SMALL GROUP COACHING: HOW TO DO IT

13 rules to plan, execute and manage your own internal small group coaching program.

NANI WILLIAMS / UNSPLASH

FASTLEAD

WE SHARE.
IT'S WHAT WE DO.

We'd love to run your small group coaching program for you, but we understand many organisations are more than capable of doing so internally.

So, how can we help?

By sharing our 13 golden rules for making small group coaching fabulously successful in your organisation.

THE 13 RULES

1. Leverage the strategic opportunity small group coaching offers
2. Approach your design with a different mindset
3. Make tactical decisions about the learning journey early
4. Over communicate the importance of appropriate nomination
5. Make sure project management is a forethought, not an afterthought
6. Be prepared to be totally inflexible about key ground rules
7. Carefully plan pod chemistry
8. Managers make the difference. Involve them everywhere
9. Deploy the 10-25-65 Rule
10. Recruit and accredit internal coaches properly
11. Create a constantly flowing feedback loop. Evaluate and measure
12. Focus and deliver on continuous improvement
13. Plan your exit strategy at the beginning

RULE 1

LEVERAGE THE STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY THAT SMALL GROUP COACHING OFFERS

What are we attempting to achieve by running this leadership development program? How will we measure whether we have achieved it?

These core questions are asked at the genesis of every successful leadership program. Typically, the objectives are described in learning outcomes, leading to better leadership behaviours, leading to better organisational performance.

Increasingly, leadership programs are also used to build a positive culture, and help participants build their internal networks.

DANIELLE MACINNE / UNSPLASH

Small group coaching programs – particularly those delivered virtually – provide the organisational development team with the opportunities to dream even bigger.

For example, because group size is intimate, coaching pods allow participants from different parts of the organisation – divisions and geographies and cultures – to work with and learn from each other in a way they can't do in large groups. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to dismantle barriers that exist in the organisation.

And perhaps the best example is that small group coaching enables leaders to build better relationships with their own leaders, because the episodic nature of the program provides many more opportunities than usual for managers and their reports attending programs to interact around leadership and personal growth planning.

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We leverage these opportunities by asking our clients which problems that exist within the organisation they would like to solve. Together, we can then make tactical decisions about the design of the small group coaching program to address these problems.

We don't change the design of the Fastlead program – we play with the settings (see Tip 3).

RULE 2

APPROACH YOUR DESIGN WITH A DIFFERENT MINDSET

As challenging as this may be, it's important that designers embrace the flexibility and new options that small group coaching as an approach gives you. Most particularly, the one size must fit all constraint of workshop design can be discarded. Thank goodness for that.

While these changes we made don't seem radical now, they were at the time.

There is an opportunity to do things radically differently in small group coaching leadership design, because you no longer need to worry about one size fits all.

Our mantra has been to customise content to the participants, not the organisation. At the front-line, all leaders – whether in blue collar roles, financial services, or health – all need the same basic skills.

This customisation is not achieved by having many curriculums – we have just one. But it is modularised, so participants select different topics that interest them and where they have a high immediate need.

Then the coach customises still further in the actual coaching sessions, by revising (spending not much time) on what they already know, and focusing (spending most time) on the new skills and content they need to master.

EXAMPLE: THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

One client had a group of front-line leaders who had been leading on the front line for three or four years each. But they'd never been on a program, and were proud of the fact that they'd learned to lead in "The School of Hard Knocks".

The client was concerned that they didn't believe they needed front-line leadership training any longer - despite it being clear to the client that they were very command and control style managers, needing development as much as any other front-line leader.

We matched a very experienced coach, one famous for "telling it like it is", one known for high challenge, to this group. It was clear to the participants that we had selected 'a more senior' coach for them.

The coach was able to customise content a great deal. "OK, you know how to do this so let's rush past it, but what about this skill? No, OK, let's focus here."

The participants felt the program was "at their level" and the coach "flexed to our needs". Three leaders who were reticent at the beginning became staunch supporters of the program.

NEW DESIGNS

EVERY POD CAN HAVE DIFFERENT CURRICULUM

Topics could be customised to the issues that the three participants in Pod 261 most want to address. These could be very different from the needs of the participants in Pod 262, who want a different group of topics. You can't easily do this is workshops with 10 to 15 people. You can in coaching pods.

PARTICIPANTS CHOOSE THEIR LEARNING PATH

Participants collectively pick the topics they want to learn. This is a difficult transition for L&D people who are experts in understanding what their participants need – but it's time to let go. Participants will love you, and respect you, for giving them some control over their own learning. We keep telling them to take responsibility for their own learning, but then control what we teach them. Time to think differently.

CUSTOMISE THE COACH TO THE GROUP

You no longer have to choose a facilitator who will mostly appeal to most participants. You can pick a group of participants that you think will very specifically fit that coach, and off you go. These small elements of flexibility in design that small group coaching offers have big impacts on the participants and their engagement and deployment of new leadership skills.

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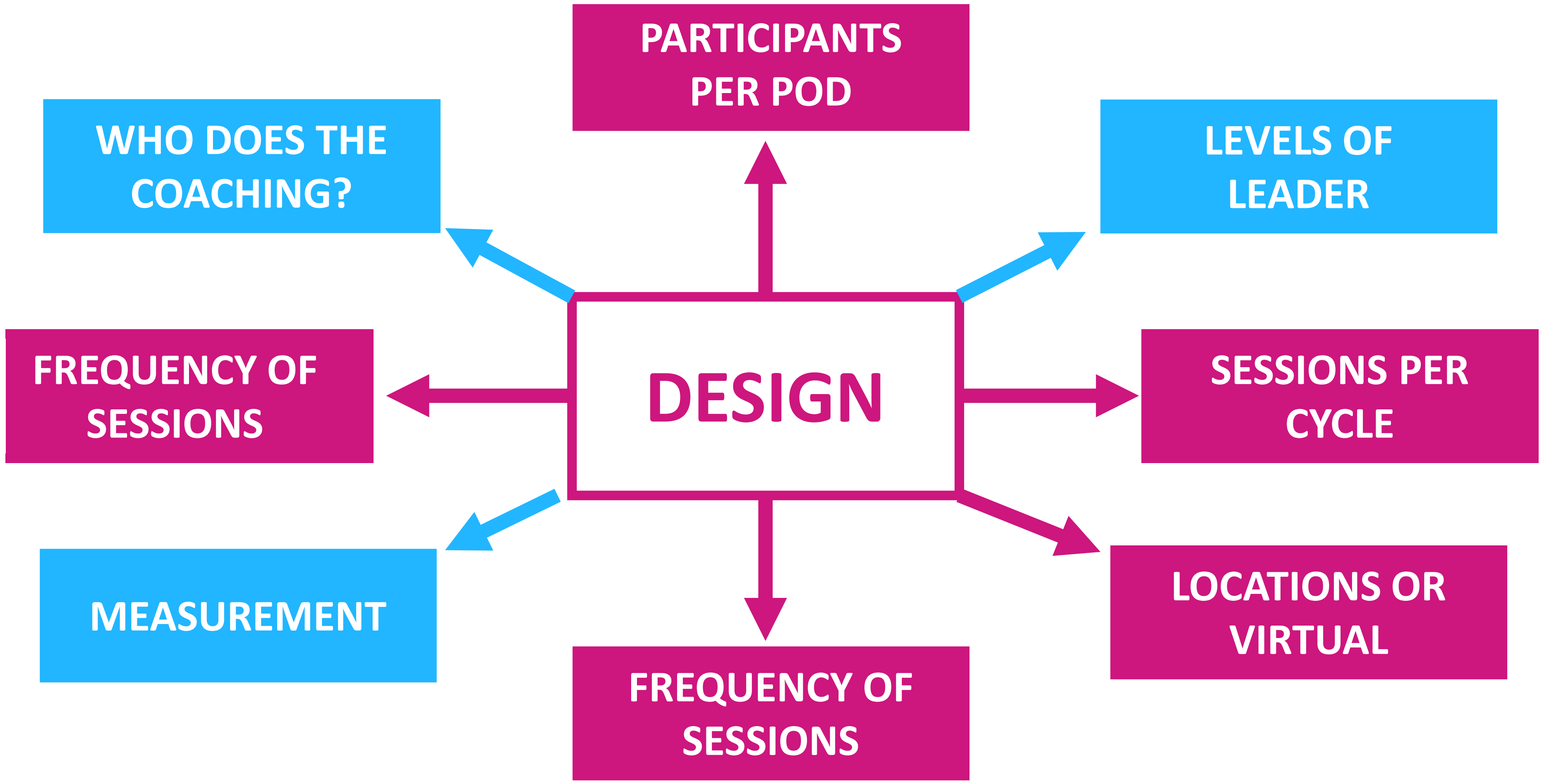
We deploy two assessment tools. The first, the Development Needs Calculator, is a self-report. It available free on our www.fastlead.com.

The second assessment is specifically designed Fastlead 360 (we have one for front-line leaders, one for middle managers, and one for sales leaders). They are available at a reasonably small cost. These surveys are multi-rater, so leaders get feedback from their manager, peers and reports.

The surveys are all designed against the topics we cover on the various Fastlead programs, enabling participants to assess their strengths and development areas, and chose topics accordingly. Not every program includes these assessments in their roll-out.

RULE 3

MAKE TACTICAL DECISIONS ABOUT THE LEARNING JOURNEY EARLY



Newcomers to small group coaching programs quickly appreciate the sheer flexibility of the program design.

Important tactical decisions around set-up must be made early in the design process, but carefully thought about. They have a big impact down the track.

See over for a detailed table that breaks down the parameters of course design.

Several additional tactical decisions are covered in other parts of this document. For example:

NUMBER AND QUALITY OF COACHES (SEE RULE 6)
Are they internal or external? To what extent do they need to be accredited and measured?

HOW OFTEN, WHO, AND WHAT WILL WE MEASURE? (SEE RULE 11)
During the design stage, it is crucial to build feedback loops.

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Our classic Fastlead small group coaching program for front-line leaders has the following settings.

Firstly, three participants per pod. Occasionally, we have four in a pod. Never five.

Secondly, a cycle of six sessions.

Thirdly, frequency is typically monthly, in the same week and same day of that week, each month.

Fourthly, we have a curriculum of 14 topics, and a typical execution is that the L&D team choose three topics, and the participants chose the rest. Finally, location – always is the same place.

TACTICAL DECISION REVIEW

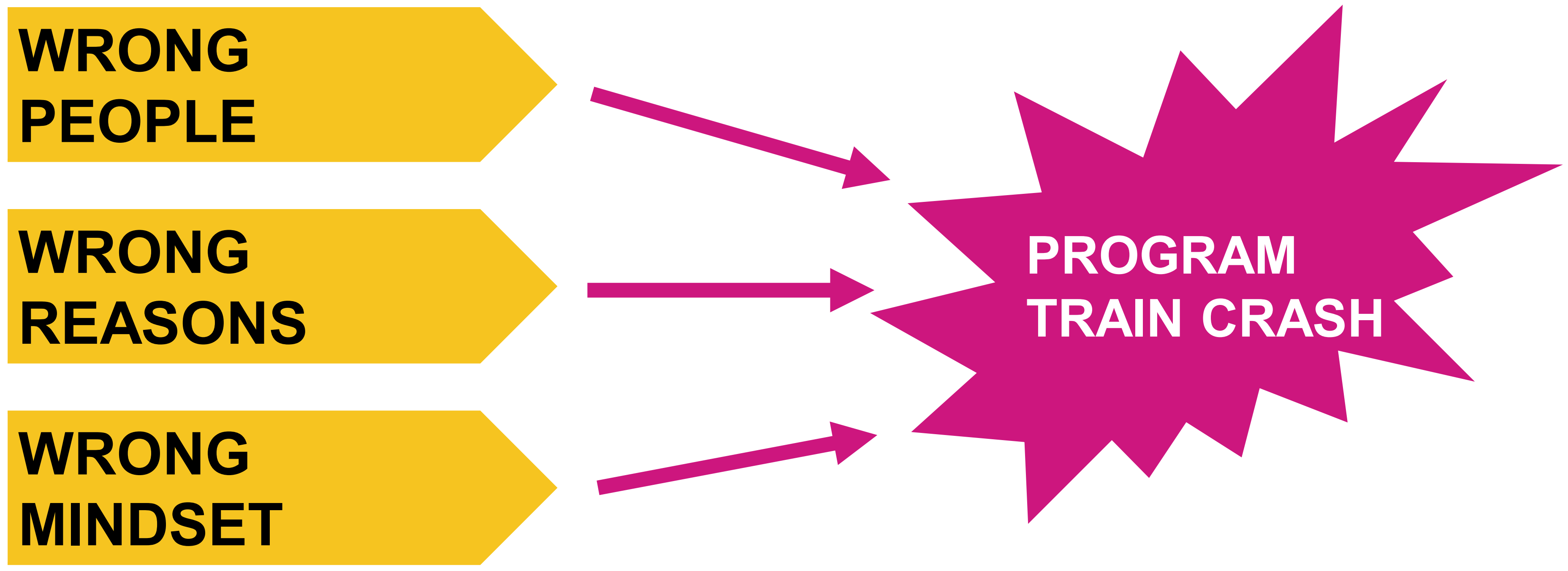
Number of participants per coaching pod Be careful not to go down the “let’s pack lots of PPTs into each coaching pod” road. It’s the road to ruin. Small group coaching works for PPTs because they have time to be heard, and it doesn’t take too much time. Five or more in a pod destroys both of these positives.	Two	Only two PPTs creates a difficult dynamic, and is hard work for the coach. Lack of diversity means fewer rich discussions.
	Three	Three is the magic number for front-line leaders, in our experience. A good dynamic, fast-paced, broad experiences to leverage.
	Four	With keen participants, four can work well; but poor nomination processes might create passengers, which negatively impact the leadership development experience of others.
	Five	Is too many in our experience. Sessions need to run too long for everyone to have an opportunity to get coached individually, and be properly heard.
	Less than six	Pods take time to gel, PPTs time to build trust, and coaches take some time to get to know the PPTs and be able to challenge strongly. Just a few sessions do not allow the pod to ‘gel’.
Number of coaching sessions per cycle We provide our pods the opportunity to ‘extend’ their number of sessions once they complete a first cycle. We like this because it asks the PPTs, if they want it, to ask for an extension. They therefore commit to extra learning.	Six	Is our minimum number of sessions in a cycle, and it seems to work very well. It allows mandating of some topics and PPT choice for others.
	Eight	We’ve used this number of sessions and again. They work well so long as the topics chosen work well - in every session, for every participant.
	More than eight	For first cycle, this is too many. If the participants want more sessions, let them put their hand up (and choose the topics). More than eight feels like the program has no end, and you want it to have an end for review purposes.
Frequency of coaching sessions For our leadership small group coaching sessions, we use monthly cycles, with 6 or 8 sessions per pod. This is true of front-line leaders and middle managers. In our Expertship program, we use eight sessions over a four-month period – more intense. But we don’t deploy anything longer than a month because we’ve found momentum and relationships gets lost.	Weekly	Weekly pods will come round really quickly, and are not ideal if you want the PPTs to go out and practice something, or have key conversations, in between sessions. Having said that, we have never deployed this cadence, so have no experience of it.
	Fortnightly	This frequency is our preference cadence for more content-rich programs, such as Expertship (building enterprise skills of experts). It maintains learning momentum. It suits PPTs who are fast implementors – like technical experts.
	Monthly	This frequency appears to be most popular with our leaders. Particularly front-line – they like having a month to practice new skills, or deploy new systems and techniques, and then report back on successes and failures.
	Longer	Experience has taught us that big gaps between coaching sessions mean the program – and the relationships in the pods – loses momentum. Indeed, if for some reason we need to move a coaching session, we tend to move them earlier rather than later.

TACTICAL DECISION REVIEW (CONT)

Curriculum selection We’ve learned that the PPTs love having the ability to choose some of the topics. It is mentioned in their feedback all the time. And they complain when they are not allowed to. This happens because we provide the workbook of all topics to the PPTs, regardless of which six or eight topics they are undertaking. We do this because logistically it is terribly time consuming to customise workbooks for different pods. It’s simply not worth the effort.	General	All of our small group coaching programs are curriculum-based. That is, they have a series of topics, which include workbooks, pre- and post-work, and associated virtual learning portals with additional learning material. The delivery of the curriculum portion of each session is no more than one quarter – that is, in a 2-hour session, we’d spend a maximum of 30 minutes on curriculum delivery and discussion. The rest is devoted to coaching. In each of our programs there are more topics available to PPTs than sessions in the program, so there are choices to be made as follows:
	L&D selects	This option is where, from our 14 topics available on Fastlead for example, HR select the six sessions they want their pods to undertake. This is what happens automatically of course in FTF leadership workshops. The benefit is consistency of experience. The negative is that the L&D team are saying they know best.
	Participants select	In this instance, the PPTs, using feedback from their managers and any 360 surveys they undertake, decide as a group which topics they would like to cover.
	Hybrid	A combination of the above two approaches. Many clients choose this option. Perhaps three chosen by L&D against observed development needs and discovery from the organisation, and then three chosen by the PPTs.
Location	Virtual	We strongly recommend video-conference rather than just telephone, but sometimes this isn’t possible in rural areas. Although bandwidth has improved dramatically over the past two years.
	Single location	Choose a location where there is a quiet training room that is central or equidistant for the participants to travel. Small amounts of travel time to a venue is not a bad thing: it helps on the way to the session the PPT to clear their mind, and on the way back to work to reflect on the session
	Rotation	This is where the venue rotates between each of the three or four pod members. Our recommendation? Don’t do it to yourselves or the participants. You’ll have people turning up to the wrong venues; it’s complexity you don’t need; and even finding parking in new venues can derail coaching time. We refuse to entertain this apparently democratic setting.

RULE 4

OVER COMMUNICATE THE IMPORTANCE OF APPROPRIATE NOMINATION



When it comes to a leadership program for 15 participants – a typical workshop cohort size – if you accidently accept a nomination from someone who shouldn't be there, or doesn't want to be there, or doesn't understand why they are there - the percentage impact to the group is about 10%.

Yes, we know, one 15th is about 7%. But ask any facilitator, and they'll tell you they spend one tenth of their time and energy managing the toxic impact of disengaged or highly cynical participants. (Which means, by the way, that the rest of the participants get only a little over 6% of the facilitator's attention.)

Make a mistake in small group coaching and the impact is at least 33% in a three-person pod – and probably much more. The whole relationship between participants is impacted. One person not turning up regularly has a worst impact.

This means that the basics around the correct nomination procedure for small group coaching has to be more robust than usual.

Then there is the added complexity of nominating a manager as well – because the way in which effective small group coaching design works is that the managers of the participants are highly involved through the program. Which means they have to be ready to take on their responsibilities as well. We've learned the following processes and elements work best.

BRIEF MANAGERS ON THE PROGRAM FIRST. BE SPECIFIC ABOUT NOMINATION CRITERIA

First amongst these is that the participant wants to be involved in the development program. Secondly, the manager is prepared to accept the responsibilities that go with nominating their direct report. Third amongst these are that the managers understand that – because it is small group coaching – their participant has to attend every session, without fail, and the policy is "use it or lose it" (see 'Rule 6 - 'Be totally prepared to be inflexible').

A DETAILED PARTICIPANT GUIDE, AND A MATCHING DETAILED MANAGER GUIDE

This guide explains the structure of the program, the rules, and contains the coaching contract, outlining the responsibilities both the manager and the participant are signing up to.

CLEAR NOMINATION CRITERIA, WITH AS FEW EXCEPTIONS AS POSSIBLE

If the program is a high-potential program, HFL recommends the nomination should come from the participant, not the manager. The nomination needs approval from the manager and another senior person outside the chain of command.

A RED FLAG SYSTEM IN THE EARLY STAGES

Our coaches are authorised to raise a red flag if they feel that (a) the participant is not engaged or (b) the participant hasn't been properly briefed about why they are on the program. In this way, we can quickly swap out a participant and add in a new one, without disrupting the other participants in the pod too much.

We all know that leadership development programs are only as successful as the commitment of the participants on the program to want to learn, and become better leaders. A really robust nomination process is the first building block to an outstanding successful program – the right participants, for the right reasons, with the right attitude.

RULE 5

MAKE SURE PROJECT MANAGEMENT IS A FORETHOUGHT, NOT AN AFTERTHOUGHT

Among all of its huge advantages when it comes to outstanding results from participants and their managers, small group coaching's one major drawback is logistics.

Instead of one or two major events (like a three-day workshop), small group coaching is by its very nature episodic.

It requires constant attention, meticulous planning, and an ability to be flexible about some things (like topic selection for example, see Rule 2), and completely inflexible about other things (see Rule 4).

A cohort of 15 front-line managers, for example, fit into five 3-person pods. That's 30 coaching sessions to be organised, it's 30 pieces of pre-work, and another 30 post-work emails.

It's 120 emails to sending Manager Toolkits across the program. It's five coaches to be organised, or perhaps fewer if each coaches multiple pods (our recommended approach!).

You can't successfully execute small group coaching unless you have a resource that can dedicate enough time – a learning coordinator – to making it all happen, monitoring and reporting.

However, once you have this resource, and have established clear ground rules, you get into a rhythm, and both participants and managers are surprising well behaved.

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We have dedicated program managers running up to 120 pods at once.

We use an automated project management system to manage typical communications, and then human intervention to solve problems and answer questions.

IZZY R / UNSPLASH

RULE 6

BE PREPARED TO BE TOTALLY INFLEXIBLE ABOUT KEY GROUND RULES

In small group coaching you need to be able to motivate three participants to turn up to many sessions at different times over many months.

Participants electing to miss some sessions because "other urgent things needed doing" destroy the momentum of the learning for the other participants, and also destroy the layer upon layer impact for the participant who doesn't turn up. (See the Six Layers of Learning on our Fastlead website.)

The commitment you seek from participants is the commitment to turn up because of the learning of the other participants, not just their learning.

The settings we are about to suggest run contrary to the mindsets and values of many learning and development professionals we interact. Over generations you have been taught to be as flexible as possible, and to be as nice and accommodating for participants and their managers as you can.

Our advice – that won't work applied uniformly across all of the settings you need to establish with small group coaching. There are times when total inflexibility is the right setting. And believe it or not, participants and their managers will thank you for it (eventually!).

On the next page are examples where we strongly advise inflexiblity.

As counter-intuitive as it might seem, being inflexible works. If the coaching sessions aren't seen as sacrosanct, then they will get moved all over the calendar, momentum and learning will be lost, and the program deemed a failure. Why? Not because you did a poor design, far from it. But because the participants and managers couldn't follow rules, they had agreed to up front. But we all know who will get the blame. Ensuring discipline among participants managers is a thankless task early on, but holding the line will pay big dividends down the line. They'll thank you for it – eventually!

In our early days managing small group coaching programs, we were too nice. Now we have a draconian system. Firstly, there is a big fat fee for anyone requiring the re-arrangement of a session. We tell the participant who wants to move the session how much it is, and who we are going to charge it too. Secondly, if it's a second time we let the L&D team know that this person isn't committed and should be pulled off the program. Thirdly, when asked if our coach could bring the participant up to speed after they have missed a session, we say of course and tell them it will cost them a monstrous fee.

These tactics have a miraculous impact – people turn up, and move other things so they can. We learned early that communicating these draconian settings at the very beginning of the program – not when the situation arises during the program - solves most problems.

FLEXIBLE OR INFLEXIBLE?

ATTENDANCE AT SESSIONS – INFLEXIBLE
Dates and times are set well in advance for all six coaching sessions. Sessions are allowed to be moved only with a months' notice. If you don't turn up, you lose the session. Bad luck. Our rationale: it's two hours a month, and if you can't organise yourself to be available for that time effectively, you shouldn't be on the program.

RESPONDING TO EMAILS AND SURVEYS – INFLEXIBLE
You all signed up for the program, wanting development, so take responsibility for making things happen in the order and timely fashion that they should. This applies as much to managers as participants. (The #1 category for late response to 360-degree surveys in our experience is managers – the people who nominated their participants for the program. That's simply unacceptable.) You will find this setting unenforceable if you send too any emails, or emails that are poorly written, have terrible subject lines, and waffle. Or have the important information buried in the last line. Required actions should be in the first line for each email.

RESPONSIBILITIES – INFLEXIBLE
We make it clear to all participants that their learning is their responsibility. We are simply the facilitators of learning opportunities. If they fail to get great impact from a well designed and proven program, then that's on them, not us.

The advantage of us having run so many pods, for so many clients, is that we can claim this with impunity – we have the data to show that 95 per cent of participants rate the program and its impact very, very highly.

REQUEST FOR CHANGES MADE IN A TIMELY FASHION FOR GOOD REASONS – FLEXIBLE
We obviously don't suggest we are completely inflexible. If sufficient notice is provided, and good reasons, then of course changes can be made.

FLEXIBILITY IN CHANGING TOPICS – FLEXIBLE
In fact, we do this all the time. Participants might choose Conflict Resolution for session 5, and then in session 3 and 4 they realise that a key leadership capability they need to work on is Delegation – a topic they didn't initially chose. Can we swap out CR for D? No problem. In fact, we encourage such flexibility in the system. It means that learning and commitment to the program is elevated. As we discuss later in this paper, people love being listened to and accommodated. We just need to make sure for it's the right reasons (learning) not the wrong reasons (poor organisation, lack of commitment or laziness).

MANAGER PULLING A PARTICIPANT OUT OF A SESSION DUE TO A 'CRISIS' – INFLEXIBLE
Managers are the single most quoted reasons for why participants can't attend sessions. We make sure that managers understand that it is absolutely their prerogative to pull their participants out of session, but we have a policy of use it or lose it. No extra sessions will be organised. The coach won't spend free time. Bad luck. We also make a point of explaining to managers the negative brand impact such decisions make on their leadership brand. Crucially, we do this right at the beginning of the program – we explain our unreason-ableness up-front.

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One of the responsibilities our Program Managers and senior consultants willing take on is talking to out-of-line managers.

As external consultants, we have the ability to talk privately and candidly to managers in a way that internal people and culture professionals cannot. We can with clarity explain the negative impact on their reputations. That we will have to point out that they didn't support their participant as they should have done.

If you are organising a program internally, it's wise to choose a senior person internally who can handle these conversations. When managers of participants behave, learning magic happens!

RULE 7

CAREFULLY PLAN POD 'CHEMISTRY'

We've discussed at length how flexible the small group coaching design can be, and here is a further opportunity to leverage the design: pod 'chemistry'. By which of course we mean how you intentionally and strategically mix and match leaders into pods.

This is, in our experience, worth taking plenty of time over and thinking through, and sometimes means you need to gather more information than usual about the leaders who are about to become participants. There are a range of different pod composition we use, and no doubt smart professionals reading this paper will think of a few more combinations.

CHEMISTRY MATCHES

EXPERIENCE CHEMISTRY

Matching leaders who have similar length of team leadership experience. We've found over time that unbalanced pods – such as having one leader who has 10 years of experience and one leader who has only one year – makes the pod more difficult to manage. It's better if leaders grouped together have about the same experience of leading.

JOB CHEMISTRY

Matching leaders doing the same role – and with the advent of virtual small group coaching with video-conference, in countries like Australia and New Zealand, this might mean being able to affordably develop the sales leaders in Western Australia and Queensland in the same pod; or North and South Island located leaders. These types of pods also help establish best practice in specific leadership roles.

SCOPE OF CONTROL CHEMISTRY

Matching leaders who have similar sized teams or similar types of employees. For example, a leader running a team of 20 being matched with a leader running a team of one is a mismatch will make the pod more different to facilitate.

COLLABORATION CHEMISTRY

Matching leaders from different departments or divisions of the organisation who need to be able to work together (and understand each other) better. Internally we call these 'silo-buster' pods, and find that many organisations get a great deal of benefit from having leaders from different parts of the organisations learn so much about what goes on elsewhere, and perhaps see different perspectives. They can also be used to match internal leaders from different cultures.

NATHAN DUMLAO / UNSPLASH

One of the great benefits of bringing a diverse group of 15 leaders together for a three day leadership workshop face-to-face is the 'network effect' – their ability to socialise and learn about the 'greater organisation', and also be exposed to different points of view and gather a greater understanding of the challenges different parts of the organisation face.

By carefully managing the composition of your pods, you have the opportunity to replicate this impact, perhaps with a less wide network, but with greater intensity of experience and learning.

You can match up a pod because you think its participants will get on with each other, or already know and like each other.

But actually we suggest taking the opposite approach. The purpose is to help leaders learn to deal with differences, embrace diversity of thought and experiences as well as gender and ethnicity, and be much better equipped to deal with all types of people from all sorts of places.

One key opportunity not to be missed: you can have four pods of three participants, and they might all be different forms of composition chemistry.

In small groups, this flexibility is easy.

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We've found we have to gather much more information about the leaders in order to help the client in the matching process, and we usually insist on being actively involved, because then the client can leverage our experience.

We also have found that you have more options in terms of mixing and matching the more you commence a wave of pods together. Five pods, 15 people, provide many more opportunities to elevate the learning experience for participants, than starting two pods with six leaders.

RULE 8

MANAGERS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE - INVOLVE THEM EVERYWHERE

While it is important to engage with the leaders' leaders in any leadership program, there is perhaps no more important level to do this at effectively than with front-line leaders. In many organisations the leaders of front-line leaders have as much need for development of the participants on the program.

Small group coaching allows you to engage managers of participants in a far richer and more relevant way than typical face-to-face large workshops.

BEST PRACTICE MANAGER ENGAGEMENT

PRE-NOMINATION BRIEFING

About the program, the responsibilities of managers who nominate their reports, and the responsibilities of the participants themselves.

POST NOMINATION BRIEFING

What we expect, dates and deadlines, rules of engagement (use it or lose it) and so on.

3-WAY CHECK-INS, EARLY

These are virtual meetings between the participant, their manager, and their pod coach to discuss the contents of the participants' Personal Growth Plans.

Usually occurring after session #1, they allow the manager to meet the coach and vice versa, and the participants to outline what's in their development plans and why. It provides the manager an opportunity to validate, add to, and talk about the support needed to execute these plans.

MANAGER TOOLKITS

These exist in many programs professionals design, but with small group coaching they can be delivered one topic at a time. "Your participants just did a session on change, and here are the models and punchlines they would have been exposed to."

Appropriately shaped and communicated, these help the leaders of participants get up to date, or refresh, or learn for the first time the same content that their reports have been exposed to, therefore giving them confidence to have meaningful conversations with their participants regularly throughout the program.

SURVEYS

Mid-cycle and end-of-cycle surveys always go to managers as well as participants – have you seen a difference, and if so how?

ACCESS TO LEARNING PORTALS

All the program materials and associated content and artifacts collected in one place on an LMS or elsewhere, and managers are given full access to all of these materials.

3-WAY CHECK-OUTS

Again involving participant, manager and coach – the two key questions are: did the Personal Growth Plan get executed, and what should go into the next one? The check-out allows contracting between the manager and participant to continue the professional growth beyond the life of the small group coaching program.

Because the program is episodic, your engagement with the managers can be too. Because the program design allows for 'one topic at a time', you can make communication with managers very specific – and also, 'news they can use'.

All of these interactions are designed to help the manager of participants contribute their advice, enthusiasm, and experience – coming from the same curriculum base – to their participants.

In our experience, often organisations get a double-impact effect – where the participants are learning, but subtly, their managers are too.

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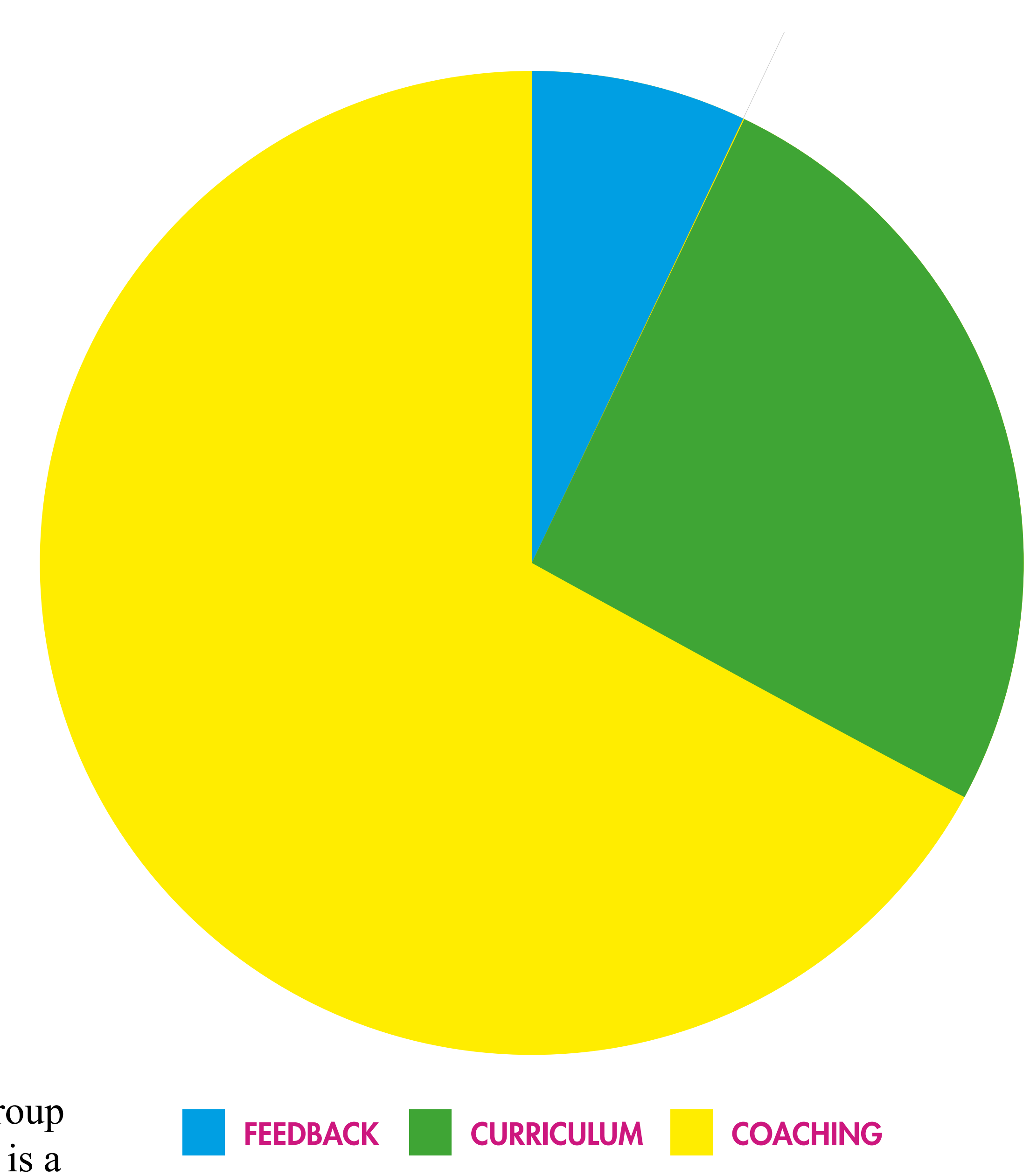
We invest a great deal of time making sure managers attend the briefings at the beginning of the program. Once they understand the rules, and that we will be monitoring them and their participants, we find most managers strongly support both the program and their participants.

In fact, it's almost a certainty that the very people who don't turn up to the briefings are the managers we most need to keep our eyes on.

The rule should be this: if the manager doesn't attend the briefing, the participant will be taken off the program. This achieves a much higher attendance rate among managers than usual, and those who don't attend have to show why they should still be allowed to send their report on the program. You need strong executive sponsorship in order to be able to put such rules in place.

RULE 9

DEPLOY THE 10-25-65 RULE



When designing curriculum-based small group coaching, its important to remember that it is a coaching approach, not 'training'. The right elements in the correct proportion to one another are important.

Theoretical ideas or content delivery have a place in coaching pods, but it's limited. Any Run Sheets you deliver should reflect this balance.

We suggest the 10-25-65 rule.

THE 10-25-65 RULE

10 PER CENT OF SESSION SPENT ON FEEDBACK

We recommend six or seven minutes at the beginning of each pod session for discussion of participant attempts to deploy new leadership skills and approaches since the last session. Successes? Failures? In progress? What did they learn? At the end of the session, for one minute each per participant, we always ask for the leadership punchlines they took out of the session, and what they intend to go back to the workplace and deploy. These are called commitments.

25 PER CENT CONTENT DELIVERY

What are the key leadership concepts we are going to discuss? Which model might we be introducing? Which conceptual discussion about the difficulty of executing one part of the leader's job might we have?

65 PER CENT COACHING THE PARTICIPANTS

Typically, this is the most freeform part of the session, where participants talk about their own challenges on their teams, and share experiences and solutions.

Our fundamental facilitation principle is that "the answer is in the room". Coaches use the I-GRROW model to tease out different realities and different options for action, before inviting the participants to decide what they will do (which might be different in each case).

The opportunity for the participants – even inexperienced or new leaders – to self-learn is immense, if you give them the space to do so.

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We deploy all of our coaching principles to make sure these percentage are roughly correct. We talk during our accreditation about a two-hats concept. The first hat is for facilitation (delivering content) and the second hat is for facilitating via coaching (asking questions, teasing out options and opportunities to lead more effectively).

A typical small group coaching pod session requires the coach to swap hats many times. The best coaches know when the right time to do this is.

RULE 10

RECRUIT AND ACCREDIT INTERNAL COACHES PROPERLY

Surely everyone can deliver a small group coaching leadership pod? Well, no – not in our experience (and we have seven years of experience with more than 40 coaches).

Coaches can't deliver consistently, anyway, without proper standards and processes being agreed. And if you are deploying small group coaching as a leadership program then consistency is very important.

When we first started Fastlead, this was an area we neglected, and it was nearly fatal.

NATHAN DUMLAO / UNSPLASH

We lost several early clients because we weren't inflexible enough around coaching capabilities and standards. We'd urge you not to make the same mistake.

If you are deploying internal coaches – that is HR, OD and L&D professionals – we would argue this is an even more crucial success factor. If you are deploying existing external coaches on your roster, don't make the same mistake that we did – assuming that executive coaches who got excellent one-to-one coaching feedback will naturally make good leadership coaches of pods.

More often than you might expect, they don't. Many of our most successful Fastlead coaches tell us that beyond the accreditation they did with us, it took several pods, and feedback from us, before they became really competent.

WHY IS THIS?

If you are designing a small group coaching leadership program, that is curriculum based, then running the pods is a curious and shifting combination of facilitation and coaching. And since every pod is different, it's not possible to mandate specific timings, or even how much time to spend on which parts of the content.

Part of the success of pods is that the participants leads their own development, setting, to a certain extent, their own agenda. This means the coach needs to manage events and timings carefully, and be prepared to flex, but not too far.

After several mis-steps, we decided on a fully-blown accreditation workshop. As a barrier to entry, we expect potential Fastlead coaches to be very experienced and successful one-to-one coaches in their own right.

Accreditation doesn't cover how to coach. It covers how to modify techniques used in one-to-one coaching, to coaching pod situations. We also spend some time on the curriculum and how we'd like it delivered, but this only forms a small part of the accreditation process.

We have established the Fastlead Eight Principles of Small Group Coaching which are available for download on our Fastlead website.

A COACHING WATCHLIST

TOO MUCH CONTENT.

We've found that L&D professionals who spend much of their time delivering content, rather than coaching, find it difficult to coach pods. They spend far too long in the pod delivering content (which should be maximum of 25 per cent of the time) – in their comfort zone. They don't spend enough time asking questions that they don't know the answer to – the secret of pod coaching and often outside their comfort zone.

TOO MUCH DETAIL.

People & Culture executives who love a very detailed Run Sheet, and like to stick to it, also tend to find coaching small groups very difficult. One of the key principles of small group coaching is that the discussion can very often – and very profitably – go off in tangents. And small group coaches need to be able to handle that.

TRUST – IT'S A VERY BIG ISSUE.

You can't have real and honest conversations in coaching pods with leaders unless they know – without any fear of breach – that what goes on in the room, stays in the room (whether virtual or not).

Internal P&C executives have to establish this trust and rule very early on, and make sure that they don't break it.

For example: A front-line leader complaining about their manager – it stays in the room. The P&C executive may not, under any circumstances, ever leverage that knowledge, because it doesn't belong to them. They never heard it. It belongs to the participants in the room.

This is the largest single reason organisations often decide to utilise external coaches. You must choose coaches who can build this level of trust with the participants.

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All 40 of our Fastlead coaches across Australia and New Zealand have been fully accredited.

We measure the performance of coaches in every pod twice per cycle, and share this information with the coaches, for development and performance management purposes. Several coaches we accredited are no longer deployed after successive average results. We require high performance figures from our coaches on a constant basis to remain on our roster.

Once a year we bring all our coaches together for a coaching conference to practice our skills, provide feedback, and build the coaching community we are so proud of.

RULE 11

CREATE A CONSTANTLY FLOWING FEEDBACK LOOP – EVALUATE AND MEASURE

Because small group coaching leadership programs run over a longer period of time, the ability to course correct is available to program designers. Provided they know that course corrections are needed.

Our advice – measure everything, regularly. Best practice for measurement is described overleaf.

None of this is, of course, rocket science. But it requires advance planning, and it requires the coaches needing to remind participants to complete surveys, and so on.

MEASUREMENT BEST PRACTICE

COACHING CALLS

Every now and then, to discover what themes are coming up, without discussing specifics, and the overall engagement of participants, without mentioning individuals. The right coaches are a rich source of insight.

MID-CYCLE SURVEYS

Of both managers and participants. How is the program being experienced? What improvements would you suggest? Which bits appear to be working best? How are you seeing your report/yourself leading differently, and what impact is this having?

END-OF-PROGRAM SURVEYS.

Asking the same questions above, but a wider range.

ACTIVITY MEASURES.

Those of you with advanced Learning Management Systems can design processes which allow you to track, or see what's be opened and downloaded, and when; it can measure the number of participants submitting materials such as Personal Growth Plans (see our website for our approach to these in an episodic design). It is also possible to track who opened their pre-work and post-work, and who didn't.

You can also track how many managers opened their Manager Guides.

If you have a scoring system (we use Pardot, part of Salesforce) we can add scores to all of these activities to get a scoreboard of who is lost, engaged, and least engaged. And perhaps which participants and managers need attention, or recognition.

ANECDOTAL CALLS

Asking random participants and managers throughout the process how they think the program is landing. This may seem obviousl but often we find it is a rich source of ideas and feedback, and also a rich source of complements.

The feedback process needs to be communicated ahead of time as part of the program design.

Ethically, for example, if we are tracking data about email opens etc we should be clear with people that that is what we will be doing. (This actually builds compliance, as well.)

One final piece of advice here – we always position the gathering of 'performance data' as a way for us to improve the program, and help any participants or managers who are struggling, rather than talking about scoreboards.

But if we say this, we have to be seen to be doing it – that is improve the program and take feedback on board (see next tip).

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Feedback from participants led us to a very important improvement in our process which would otherwise have been unseen. We asked participants in mid-cycle and end-of-cycle a range of questions about their coach.

All of our coaches passed most of these measures with flying colours – except one.

We ask participants whether their coach challenged them in coaching sessions. We noticed that "sometimes" (a score of 3 in a five-number scale) was the highest figure. Conclusion, our coaches were not challenging Fastlead participants enough. We discussed this with coaches and reset their understanding of our expectation. We also ran some sessions at our conference on how to coach diplomatically more often. The last batch of figures show far higher rates of challenge across all coaches.

Message received, understood, and acted upon.

RULE 12

FOCUS AND DELIVER ON CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

There is little point in collecting lots of data unless you are going to do something with it.

If all we do as professionals is gloat about how much participants liked the program, then participants will soon reduce the amount of time and effort they give to deliver feedback and complete surveys for us. Improving the participant experience and learning outcomes must be our agenda.

Responsivity is so appreciated by participants and managers – it tells them 'you listened'.

WHERE TO LEVERAGE FEEDBACK DATA

PROCESS IMPROVEMENT

This relates to logistics and operational communication. Are our messages getting through, actionable, and effective? We have constantly tweaked our communications over the years on suggestions of participants and managers alike. We've also axed some elements because feedback told us they were of little value to the program.

CONTENT IMPROVEMENT

We ask lots of questions about what the most important and helpful parts of the program were, and match this data against what they studied. It tells us which topics are landing, and which could land better. Over the years we have dropped some subjects and added others.

COACH PERFORMANCE

Maybe this is a characteristic of professional coaches, but far from worrying about being monitored, our coaches embrace feedback hugely. Maybe because they so rarely get structured and comparative data. It is possible for our Master Coaches to tell a coach on our roster that their scores are in the lowest quartile. This is data, if you are a professional coach, you need to know, no matter how disappointing it is to hear at first. Coaches are the biggest single point of inspiration and failure in any small group coaching program. Ensuring you have the best people delivering at their best consistently is a key success factor.

PARTICIPANT AND MANAGER ENGAGEMENT

How engaged are the participants, and why? What, if anything, is disengaging them? Elsewhere in this paper we talked about making sure sessions happen regularly. We learnt how negatively impacted the pods were when this wasn't the case through engagement feedback. We learned how much participants want to – and can be trusted to do so sensibly – choose their own topics through feedback.

We learned through feedback from managers that making sure they understood the nomination criteria far better upfront was important. And we are adding briefing videos to complement our documentation because managers tell us they are more likely to watch a three-minute video than read a document.

PROMOTIONAL CAPABILITY

How do we promote the investment in these small group coaching pods to senior executive sponsors. The answer is always data, and if we are showing continuously that the program is delivered and being improved, it makes it much easier for senior executives to fund the initiatives.

In some programs, clients decide to do "before" and "after" 360 surveys to see whether individual participants have progressed.

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We make sure we are constantly communicating to our alumni how their feedback has helped. This isn't just good PR, it's good practice. It generates goodwill and shows that the program is about them and not us as designers. It generates budget and commitment from the wider organisation.

In our Fastlead programs we handle all the metrics and reporting, providing clients access to raw data as well as processed, and we discuss what this data is telling us in program meetings on a continuous basis.

RULE 13

PLAN YOUR EXIT STRATEGY AT ENTRY

This is probably a tip for all leadership development programs, but with small group coaching leadership programs you have a few additional options that are worth planning for.

There are several options available to designers, and some are very simply, low effort – high reward activities, and others take some time and planning.

The message contained in any initiative you undertake to engage the alumni is 'keep learning'.

It also avoids the post-program flop – where the participant has been invested in and engaged for eight months, then …. nothing.

This is crucially important. It can feel to some participants that they have 'learned all they can learn', and they start looking to learn elsewhere. You really don't want your recently invested in leaders walking out in large numbers – or any numbers! – out of the door.

Maintaining engagement and learning opportunities are not just nice to haves – they're must haves.

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We provide the full workbook with the content of all 14 content sessions to every participant, regardless that they are only completing a six or eight topic cycle. There's two reasons for this.

First, it's logistically easier, and allows for topics changes to be accommodated easily (they already have the session!). The second reason is that we want to encourage further study – either by the pod having sessions and discussing topics themselves (without their paid coach), or by purchasing session extensions.

AVOID THE SLUMP WITH...

LEARNING PORTAL UPDATES

Most organisations will be regularly updating their learning portals or LMS with new material. Remember to add quarterly newsletters to your alumni so they can review new material, and continue to build on learning. This is easy to do.

RE-PLANNING PERSONAL GROWTH PLANS

We use the check-outs with managers and participants to ensure a new plan gets shaped, and then executed – but by the participant and manager rather than involving us. You want the learning to continue. This is built into the design, but some check-in six months later is easy to organise as a reminder that work is supposed to be being done.

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

Create new content specifically to engage the alumni. WE undertake monthly leadership challenges, asking our alumni to solve a leadership challenge, and then providing feedback on all of their answers. This is higher maintenance, but feedback we get is very positive.

WEBINARS

Refreshers on topics they undertook, or on topics they didn't get to. If you have an accredited coaching network this is easy to arrange, good for their development, and also a mechanism to check out the quality of coaches' insights.

BRUNO CERVERA / UNSPLASH

WHO ARE WE?

ABOUT HFL & FASTLEAD

There are perhaps one hundred or so tips and tricks explained in this document.

Within HFL's Fastlead small group coaching specialist division, we are indebted to the many participants, their managers, and visionary clients for eight years of continuous feedback.

Their ideas and observations have enabled us over the years to fine tune our small group coaching expertise, and we now boast four small group coaching executions which we are very proud of:

FASTLEAD
For front-line leaders

FASTLEAD PLUS
For mid-level leaders, or middle management

FASTLEAD SALES
For front-line leaders of sales teams

FASTLEAD.COM/WELCOME

MASTERING EXPERTSHIP
For individual high-value technical contributors. This is an Expertship program, not a leadership program.

This program is offered by Expertunity, a subsidiary of HFL Leadership.

EXPERTUNITY.GLOBAL

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CAN WE HELP YOU?

In the spirit of the feedback given to us, we are happy to pass this knowledge on to our industry in the hope we can elevate leadership development in every organisation and help HFL fulfil its purpose – that every employee might be led by a great leader.

FREE "SHOW AND TELL"
Our Fastlead team offer all organisations the opportunity to explore in detail how we deliver Fastlead, whether or not you have any intention to purchase. This service is provided free.

DESIGN CONSULTATION
Longer-term consulting assignments to help you design internal programs is also available. Normal consulting rates apply for this service.

FASTLEAD
Crucially, we also run what we believe is the world's best small group coaching accreditation program, and two day deep-dive into the intricacies of small group coaching, run by very experienced small group coaching coaches.

Such programs can be delivered internally to HR teams who intend to coach small group pods. Prices upon application. This accreditation can be delivered virtually.

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