participants in the redesigned program demonstrated measurable behavior change in workplace and community leadership contexts, documented through systematic quarterly assessment. Engagement ratings remained consistent with prior cohorts (4-5 out of 5) while adding the outcome layer that had previously been absent.

The quarterly assessments captured what satisfaction scores never could – evidence of application. One participant replaced sporadic team gatherings with structured weekly check-ins within 30 days of the influence and relationship-building session. Another initiated a difficult conversation with a struggling staff member within 30 days of the communication and conflict session – drawing not just on that session's content but on the emotional intelligence and values work from Phase 1, exactly the kind of competency integration scaffolded design is built to produce. A third participant felt sufficiently empowered to proactively initiate regular one-on-ones with their own supervisor – sharing ideas and seeking feedback in ways they hadn't before.

These aren't dramatic organizational transformations. They're precisely what Kirkpatrick Level 3 looks like in practice: people leading differently because of how the program was designed, not just because they attended it.

The Transferable Framework

The design principles that drove this redesign aren't specific to community leadership programs. They apply wherever organizations invest in developing people:

Scaffolding matters. Competencies build on each other. Design should reflect that.

Transfer requires intentional architecture. What happens between sessions is as important as what happens in them.

Measurement must be built in, not bolted on. If you can't define what behavior change looks like before the program starts, you won't be able to demonstrate it when it ends.

Context is not decoration. Learning that connects to participants' actual challenges produces application. Generic content produces note-taking.

From Community to Corporate: Why This Framework Travels

The methodology described in this case study was developed and validated in a community leadership context – which is precisely what makes it transferable. Community programs operate without the organizational levers corporate L&D practitioners take for granted: no mandatory attendance, no performance management backstop, no dedicated learning budget, no LMS to track completion. When behavior change happens in that environment, it happens because the design earned it.

That same framework applies directly to the challenges corporate and organizational L&D practitioners face every day. Manager development programs that produce engaged participants but no change in how managers actually lead their teams. Onboarding cohorts that deliver information efficiently but fail to build the judgment and relationships new employees need to perform. High-potential leadership pipelines that identify the right people but don't develop the specific competencies the organization needs them to demonstrate.

In each of these contexts, the diagnostic questions are identical to the ones that drove this redesign: Are sessions building on each other or operating in isolation? Is there intentional infrastructure connecting learning to application? Is measurement designed in from the start, or are we hoping satisfaction scores tell us something meaningful about impact?

The answers – and the design responses – travel across contexts because the underlying challenge is the same. Organizations don't need people who attended a program. They need people who lead differently because of it.

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