

Accelerating executive leadership development: 3 ways to stretch yourself

In leadership development, stretch experiences are key to breakthrough growth and development.

Life is all about growth—especially when we are stretched through experiences. Whether we're learning how to walk or training to be a competitive athlete, these formative moments push us beyond our current state. We often take them for granted, but if we step back, we can point to the stretch experiences that helped us grow most in life and work. The seminal work of the Center for Creative Leadership (www.ccl.org) provides quantifiable evidence that leaders develop most through stretch experiences.

Key learnings from Deloitte's award-winning leadership development programs

In Deloitte's signature programs, high-potential leaders undergo three critical steps to accelerate their leadership growth through stretch assignments:

1. Taking time to reflect on leadership experiences to date.

Leadership development takes intention and practice to master. Deloitte's high-potential leadership development programs provide participants with an executive coach who can help them stop and think about what they're doing, why they're doing it, and what they're learning in this **leadership insight phase** of breakthrough growth.

Participants reflect on the leader they are today, the pivotal experiences that have shaped them, where they might feel "stuck," and what experiences might help them break through to the next level of leadership. Executive coaches also guide participants to understand their leadership personality features and how these can impact their leadership style.

Lauren Bonn, partner, Deloitte LLP, and a graduate of Deloitte's NextGen Experience, the organization's leadership development program for mid-career partners, says, "My coach helped me unpack the aspects of the roles I embraced, versus those I did not. He helped me evaluate my strengths and weaknesses, and craft my message so I could better define, communicate, promote, and embrace my leadership skills. Now I own these skills every time I walk into a room."

2. Identifying the best breakthrough experiences for the next level of leadership growth.

Our coaches also help participants leverage their current style, candidly assess their limitations and development areas, set stretch goals, and help identify the right breakthrough experience that aligns with their needs. This is the **targeting experience phase** of breakthrough growth.

Sometimes organizational factors can get in the way. The right assignments or roles may not be available, or the timing might not be right for a move. Senior leadership might need to step in and make an existing role

available or create a new role that fulfills a business need and provides a leader with that breakthrough opportunity.

Sometimes participants get stuck in what we call their self-imposed box. One example is the “great performer” box: “I’m really good at what I do, my brand is based on what I do, and I don’t want to risk anything that could damage my brand.” Another is the “one-way ticket” box: “If I leave my current situation and the new one doesn’t work out, there’s no return trip.”

It’s not uncommon for successful people to feel it’s easier to keep doing what they do well rather than take risks. The challenge is to say, “I want to be more than I am today, which will require taking risks in new situations that stretch me. This may challenge some people. But the greater good will be served by engaging in experiences that are different from what I do now and what I deliver now.” This takes courage, an important skill serving leadership growth.

Our coaches work with participants to define and understand their current personal brand, how others count on them, and why they might be stuck in “the box.” They also explore the risks of asking for help in finding a new experience and then stepping in to execute it. Through candid discussions, participants discover that there are no breakthrough experiences without some level of risk—but that the risk can be less daunting and the reward much greater than they imagined.

Says Kirsten Rhodes, managing principal, Deloitte LLP, another graduate of Deloitte’s NextGen Experience, “I took a bit of a leap to become managing principal of Deloitte’s San Francisco marketplace because my experiences fell outside the traditional background for this role. Had I focused on a few potential gaps that existed in my mind, I might have talked myself out of putting my hat in the ring. But in discussing the opportunity with my coach and other key members of my network, I realized that I had the foundation and the qualities that made me right for this role.”

3. Fully stepping into the new experience by practicing skills that will build other leadership muscles and gain the confidence necessary to lead differently and successfully.

Our executive coaches continue to work with participants to help them stay on track as they integrate new skills. The ability to consider current and new ways of addressing situations is critical to maximizing stretch experiences. This is the **making it real** phase of breakthrough growth.

It’s easy to fall back into behaviors that may have served you well in the past. Some of these will likely be useful, but stretch experiences can road-test new behaviors and styles and expand your leadership toolkit.

An executive coach helps you stay true to your effort while encouraging you to be courageous in changing your style, all while providing a sounding board for exploring alternate paths to handling important leadership moments.

Jay Cochran, principal, Deloitte & Touche LLP, and an alum of Deloitte’s NextGen Experience, adds that “Throughout my time in NextGen, my coach helped me see how some of my best leadership practices would get sidelined when I was under stress.

“Each time we met, my coach would ask me for an update on working in a high-stress situation, how I handled it, and whether I had heeded her counsel. She stressed that leadership muscles aren’t built overnight, but rather that new ways of thinking can become good habits over time.”

Bonn added, “The experiences that most influenced me were having worked for very strong personalities with very different styles, but who were wonderful mentors and bosses. Ironically, these were not always my favorite

roles. But upon reflection, I can acknowledge how much I learned and grew in these assignments that I didn't enjoy. Probably more than the roles I thought I liked better!"

Balancing business requirements with individual needs is an ongoing challenge for any organization. But by asking insightful questions, we often find the obstacle is more in a leader's mind than in any organizational reality. And by helping leaders reflect on what they're learning, we increase the probability that they get the most out of the breakthrough experience that they worked so hard to get.