

# Leading with Impact

## How Functional Leaders Face Challenges, Focus Development, and Boost Performance

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# Introduction

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Marc didn't fall into the role of vice president of operations by chance. Over many years, he's built his skills, gained extensive experience, and produced strong results. Taking the VP job was the next logical step, the result of personal ambition and a strong commitment to the organization and its customers. He knows he's talented, but sometimes wonders how he can be more effective as the demands of the job increase.

Yet, the reality these leaders face is challenging and complex—and the skills needed to be successful are many. It's not surprising they feel the need to continuously improve and, at times, struggle with how to do it.

CEOs, too, are unsure if they are developing their functional leaders sufficiently. "I know our leadership team is good, but is good really good enough?" the CEO of a global consumer products organization asked us. **"How can we get ourselves and our organization to that next level of performance?"**

This paper looks at the challenges and realities of being a functional leader and how these talented leaders can focus their development and boost performance.

Our work is based on a study by a team of senior faculty at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®). The team analyzed assessment results and written comments from 989 functional leaders who participated in CCL's open enrollment program, Leading for Organizational Impact, or in a similar customized client engagement. We also analyzed 360-degree assessment ratings from 14,851 of their bosses, peers, superiors, and direct reports. Finally, we interviewed 101 of these leaders to better understand their most pressing issues (see About the Study on page 16 for details of the research).

Here's what we found:

1. Challenges are immense.
2. The bar for effective leadership is high.
3. Perceptions of effectiveness vary.
4. Leaders have room for improvement.
5. A more targeted approach is needed to lead with impact.

We believe our work will help functional leaders take their leadership and performance to the next level—and encourage others to do the same.

## Functional Leaders at a Glance

CCL works closely with many leaders who are running functions or divisions in large organizations. They carry titles such as vice president or senior director and have responsibilities for one or multiple functions such as Sales, Marketing, Finance, Operations, Engineering, Technology, Legal, and Human Resources. They run business units and geographic regions. Functional leaders typically manage groups of more than 500 people, have budgets in excess of \$500M, and often, are on a short list to be COO or CEO.

# 1. Challenges are Immense

The rewards tied to leading functions, divisions, or business units are many, yet the demands these leaders face are great. To better understand their realities, we analyzed 2,410 organizational challenges identified by the functional leaders in our study.

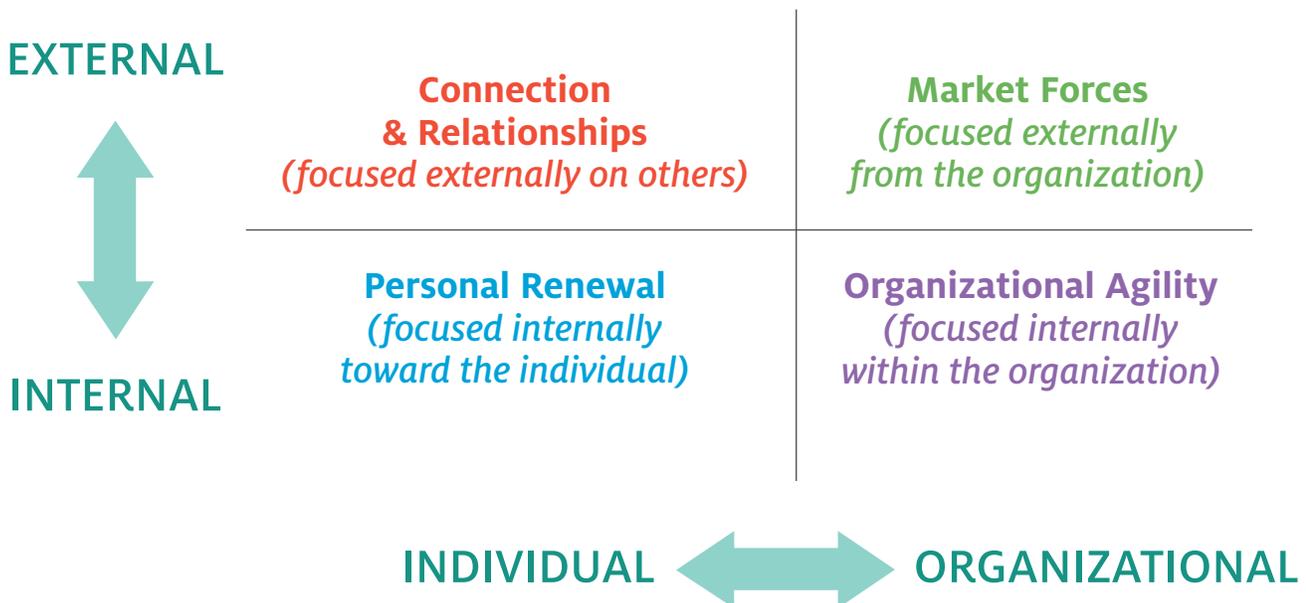
Functional leaders describe their challenges with words such as:



As one division president noted,

“These are the words that keep me sharp—and also keep me awake at night.”

We sorted the challenges into four main categories, noting the degree to which their challenges are *internally* or *externally* focused and *individual* or *organizational* focused. This matrix creates a picture of the challenges that are most pressing for functional leaders:



While we've organized these challenges into four themes, each challenge is made up of numerous factors and variables. Any single factor could cause significant pressure for leaders.

## Most functional leaders are dealing with multiple, interwoven factors—creating exponential change and challenge in their work.

In fact, these leaders are handling multiple and conflicting challenges, which they often refer to as “intense” and “invigorating.”

As you read more about these four themes in leaders' challenges, keep in mind that leaders respond differently to these challenges and realities. A point of struggle or frustration for one may be energizing for another. In addition, industry and market dynamics, organizational culture, cohesiveness of the leadership team, relationships with peers and direct reports all affect how a leader perceives and manages these realities.

### Market Forces.

Functional leaders face enormous pressure to understand global trends and economic forces in an effort to stay ahead of their competition. They are expected to be savvy about the global economy and its relationship to the organization's financial, operational, and human capital needs. For some leaders, including those from nonprofit and government agencies, this challenge may take the form of regulations and geopolitical changes or uncertainties. Shifting business cycles, balancing short-term performance with long-term growth, and ensuring organizational sustainability are added challenges.

At the same time, these leaders must provide impeccable service to increasingly sophisticated and challenging customers. Leaders must influence intricate networks of suppliers, dealers, distributors, partners, and strategic alliances. Globally, many traditional market roles are blurred; customers may also be suppliers or even competitors.

Functional leaders are also responding to “wild card” scenarios: natural disasters, social change, acts of violence, and many other crises. A financial services CEO remarked:

**“It is in crisis that executives reveal their true leadership. When there is no check-list to follow or previous experience to rely on for guidance, leaders must seek out fresh advice and guidance to find new answers.”**

## Organizational Agility.

Leaders who introduce large-scale change and seek to align multiple functions or business units need to show a significant understanding of strategy, people, processes, systems, and new technologies. They must have a solid knowledge of their peers' areas of responsibilities and consider the broader organizational context in making decisions. Leaders must gain wider and deeper experiences, while navigating both formal and informal social systems. They are asked to quickly examine opportunities and assess roadblocks to success.

Functional leaders typically implement structural changes, such as mergers, acquisitions, or reorganizations. Traditional hierarchical structures are giving way to more matrix or networked structures, requiring leaders to push for new thinking about internal boundaries, silos, power sources, and organizational culture. Functional leaders now face the transition from being "in" the culture to "shaping" the culture.

These leaders are often pulled in many directions. Many now lead multiple functions, including areas in which they have limited familiarity.

One executive explained:

**"I now have responsibility for IT as well as marketing. On the one hand, I need to learn quickly on strategic issues where I have no previous experience. On the other hand, it's been a great opportunity for me to gain a much deeper understanding of the challenges facing IT leaders. When I now speak to a customer's CEO, CIO, or CTO, my whole perspective shifts to be more strategic, and I am much more aware of the business and IT challenges these leaders face."**

## Connection and Relationships.

Strong interpersonal dynamics continue to be a key success factor for these leaders.

Functional leaders are often influencing upwards to top management and board members while leading their peers, direct reports, and other key stakeholders. They may be leading with or without authority or resources. At the same time, they must bridge cross-generational, geographic, and cultural differences to gain trust, develop teams, engage others, and drive accountability. Relational skills require leaders to understand and address behaviors and emotions across a much wider range of people, cultures, and perspectives. Leaders must be more present, engaging, and approachable to others. Ironically, what used to be considered the “soft stuff” is now often called the “hard stuff” for functional leaders.

The need to connect and collaborate extends beyond individual relationships and even beyond single organizations. These leaders are pressed to build strong and strategic connections across groups, organizations, and communities. A vice president of international markets commented:

“I’m fine when I have full accountability and our international team can make decisions and move forward. Whenever I need to step out and engage across other areas of the business, my world becomes exponentially more complex. It’s like eating from a bowl of spaghetti, it quickly becomes messy.”

## Personal Renewal.

Functional leaders often cite personal challenges in addition to already demanding schedules and work commitments. This reality may affect the way they work with others and make decisions, in negative and positive ways.

Quite often, functional leaders experience conflicts in shifting priorities, commitments, desires, and needs. These leaders often have young children at home and partners who are also working and traveling. Many serve on community boards or volunteer their time and talents for others. Aging parents, financial matters, or health issues often weigh heavily on this group.

Often exhausted and pulled in many directions, carving out “downtime” is difficult, and personal reserves are slim for these leaders. Making time for physical, mental, and emotional health may be valued, but “juggling” or “hanging in there” or “I’ll get to that later” is often their response.

At the same time, many leaders are looking for something “more.” Most are asking deep questions about their purpose and mission (Heermann). One healthcare organization’s general counsel remarked:

“Corporate attorneys tend to apply what we learned in running private practice, where our focus is about client service and billable hours. Yet, when one of our young attorneys was diagnosed with a terminal illness, our team quickly recognized how valuable spending time was with colleagues, friends, and family. I hope others can learn from our mistakes before a tragedy forces them to make changes in their work and personal lives.”

## 2. The Bar for Effective Leadership is High

What leadership competencies are most important for success in a functional leadership role? How well do leaders perform in these critically important areas?

CCL developed a validated and reliable 360-degree assessment specifically for functional leaders to get concrete answers to these questions (Walsh, Trovas, Calarco, Leslie, Braddy). For individual leaders, this information helps focus their learning and development. We wondered what we would learn about leadership development priorities for functional leaders by analyzing the 360-degree data from nearly 1,000 leaders.

With the *Leading the Function 360*, leaders rate themselves in terms of effectiveness in 13 critical areas, or competencies. Bosses, peers, superiors, and direct reports also rate the effectiveness of the leader. Each rater chooses their seven “most important” competencies for the functional leader’s success in the organization from the list of 13 competencies. We ranked these competencies from highest to lowest based on how frequently they were selected as most important.

The 13 competencies measured by the *Leading the Function 360*, in order of overall importance are:

RANK	LEADING THE FUNCTION COMPETENCIES
1	<b>Executive communication.</b> Expresses ideas clearly and uses language to build common understanding.
2	<b>Execution and results.</b> Aligns resources to accomplish key objectives and assigns clear accountability for important objectives. Achieves meaningful accomplishments.
3	<b>Influence.</b> Inspires and motivates others to take action.
4	<b>Strategic perspective.</b> Gains perspective and balances the tension between daily tasks and strategic actions that impact the long-term viability of the organization.
5	<b>Working across boundaries.</b> Works across the organization to build collaborative relationships.
6	<b>Engagement.</b> Motivates others to perform at their best.
7	<b>Understanding the enterprise.</b> Understands the perspectives of different functional areas in the organization and has a firm grasp of conditions affecting the organization. Has both breadth and depth of experiences.
8	<b>Vision.</b> Understands, communicates, and stays focused on the organization’s vision.
9	<b>Innovation.</b> Integrates knowledge, perspectives and approaches to innovate and create greater value and stronger outcomes.
10	<b>Executive presence and approachability.</b> Is visible and proactively creates trust and connection with others. Displays warmth and a sense of humor.
11	<b>Self-awareness.</b> Has a clear view of the value they bring and accurate picture of his/her strengths and developmental needs.
12	<b>Learning agility.</b> Gains wide range of opportunities to learn from experience. Has a growth mindset.
13	<b>Leading globally.</b> Knows how to lead and conduct business throughout the world.

We looked at how the different rater groups responded. There was high agreement among all raters that *executive communication, execution and results, influence, strategic perspective, and engagement* are in the top tier.

Working across boundaries was in the top seven for all groups as well, although peers and bosses placed more importance in it than direct reports (who are themselves mid- to senior-level managers). For peers and bosses, understanding the enterprise was also in the top seven; for direct reports, vision held a top spot.

But functional leaders cannot ignore the lower-ranked competencies. Based on our experiences with these senior leaders, we see all of the 13

competencies are needed for success. One main reason is because they are interconnected. For example, self-awareness is critical to understanding how to improve your influence and executive communication. Second, the importance of a competency is dependent on the current role and the organization. *Leading globally*, for instance, was lowest on the list overall but was given higher importance in situations where leaders were in global roles in a global organization.

While every competency may not be critical all the time, to be exceptional, functional leaders need to be effective in all 13 areas.



### 3. Perceptions of Effectiveness Vary

In our analysis of leadership effectiveness, the five highest-rated competencies were those in which leaders were considered **more effective**. The five lowest-rated competencies were those in which leaders were considered **less effective**.

- All rater groups assessed functional leaders as **more effective** in *executive communication* along with *execution and results*. Good news—the two most important competencies are strengths for these leaders as a group. Now, functional leaders need to make sure they are not overusing these strengths.
- All rater groups assessed *leading globally* and *innovation* as **less effective**. Although these two competencies were not considered in the top seven “most important,” in select markets and in global organizations these two competencies are considered essential to the leader’s (and organization’s) success. As a group, these leaders are not showing strength in these competencies—a potential problem in the future for functional leaders.

**Summary of Effectiveness of Functional Leaders Based on Rater Groups**

Leading the function competencies	Overall Importance Rank	Overall Effectiveness by all Raters	Effectiveness Rated by Boss & Superiors Only	Effectiveness Rated by Peers Only	Effectiveness Rated by Direct Reports Only
Executive communication	1	+	+	+	-
Execution and results	2	+	+	+	+
Influence	3	+	-	+	+
Strategic perspective	4	-	-	-	+
Working across boundaries	5	-	-	-	+
Engagement	6	-	-	-	+
Understanding the enterprise	7	-	-	-	+
Vision	8	+	+	+	-
Innovation	9	-	-	-	-
Executive presence and approachability	10	-	+	+	-
Self-awareness	11	-	+	-	-
Learning agility	12	-	+	-	-
Leading globally	13	-	-	-	-



**That's where the broad agreement across rater groups ends** (see Effectiveness Table on page 8).

Bosses perceived functional leaders as **more effective** in the areas direct reports ranked **less effective**, and vice versa, showing a clear split by level. Superiors tended to agree with bosses. Peer rankings were more variable.

Below are the main differences:

- Direct-reports assessed functional leaders as **more effective** in the areas of *influence, strategic perspective, working across boundaries, engagement, and understanding the enterprise*. Bosses rated functional leaders as **less effective** in these same areas.
- Bosses rated functional leaders as **more effective** in the areas of *executive communication, vision, executive presence and approachability, self-awareness, and learning agility*, while direct reports assessed functional leaders as **less effective** in these same areas.
- Peers, like bosses, assessed functional leaders as **more effective** in the areas of *executive communication and vision* as well as *executive presence and approachability*. Also agreeing with bosses, peers assessed functional leaders as **less effective** in the areas of *strategic perspective, working across boundaries, engagement, and understanding the enterprise*.
- Peers, like direct reports, assessed functional leaders as **more effective** in *influence* and **less effective** in *self-awareness and learning agility*.

From this, we conclude that functional leaders must adjust, recognizing they can't be all things to all people. They must take into consideration their current context and future goals.

## 4. Leaders Have Room for Improvement

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A final point on effectiveness.

The effectiveness ratings suggest that, as a whole, these leaders are good, but still have room for improvement. On average, all raters assessed functional leaders at or below 3.99 on a five-point scale. While a 3.99 is not a poor rating, these leaders don't excel in any of the 13 leadership competencies needed for success at this level. They are considered high-potential talent. Yet, their leadership capabilities fall short of what is needed to address the challenges occurring in today's organizations and environments.

CCL has identified this same trend with the most senior-level executives. Based on 360-degree assessment results from participants in Leadership at the Peak®, a leadership development program designed for CEOs and COOs, most senior-level executives have room for improvement as well.



Why aren't the ratings stronger for functional leaders? Our initial observations based on our interviews with 101 functional leaders suggest several key reasons.

**The preparation for top jobs is generally inadequate.** Leaders have risen to the top with a certain set of skills within a particular functional area—but need different or broader skills to excel in today's environment. We see a greater need for breadth of experiences including in a variety of functions. The business demands require these leaders to be a strategic partner, yet few have had the opportunities to learn what that is in practice. It's new territory.

**Leaders may be too well-rounded.** They may be reasonably skilled in a full range of leadership skills, but excelling at none. They are unsure of what matters most or inexperienced in the ability to “dial-up” or “dial-back” on their leadership style and skills when needed. We often hear that this inability to adjust their approach may be caused by trying to be good at everything and not sure where to focus in order to have the greatest impact.

**Leadership is a collective effort.** For most functional leaders to be successful, they must rely on the skills and capabilities of others in a way that was not required in other roles. Leading effectively involves working more collaboratively, across boundaries, and with allies and competitors alike. A leader's skill is tied directly to the leadership of other senior leaders.

**Success is more difficult to gauge.** In functional roles, progress and success is evaluated both in terms of long term and short term yet evaluating the performance of functional leaders becomes increasingly difficult—making it a challenge to identify more specific areas for improvement.

**The competition is stiff.** These leaders are some of the best talent in their functional areas. To be seen as excellent at higher levels is more challenging because most people at that level are exceptional. This makes it difficult to stand out. Also, when you get to the top, the bar gets raised. What was considered excellent performance one level down is now just acceptable performance. So, functional leaders must learn how to add value quickly and strategically.

## 5. A Targeted Approach is Needed to Lead with Impact

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Functional leaders can bring focus to their leadership and boost performance in ways that will have a powerful impact.

We see the most effective functional leaders taking a more targeted approach. They balance the pressure of “everything is important” and stay focused on those leadership skills that matter most in their organization. Here’s what we suggest for functional leaders:

**Seek feedback.** Gauge to what extent your own and your organization’s leadership reflect CCL’s findings. In the absence of a formal assessment, seek out honest feedback on what’s most important and how others see you as an effective leader. Pay close attention to differences between levels. Use these research findings as a starting point for asking others for feedback.

**Clarify challenges.** Gain clarity on the leadership challenges you face or will be facing over the coming years. Our study provides four main categories—market forces, organizational agility, connection and relationships, personal renewal—and describes many specific challenges. Which one or two are most pressing for you?

CHALLENGES	LTF COMPETENCIES
MARKET FORCES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Execution and results</li> <li>• Innovation</li> <li>• Strategic perspective</li> <li>• Leading globally</li> </ul>
ORGANIZATIONAL AGILITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working across boundaries</li> <li>• Vision</li> <li>• Understanding the enterprise</li> </ul>
CONNECTION & RELATIONSHIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Executive communication</li> <li>• Influence</li> <li>• Engagement</li> </ul>
PERSONAL RENEWAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-awareness</li> <li>• Learning agility</li> <li>• Executive presence and approachability</li> </ul>

**Determine what is most important.** Consider what leadership improvements would have the greatest impact. Certain leadership competencies tend to align with certain challenges, so start there. Look at the competencies linked to one of your key challenge areas and consider what you could learn or do differently. Focus on the competency that, if you improve, would have the most value to your organization. Keep in mind any differences in what may have value for direct reports, peers, boss, and superiors.

**Explore and learn.** Seek out new responsibilities that will build both breadth and depth of experiences. For global organizations, innovation and global leadership are particularly critical for success.

**Solicit support.** With a professional coach, mentor, or strong ally, set specific goals and identify behaviors to change, actions to take, or new learning to pursue.

# Conclusion

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We believe that the findings presented here give detail and depth to the challenges, opportunities, and development needs facing functional leaders. We also outlined just how challenging it is to lead large functions, divisions, and business units.

In spite of these complexities and difficulties, most of the leaders we meet remain motivated, optimistic, and eager to contribute at even higher levels for their organizations.

Organizations, too, are starting to respond with more deliberate development experiences to better prepare these functional leaders. Here are some trends we are seeing:

- To provide broader, more strategic perspective, organizations are extending functional leaders' responsibilities to oversee several functional areas.
- Functional leaders are being asked to lead major strategic initiatives across the organization to gain critical experiences they may be lacking.
- More targeted mentoring is being offered by highly experienced leaders both inside and outside the organization (including board members).
- Strategic projects are being owned by multiple functional leaders, while applying a more systemic and strategic approach to leadership.
- Leaders are gaining experiences from both wide and deep job assignments. More often, these assignments include global and cross-cultural responsibilities.
- Reward systems are measuring results over a longer time horizon.
- Board members are being more proactive in developing key talent.
- CEO's are thinking more strategically about their organization's leadership.
- Functional leaders are moving from a mindset of "either-or" to "both-and" in their strategic planning, decision-making and implementation.

We hope we've challenged you to think about your own leadership and development—and what is needed to develop other functional leaders.

By clarifying challenges, focusing on what's most important, and targeting development we believe leaders at this level have great opportunity to boost performance and have greater impact on their organizations, people they lead, families they love, and communities where they live.

## About the Authors

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**Richard J. Walsh** serves as senior faculty at the Center for Creative Leadership and president of The Leaders' Counsel. Richard provides expertise in strategic leadership, C-level coaching and mentoring of functional leaders. With over twenty years in business, he held executive roles in strategy, human resources, leadership and organizational development for AT&T, GE, and IBM. Richard also served as executive and founding director of the Center for Leadership & Executive Development.

Over the years, Richard has consulted with top global organizations including American Express, BCG, Campbell's, Emerson, Google, Haworth, National Life Group, Phillips, Proctor & Gamble, Timken, Volvo, Whirlpool, Wal-Mart, US Air Force, and others. Richard also collaborates with other thought leaders from international consulting firms and top business schools. He earned graduate degrees in Organizational Leadership and International Marketing. He holds a number of professional certifications and serves on several company boards, professional associations, and non-profit organizations. Richard coauthored numerous articles and papers, and is currently focusing his efforts working with senior leaders of functions, business units, and divisions.

**Stephanie A. Trovas** is a Portfolio Manager at the Center for Creative Leadership. During her 20 years in the training and development field, she has worked extensively with individuals and organizations from a variety of industries, organizational functions, and countries. She focuses on senior leaders and what it takes to lead functions, divisions, and business units. She has a passion for the use of simulations in leadership and organizational development. Currently, Stephanie is the global manager for *Leading for Organizational Impact: The Looking Glass Experience* and former manager of CCL's *Leading Strategically* program. As senior faculty at CCL, she trains open-enrollment programs and designs and delivers customized leadership solutions. Stephanie also coauthored books and articles on relevant leadership topics. She holds a BA in psychology from the Colorado College and an MBA from the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. In graduate school, her emphasis coursework was in marketing and organizational leadership.

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# About the Study

Data is from participants of the Leading for Organizational Impact program of the Center for Creative Leadership and similar custom client engagements between January 2012 and December 2013.

Prior to attending Leading for Organizational Impact, participants and a selection of their bosses, peers, superiors, and direct reports complete the “Leading the Function 360”—a recently created assessment that reflects what is most important for success at this level and how effective each leader is for what matters most (Walsh, Trovas, Calarco, Braddy, & Leslie, 2011).

Our sample consisted of 989 functional leaders along with 14,851 raters. The 989 leaders worked across a range of industry sectors, including manufacturing, services, government, pharmaceuticals, nonprofit, retail and energy. Most participants (84%) were upper or executive levels of management. The majority reported they had international responsibilities (80%) while 40% said they had global responsibilities. Seventy percent were men; 30% were women. The average age was 45.

## Education

- >96% have a bachelor’s degree or higher
- >40% have a master’s degree or higher
- <4% have a high school diploma or lower

## Industries

- 22% manufacturing
- 12% services
- 8% government
- 6% pharmaceuticals
- 6% nonprofit
- 4% retail
- 2% energy

## Functions

- 14% general executive/ business unit
- 14% Marketing or Sales
- 12% Production or Operations
- 10% Finance
- 8% Engineering or R&D
- 7% Human Resources
- 7% IT
- 5% Legal

## Current Region (where they work)

- 60% North America
- 20% EMEA
- 10% APAC
- 5% Latin America
- 5% Other

Also as part of the program pre-work, participants answered the following open-ended question: “What are the most critical leadership challenges you are currently facing?” Overall, 2,410 challenges were collected from 989 participants.

We then used thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns in participants’ leadership challenges. The coding procedure began with randomly selecting leadership challenges from all responses of the participants. The final coding system included 4 major categories. The entire challenge statement provided by the participant was examined and only one challenge category was used per challenge statement. All challenges were independently coded. Where discrepancies occurred, the coding team met to discuss and reach consensus for all challenges.

Finally, we interviewed 101 of these leaders to better understand their most pressing issues and to capture just a few of their inspiring stories.

## More to come

Expanding on this study with functional leaders, we will present in a future paper the actions that functional leaders report to be most helpful in focusing and developing the leadership needed for their organizations’ success.

## Resources and Further Reading

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