

Case Study: Leaders-as-People Development Design (OCBC)

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Initiatives: [Leader and Manager Effectiveness](#)

Conventional classroom-based leadership development programs often fail to build networks that can facilitate postprogram learning application and collaboration. Learn how L&D leaders at OCBC structured development programs to strengthen bonds between OCBC leaders to improve learning application.



- Company name: Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation Limited (OCBC)
- Industry: Banking and Finance
- Headquarters location: Singapore
- Assets: S\$581.4B (2023)
- Employees: 33,000

Case Overview

Problem

- Informal networks between leaders are not strong enough to overcome learning application challenges.
- Leaders do not feel comfortable asking peers for help in overcoming shared challenges.

Actions

- Embed interspersed relationship-building events throughout the program, creating periods where leaders have time to apply what they learned to their day-to-day work and discuss challenges, assumptions or mistakes they face in application.
- Create positive moments throughout the program touchpoints that cement the shared memorable experiences to connect leaders as people, not just as leaders.

Results

- Leaders who participated in leadership development programs at OCBC reported that they felt a significant expansion of their peer networks and felt deeper engagement with colleagues across the business.

Problem

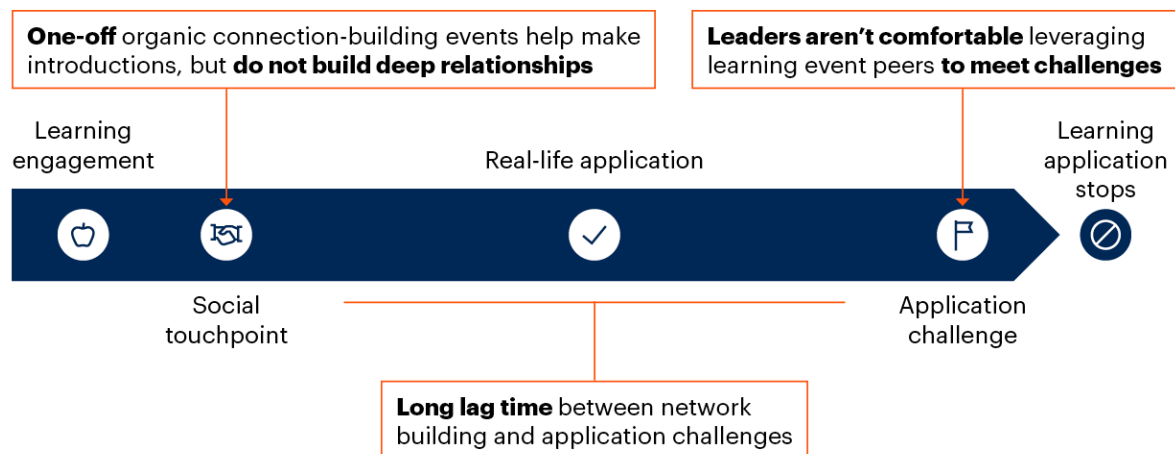
OCBC's learning & transformation (L&T)* team wanted to strengthen bonds between leaders within the organization to improve learning application, collaboration and knowledge sharing. In doing so, they realized that the current set of informal networks across the organization could not sufficiently create an environment where leaders feel comfortable asking questions, sharing approaches and speaking about mistakes with their peers (see Figure 1).

**OCBC's learning & development team has been renamed to "learning & transformation" to reflect the transformational nature of learning.*

Figure 1: Typical Program Design Limitations

Typical Program Design Limitations

Illustrative



Source: Gartner
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Gartner

Critical Components

OCBC's L&T team created a leadership development approach that embeds repeated connection touchpoints into the program design. They have found that this approach creates the psychological safety needed for leaders to build trust with one another, ultimately forming a peer network that they can leverage to overcome learning application challenges. The two critical components of OCBC's leaders-as-people development design are:

- **Repeat embedded peer connections to support learning** — Embed interspersed relationship-building events throughout the program, creating periods where leaders have time to apply what they learned to their day-to-day work and discuss challenges, assumptions or mistakes they face in application.
- **Shared interest experience design** — Create positive moments throughout the program touchpoints that cement the shared memorable experiences to connect leaders as people, not just as leaders.

Repeat Embedded Peer Connections to Support Learning

Embed interspersed relationship-building events throughout the program, creating periods where leaders have time to apply what they learned to their day-to-day work and discuss challenges, assumptions or mistakes they face in application.

In conventional leadership development programs, networking consists of one-off social events that take place immediately after learning sessions. However, these events' one-off nature prevents them from building lasting peer networks where leaders feel safe reaching out for help in the future when they encounter challenges.

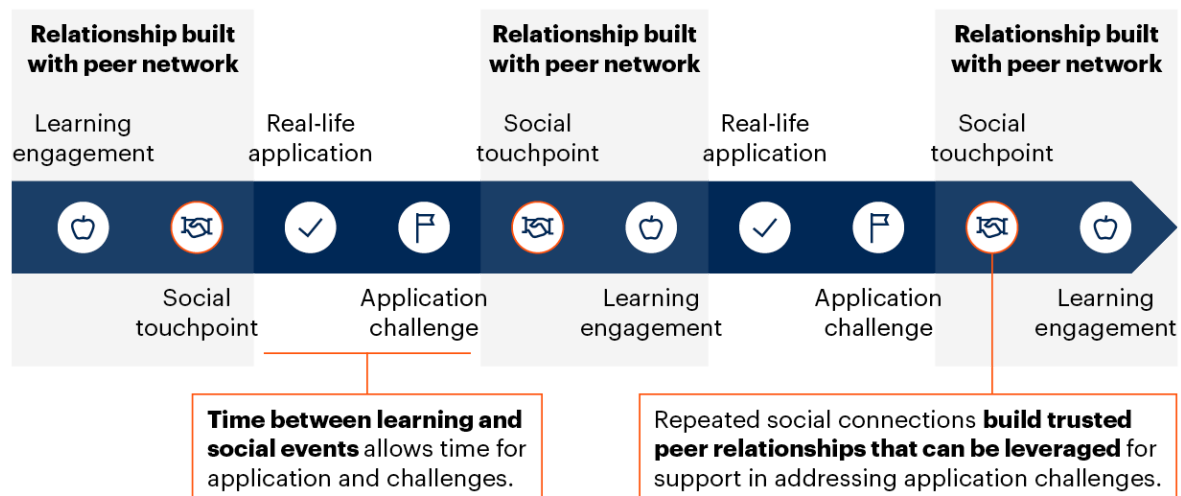
To use networking social events to build peer networks that aid in learning application, OCBC'S L&T team realized that people need time to build a connection that will last. Their leadership programs typically stretch across three months or more, which allows meaningful connections to form over time. Having numerous events that are specifically focused on building connections with others creates multiple touchpoints for people to continually build and strengthen their relationships.

These programs aim to build a psychologically safe peer network for leaders to reach out to when they run into challenges. This requires a shift in event timing throughout the program (see Figure 2). The exact amount of time needed between learning and social engagements is set by the learning outcomes. For example, if the learning event is intense, there may be a longer elapsed time before the next event. This allows for reflection and gives adequate time for the learning to sink in. On average, the L&T team tries to keep to an elapsed time of two-to-four weeks between events.

Figure 2: OCBC's Leadership Development Learning and Social Touchpoint Sequence

OCBC's Leadership Development Learning and Social Touchpoint Sequence

Illustrative



Source: Adapted from OCBC
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Gartner

Leaders can't learn from others if they haven't applied their training to work before a social event. They won't know the challenges that they might face, and their network won't know how they might solve those challenges. OCBC allows leaders to have time for application before bringing them all together again. When they do come back together, they can have more productive conversations about application. Roughly 70% of the agenda is driven by the OCBC leaders themselves to strengthen interpersonal connection and support development. To prime discussions during social touchpoints, L&T shares prompts beforehand that encourage leaders to already be thinking about the challenges they've faced.

Examples of prompts include:

- Short friendly reminders of assignments due for completion and checking-in on learners' progress
- Suggestions on how to successfully apply what is learned
- Sharing news of related events to add to the body of knowledge and trigger short conversational bursts

- Shout-outs and other messages of celebration and validation of participants who successfully apply their learning

Once the community is mature, prompts begin to originate from the leaders themselves in addition to those from the L&T teams.

Shared Interest Experience Design

Create positive moments throughout the program touchpoints that cement the shared memorable experiences to connect leaders as people, not just as leaders.

Leaders are typically expected to organically build relationships with each other through networking events throughout the leadership development program. But, people do not form lasting relationships solely because they're physically near each other – simply being in the same classroom does not mean people will connect with each other.


To help leaders connect with one another, the L&T team at OCBC recognized that people form relationships when they have a shared interest or something to bond over. Through planning social events based around shared personal interests, the team increases the odds that people feel a natural connection and belonging with each other (see Figure 3). This then empowers the learners to continue to communicate with each other long after the leadership program concludes.

Figure 3: OCBC's Shared Interest Experience Design

OCBC's Shared Interest Experience Design

Illustrative

Shared interest experience examples



Source: Adapted from OCBC
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- 1 Create memorable experiences** focused on shared interests.
- 2 Connect** these experiences **to learning**.

Example:
At OCBC's candlelight concert event, attendees interviewed the conductor to learn how to lead a diverse team.



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OCBC isn't using these social events purely to help leaders make friends with other leaders. They connect the experiences to learning. For example, leaders in one program attended a candlelight concert, which is a memorable event that people can use to later reconnect with others who went to the event. Before the concert, leaders participated in a short facilitated discussion with the conductor, which focused on the ways in which the conductor led his diverse team of musicians. This was a means of directly connecting the social experience with leadership lessons.

Results

The leaders-as-people approach to leadership development has allowed OCBC to improve collaboration and empower social networks to have an impact on learning application. By using structured social experiences in their leadership programs, OCBC saw several positive themes in participant feedback:

- Peer perspectives and insights
- Time for reflection
- Fun and people-friendly
- Transformative at an individual level

“Sustainable business growth is increasingly correlated with the ease of collaboration supported by effective social networks across the organization. L&T is in the privileged position of bringing people together through our design of learning experiences. Feedback from our learners confirm that participation in our leadership programs lead to a significant expansion of networks and deeper engagement with colleagues across the organization which help in alignment, innovation and transformation. And that can only be good for business.”

— Yap Aye Wee, Head of Learning & Transformation, OCBC

Recommendations

L&D leaders seeking to use a leaders-as-people development design to improve leader collaboration and empower social networks to impact learning application should:

- Design leadership programs to have built-in time between learning and social events, which allows time for application and challenges to arise.
- Share prompts asking about application challenges with leaders ahead of social touchpoints to prime them for discussions with peers.
- Create social touchpoints with the goal of building personal connections among leaders, then connect those experiences to teachings from the program.

Evidence

We developed this case study based on extensive interviews with Aye Wee Yap, Head of Learning & Transformation, at OCBC.

Recommended by the Author

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

[Seven Hallmarks of Effective Leadership Development](#)

[How to Enable Employee-Led Development for Continuous Learning](#)

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