

# Leader Development Gets a Second Life

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Imagine that it is time for you to attend a CCL leadership development program. The program you have chosen is open to only twelve participants from around the globe. You are eager to attend, having heard from others that the program will provide a unique learning experience in a three-dimensional world via the Internet.

The program will be held on CCL Island in Second Life (SL). Second Life is a virtual, 3D, parallel universe imagined and created by its residents. The SL platform was created by Philip Rosedale (formerly vice president and chief technology officer of RealNetworks) and is hosted by Linden Research, commonly known as Linden Lab.

The attending group for your leadership development program is made up of participants from Europe, Asia, and the Americas. The gender breakdown is six women and six men. You log onto your computer at the program start time, navigate to the designated *SLurl* (a link you can click on in a Web browser that takes you to a particular place in SL), key in your *avatar* (participant) name and password, and teleport to the program site. In nanoseconds you travel through time and space and find yourself in a parallel universe—CCL's SL Campus.

You *rez* in and make yourself appear as a 3D virtual avatar in the

campus amphitheatre, where you meet the eleven other avatars, who are eager to engage in the program activities. Unlike your real self in a real-world classroom, in this virtual classroom you can fly, change your body type, teleport to far-off parts of the SL universe, and interact with the 3D environment around you in new and exciting ways.

Upon completion of the program, you conclude that the content of CCL's SL leadership program was easily understood and applicable to your immediate work situation. The instructors eased your transition into this new world. The program was delivered as a virtual experience in which you could dialogue, explore ideas, and learn interactively with the other avatars. Your network was expanded and you explored new leadership tools, which you practiced and are now ready to apply.

The costs of travel, lodging, and similar expenses associated with a conventional leadership development program at a vendor site would be expensive, but there were no such costs for the SL program, and time away from work was minimal—you never left your work location. The only expense to your organization was tuition, which was a fraction of your organization's overall training and development budget.

## VIRTUAL WORLD

Brian A. White, author of *Second Life: A Guide to Your Virtual World* (Que, 2007), describes SL as both a platform and a community. He sees SL as a

platform as an Internet-based, multi-user, 3D environment that emphasizes innovation, social networking, and collaboration. He sees SL as a community as being inhabited by residents who can explore the SL universe, interact with other avatars, socialize, participate in interactive group experiences, and learn from one another.

Since its inception in 2003, Second Life has become a popular virtual reality tool, attracting individuals from all over the world by offering a variety of opportunities for creating learning environments where individuals can build a sense of community, interact, and learn together. This one aspect of SL has the potential to create and sustain a new understanding among its global inhabitants, creating a more just and forgiving world.

In addition, in SL you can buy and sell property, own businesses, and generate revenue. The economy in SL is based on the Linden dollar (L\$). Residents can buy and sell L\$ on the LindeX, the official virtual currency exchange of SL. In 2008 more than L\$100 million was bought and sold on the LindeX. The most recent exchange rate was \$1 to L\$265.

To access SL, go to [secondlife.com](http://secondlife.com). You can sign up and download the program for free. Create your own avatar and enter a parallel universe where your imagination is your only limitation.

## THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Your avatar represents how you want to be seen by others in SL. You can

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*Editor's note: In Focus is an occasional series that takes close looks at specific topics of importance to leadership and leaders.*

do a deep dive into psychological interpretation when creating your avatar or you can just have fun—you can change your avatar appearance whenever you choose.

When you enter SL, you pick one avatar to begin your journey. You can choose from a total of twelve avatars. They are organized as male and female and some subcultures are represented. Once you have negotiated your avatar and entered SL, you can reconfigure your avatar in any way you choose.

Participants frequently cite the immersive nature of the experience—from chirping birds to rushing water to complex communications and human interactions. Residents experience emotions, compelling social dynamics, and often strange and fascinating creations ranging from concept art to multimedia expositions. It is this evoking of feelings that makes SL compelling for high-level leadership development.

More than a hundred leading universities and school systems worldwide are using SL as part of their educational programs. Linden Lab works with educational institutions to help them understand the benefits of SL. Educators are engaged in creating student social networks, conducting research, developing educational programs, and experimenting with behavioral science methodology in examining avatar interactions.

The New Media Consortium (NMC)—an international community of colleges, universities, museums, and technology companies working to use new technologies to support learning and creative expression—employs its combined resources to push the boundaries of the SL technology and better understand new applications for learning. Larry Johnson, CEO of the NMC, recently testified before Congress that “at the NMC, we see Second Life as the most currently evolved of the virtual-world platforms today, and wherever this technology takes us, Second

Life will be seen as the seminal first instance of what the 3D Web might look like.”

SL learning offers many advantages over traditional learning environments, according to Shiv Rajendran, cofounder of London-based virtual-learning institution [Languagelab.com](http://Languagelab.com). Online teaching methods are far more effective than traditional alternatives, Rajendran says: “Retention is up to 50 percent higher than traditional classroom courses.” Aside from the convenience of studying virtually anywhere, students are not confined to teachers from their area—teachers can be based anywhere.

According to Linden Lab, companies from around the world—including Adobe, Michelin, IBM, and Xerox—have established significant presences in SL. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration uses SL to show how its *hurricane hunter* aircraft work. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration owns an island in SL where a team of scientists is working on ways to link the astronauts who may someday go to Mars to their families, friends, and co-workers on Earth.

The benefits of using SL for learning include

- *Improved participation.* In contrast to other forms of virtual collaboration such as e-mail, blogs, and webinars, a 3D virtual environment is believed to increase participation and improve retention because the addition of avatars and other 3D models helps the user to feel more immersed in the session.

- *Lack of physical constraints.* Users can participate in complex simulations that would be nearly impossible to construct in the real world.

- *Fun.* Although some educators argue that learning in SL may be too much fun when trying to take on a serious endeavor, others say that learning should be fun and that the SL medium will make participants eager to join.

- *Security.* Linden Lab, in partnership with IBM, has developed a way for companies to develop safe, secure, and flexible environments in SL that are managed behind their own corporate firewalls.

- *Knowledge management.* Many organizations are finding it useful to set up communities of practice in SL, where employees with similar interests and expertise can congregate.

## FIRST ISLAND

In 2008, CCL purchased its first island in SL. CCL Research Island was created and designed to support CCL’s coaching and feedback sessions in its programs.

CCL is participating with George Mason University and the U.S. Air Force in a research study to examine the feasibility of coaching in SL. The study is being funded in part by a Society for Human Resource Management grant, which will extend into 2011. The research target is to conduct fifty feedback sessions in SL, using CCL’s Leadership Development Program (LDP)® as the source of research participants. CCL will certify eighteen coaches who will be specially trained to conduct feedback in SL.

CCL Research Island has a Welcome Center where the coach meets the coachee to begin a two- to three-hour feedback session. As you stand outside the Welcome Center, you can see waves rolling on the shore and trees rustling in the breeze, and you hear faint sounds of woodland animals scurrying across virtual pine needles. The coach is specially qualified to conduct coaching in SL, understanding not only the technical aspects of SL—such as walking, running, flying, and teleporting—but also how to use metaphors in SL.

As the coach and coachee begin the feedback session, the coach invites the coachee to teleport to the Visual Explorer Exploratorium, where the feedback journey begins.

This simulation is on a platform above CCL Research Island, and it contains the colorful pictures used in CCL's Visual Explorer. The coachee is instructed to select a picture that is a visual representation of his or her thoughts about the coaching session outcomes. Touching the picture places a copy of it in the coachee avatar's inventory for later recall.

After a discussion about the picture and what it represents to the coachee, the coach teleports the coachee to the Assessment Center, where assessment data are displayed in virtual space. The coach and coachee discuss the meaning of the feedback data and the implications for personal development. The coach might teleport the coachee to other regions in SL to enhance the learning or create new learning opportunities.

The coach then teleports the coachee to the Path of Understanding, where the development journey begins. The coach and coachee travel the path and eventually begin the ascent to the top of the mountain where the coachee's developmental goals will be discussed.

The coach and coachee reach a rickety bridge spanning a deep gorge. The bridge is in constant motion, swaying back and forth, making it difficult to cross. However, success lies on the other side of the bridge, where the final ascent to the mountain summit begins. The avatars sway in the breeze and the creaking sounds make it seem as if the bridge could give way at any time. Once safely across the bridge, the coach and coachee climb to the top of the mountain, where they can look out over CCL Research Island and the journey they have just completed. They discuss goals and action plans and line up their follow-up meeting in SL.

## THEME AREAS

In 2009, CCL purchased a second island, CCL Island. It was created and designed to serve multiple edu-

cational purposes. Like the Disney parks, CCL Island offers major theme areas. The first is the CCL Social Networking area, where residents of SL can visit CCL, congregate with other avatars from around the globe, discuss world events, share information about leadership issues, discuss CCL programs, hear free lectures delivered via rich media streams, and visit CCL's Main Street stores. You can visit the CCL bookstore,

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buy CCL T-shirts, sign up for leadership programs, buy a cup of coffee, participate in CCL surveys, visit the H. Smith Richardson Museum, watch fireworks, take a boat ride, or just sit in a tree-lined park surrounded by like-minded avatars.

The second area to visit is the CCL Campus. If you are attending a CCL seven-hour SL leadership program or attending a CCL special event, you will meet your CCL host at the campus amphitheatre to begin your journey. Streaming video and guided slide presentations mix with other learning tools to create a rich learning environment. Most training events and activities will be held at the CCL Campus or on CCL Research Island.


The third area to visit is CCL Alumni Village. It is dedicated to

CCL program alumni and friends of the Center. Nominal fees are required to participate in Alumni Village activities, which include postprogram coaching support, access to current leadership lectures, dialogue with keynote speakers, attendance at conferences, access to current research literature, participation in group activities and simulations, and the ability to network with a variety of peers from across the globe.

## A NEW PLATFORM

When asked recently about the future of virtual worlds over the next five years, Philip Rosedale answered, "I don't know." Elaborating, he stated that the rate of change is fast and is driven by profound shifts in technology. Visual realism will become increasingly important. Voice will be transformational.

Lyndon Rego, director of CCL's Innovation Incubator, offered these thoughts in response to a similar question: "Virtual worlds could very soon be the platform for much leadership development and coaching in the future. Gains in the fidelity of this technology coupled with users' proficiency in using the technology will make this form of delivery much more feasible and effective."

What the future holds for CCL's presence in SL remains unclear. The Center believes, however, that its work in SL will benefit its clients by redefining the way that those involved in the leadership development process interact with one another. 

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