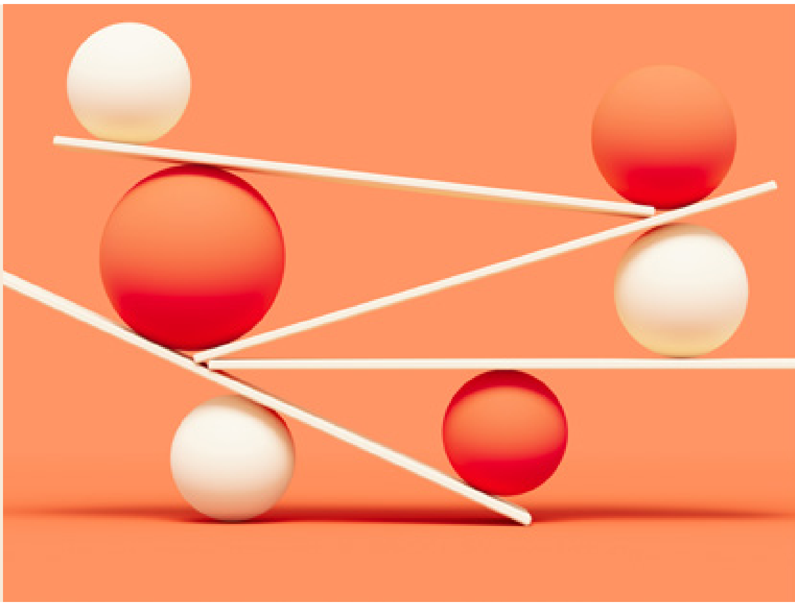
Transformation at Scale: Using Collaborative Learning to Accelerate Change



It's a story we hear often from CEOs: Their company's ability to carry out a transformation plan — to accelerate AI adoption, drive growth, execute faster, improve decision-making, increase productivity or even to be nimble enough for today's highly dynamic business environment — requires a dramatic shift away from entrenched mindsets and behaviors among its senior leaders, as well as a broader cultural change.

Many chief human resources officers, meanwhile, are grappling with whether learning and development programs are effectively moving the organization forward in a tangible way, supporting transformation and preparing leaders for succession.

Transformation is on the agenda for most boards, CEOs and leadership teams today. But transformation is challenging, requiring CEOs to align their team — and then the whole organization — behind a clear vision for the future and ensure the culture, processes, skills and behaviors support the change. One of the most effective ways we have seen for accelerating transformation — by breaking down barriers, changing leader behaviors and building critical skills — is collaborative learning.

Collaborative learning — by a set of peers, a standing team or a diverse group — is effective because it helps leaders gain and use key skills collectively; together, leaders reinforce what they have learned and provide accountability for behavior change. This group learning approach often involves experiential activities — having people work together to find solutions to concrete business challenges — putting newly learned skills into practice and breaking down functional or business silos. These leaders, in turn, model new skills and behaviors with their own teams, cascading change down through the organization.

Collaborative learning in practice: How a new CEO is driving transformation

Consider this recent example: The newly appointed CEO of U.S. transportation company viewed culture change as a key pillar of his strategy to leverage AI and other technology to increase operational efficiency, improve service and drive higher profit margins. For the strategy to succeed, the organization needed to break down silos, replace deeply ingrained ways of working, and collectively become more comfortable with change, more collaborative and more innovative.

We worked with the CEO on the change management effort, focusing first on building alignment and developing transformational leadership skills among the senior executive team, then broadening to levels of leadership deeper in the company. Diagnostic tools, including executive assessments, a culture assessment and an organizational effectiveness review, surfaced specific skill development needs — enterprise mindset, cross-functional collaboration, strategic thinking and execution — as well as opportunities to improve team performance and systemic issues holding the organization back.

With data as the foundation, several dozen company leaders received structured individual development plans to translate strategy into actionable goals for themselves and their teams. They participated in workshops and working sessions, and practiced modeling the behavior change they were trying to encourage.

The organization began to see immediate results, and momentum around the change built over time.

- The CEO's team, which had previously operated in a hub-and-spoke style with all decisions flowing up to and down from the CEO, began building collaboration, influencing and productive-conflict skills. These skills helped improve team dynamics and trust, providing a foundation for operating more fluidly and interdependently.
- Group sessions structured to tackle specific business issues allowed the CEO to directly observe how leaders in the organization interacted and problem-solved together, how the hierarchy played out, and the level of engagement and buy-in for his vision. This insight into people issues and dynamics, which would have otherwise been invisible to him, illuminated where he needed to coach or make adjustments.
- Learning together in group settings created a platform for leaders facing similar challenges to find one another, creating a community of people across the business who could help one another get things done and navigate organizational change. In addition to building individuals' personal networks, programs increased their visibility with senior leaders, which is critical for progressing in the organization — and a benefit they wouldn't get from an external development program.

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- Opportunities to work together on targeted initiatives encouraged teamwork and helped to break down barriers, which in turn, began changing mindsets, fostering new leader behaviors and moving the culture. The momentum from this work helped the organization maintain motivation for change, and therefore commercial momentum, even in the face of a difficult macroeconomic environment. Earnings improved while competitors continued to adjust expectations downward.

- Leaders at different levels embraced the process because they were involved in shaping the programs. Rather than feeling in the dark and waiting for change to be forced upon them, leaders were energized by the change and reported feeling "we're in this together and collectively we have the power to make things better."

- Finally, change happened faster. It would have taken the CEO years to have the same impact, particularly given how entrenched the organization was. As the CEO told us, "Three years later, the shift is striking. We now share a common language, people have seen meaningful progress, and we continue to rely on tools and materials from earlier leadership development sessions. I'm confident these learnings will endure."

What are the conditions for successful collaborative learning and development?

Visible sponsorship and support by the CEO and other top leaders are critical to the success of a group development program. By championing development and its value to the business, CEOs encourage leaders to remain engaged in the learning and fully participate in efforts to break down barriers and increase collaboration. Other critical factors include:

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- **Diagnostic rigor**. Individual and organizational effectiveness assessments that provide detailed insight about skill gaps and organizational dynamics enable learning programs that target and address impediments to change at scale. Without the foundation of a rigorous diagnostic review, learning is unmoored from the actual needs of the business and people in the group, so it tends to have less impact. A holistic picture of what's happening and what's holding the organization back informs a customized learning journey that addresses specific individual, team and organizational needs.

- **Structured learning that reinforces real-world behavior change**. For most organizations embarking on a transformation initiative, breaking down silos is a key priority. Learning programs bringing together cross-functional and cross-business groups to work together in structured ways encourage people to step out of their silos, view the business from an enterprise perspective, and effectively learn in the classroom the behaviors they need to emulate on the job.

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- **Built around business impact**. Programs are most effective when groups work together on real-life business issues that are relevant to their day-to-day work and where they can see the impact of their collaboration. This encourages people to step up and perform better in the moment and improves their skills over time. In this way, leaders learn as they work, and work as they learn.

When do organizations use collaborative learning programs?

Development programs structured around the needs of a select group, team or cohort encourage leaders to learn together in an environment that reflect how they should be working day to day. In addition to skill-building, peer support and guided instruction, these programs often feature facilitated learning labs where groups collectively find solutions to concrete business issues. We have seen organizations use this approach to group learning to support development and accelerate change in various situations:

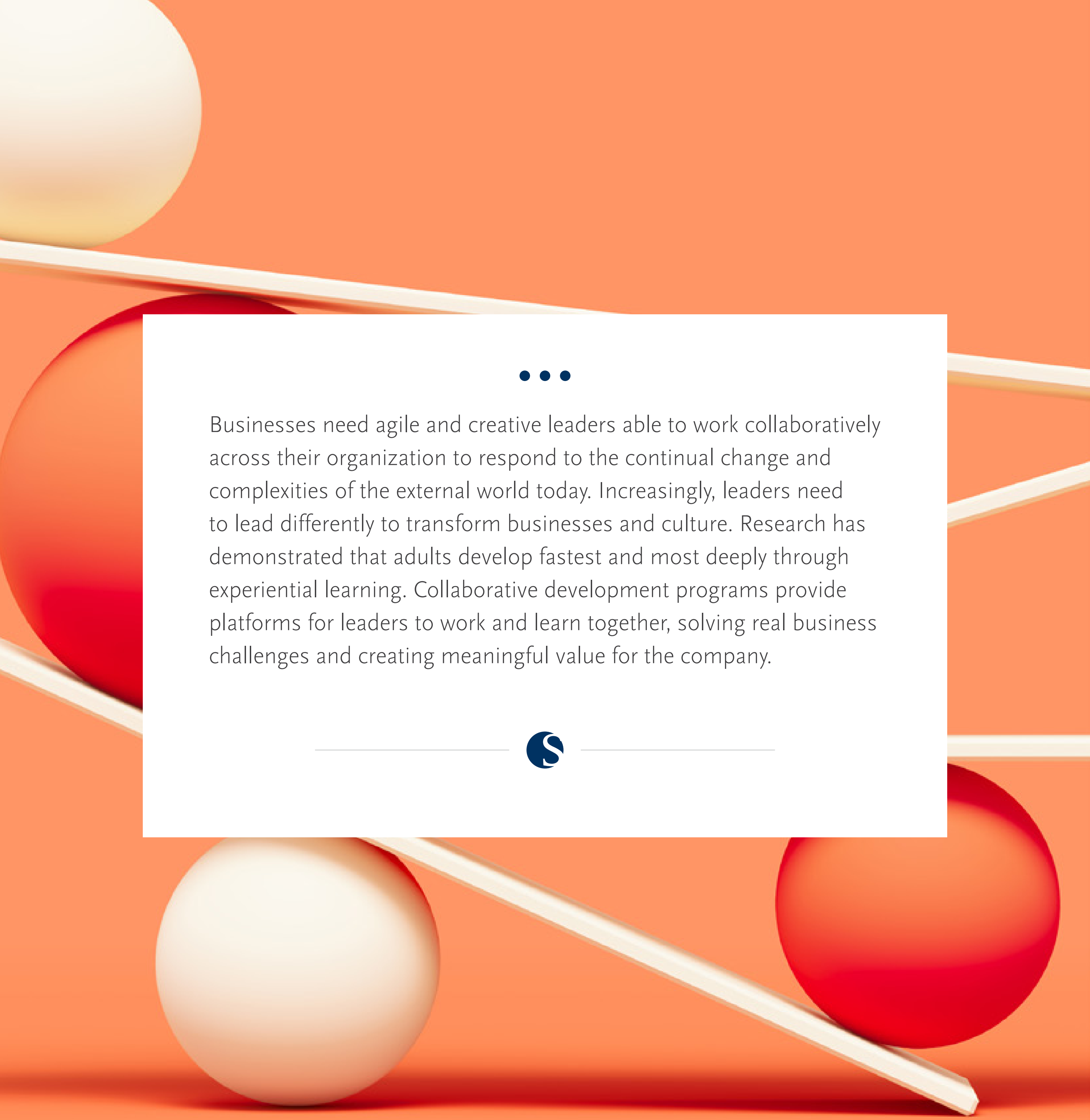
- **Long-term succession planning**. When grounded in rigorous executive assessments, collaborative learning enables up-and-coming leaders to develop skills, build community with peers who are in similar situations and gain exposure to the top leaders who will make selection decisions.

- **Aligning the C-suite under a new CEO**. A top priority for new CEOs is building and aligning their team around their vision and strategy for the business. Team development can strengthen leaders' capabilities in the areas needed to execute strategy and engage them around a shared purpose and values, building cohesiveness.

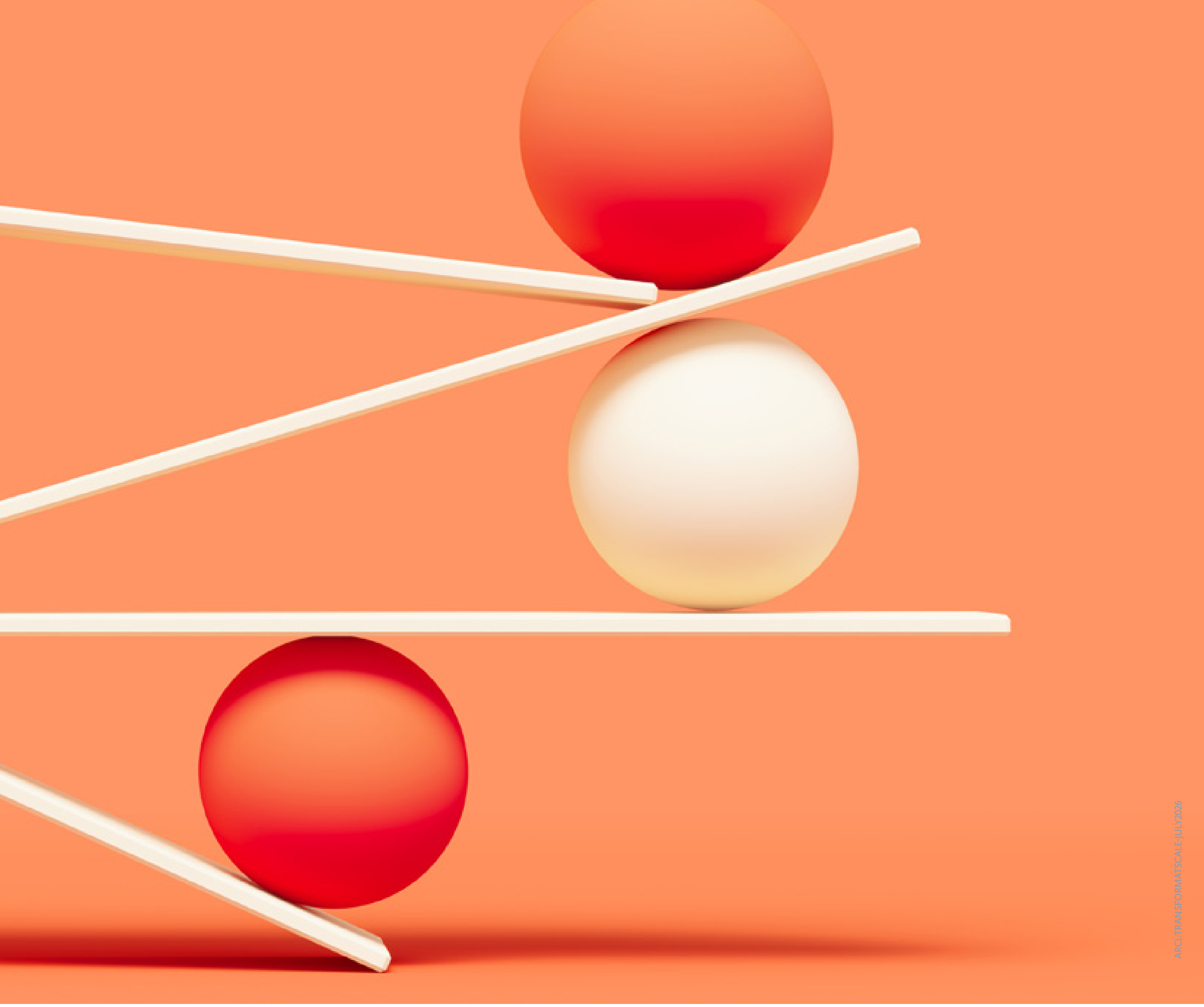
- **Quickly gaining traction on a transformation initiative, merger or acquisition**. When development focuses on a specific context and the needs of the organization in the moment, it supports targeted skill-building to achieve specific business goals.

- **Improving top-team performance**. Executive assessments not only illuminate individual development needs but also behaviors and dynamics that affect group performance. Targeted team development provides a platform for the team to work together on the root causes of their performance issues and on becoming a more aligned, higher-performing team.

- **Enhancing leader performance**. Collaborative development allows organizations to efficiently build critical capabilities across a team or group of leaders, including capabilities such as leadership agility, people leadership, media and investor relations, and stakeholder management. In one client we worked with, 85% of leaders in the program showed significant improvements in key leadership capabilities, including cross-functional collaboration, influencing skills and strategic thinking, according to peers and direct reports.



Businesses need agile and creative leaders able to work collaboratively across their organization to respond to the continual change and complexities of the external world today. Increasingly, leaders need to lead differently to transform businesses and culture. Research has demonstrated that adults develop fastest and most deeply through experiential learning. Collaborative development programs provide platforms for leaders to work and learn together, solving real business challenges and creating meaningful value for the company.



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