



# 10 Ways To Level Up Your Leadership

BY REBECCA HOUGHTON 

The biggest space that leadership programs are failing is middle management. Far from the laughed-about middle manager of last decade, those that can lead from the middle – the B-Suite – are fast becoming invaluable. They turn strategy into reality and act as an essential translator between the C-Suite and a largely millennial workforce.

Imagine managing through the return-to-office debate without the support of the B-Suite. It's a role that neither a front-line leader nor a C-Suite leader can play. We need the B-Suite more than we ever have, and we will continue to do so for as long as business remains fast-paced and disrupted. But there is a problem.

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The B-Suite have not had a great deal of successful investment recently. They're experienced managers already but not senior enough for executive-level investment, too senior for generic training, and so large a cohort that they're expensive. So they have often been left to their own devices and we are just discovering that they need much more support to take on the responsibility of leading from the middle.

Without that support, the B-Suite is experiencing burnout at far higher rates than any other cohort because they are at the epicenter of so many conflicting pressure points.

The result is a widening gap between the C-Suite and the B-Suite that has become HR's problem to solve, and here are ten ways to do that:

**1. Invest in your B-Suite.** Succession planning has a poor success rate globally and the gap between B-Suite and C-Suite is widening. Companies increasingly hire leaders from outside rather than promote from within, paying 13%-15% more for new hires who take longer to perform in-role and are more likely to leave than someone who was promoted internally.

**2. Refocus your development objectives.** Leadership training budgets are already straining the coffers, and the B-Suite is huge. The B-Suite has already been taught the tools they need for success, but they are not applying consistently and broadly to new scenarios. Rather than continue to source

and provide new knowledge or new tools, turn your attention to application of knowledge, forming long-term, sustainable habits instead. We don't need more models for leadership – we need to apply the ones we already have.

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**3. Review your mode of delivery.** B-Suite leaders want to learn from experienced peers and external experts, what they get is internal training and internal mentoring. According to DDI's Leadership Forecast, the number one preference for high potential B-Suite leaders is external mentoring. Yet that doesn't even feature in the top five investments by most organisations. This disconnect is wasting B-Suite time and L&D money.

**4. Simplify competency for 21st Century Leaders.** Focus on a smaller number of things that make the biggest difference. Our B-Suite Leaders need to do three things really well: control the pace of work, use the space to think strategically, and make the case. This is overwhelmingly supported by Deloitte, the DDI Global Leadership Forecast, McKinsey, and Bersin. Keep it simple.

**5. Rebalance your leadership program spend.** An earlier article by Training & Development magazine shows that 10% of all training spend globally is dedicated to the C-Suite, with new manager and diversity leadership taking up the bulk of the remaining 45%. That's a disproportionate lack of investment in the B-Suite.

**6. Help them to stop undermining themselves.** Only 50% of leaders feel confident to lead today, and for many B-Suite leaders, inner confidence is their greatest and most private battle and a major contributor to a leaders' resilience.

**7. Teach them to think.** Most B-Suite leaders fill their rare spare time with more work because their DNA is efficiency rather than effectiveness. Most of them haven't been faced with the complexity, frequency, and changeability of decision making that they are faced with today. They need to be able to think more strategically, but most of them have never been trained to do so.

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**8. Shift how they view execution.** Many B-Suite leaders are struggling to meet the new levels of complexity and ambiguity with old methods of management. Most are still trying to manage complexity with rigidity; introducing more structure, processes or role clarity. What they really need are tactics to combat the chaos – enabling them to tackle complexity with flexibility instead.

**9. Teach them to manage up.** They need it and so does the C-Suite. There's a lot of training out there about how to be a great manager and hardly any about how to be a great direct report. Yet both sides of the equation are critical for the relationship (in fact, the whole system) to work. On top of this, most B-Suite Leaders view managing as sucking up and are naturally deterred from consciously practicing it.

**10. Empower them to have a personal brand.** At the C-Suite reputation is an asset. There are plenty of CEOs that are a household name, yet most corporates actively dissuade B-Suite leaders from having an independent voice.

In a nutshell, our B-Suite leaders need a tune up to address the new demands of work – and I think we are ready to provide it to them.

 **REBECCA HOUGHTON**

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