

WHITEPAPER

# LEVERAGING GROUP COACHING TO DEVELOP EFFECTIVE AND HUMANE LEADERS

ALISON REID

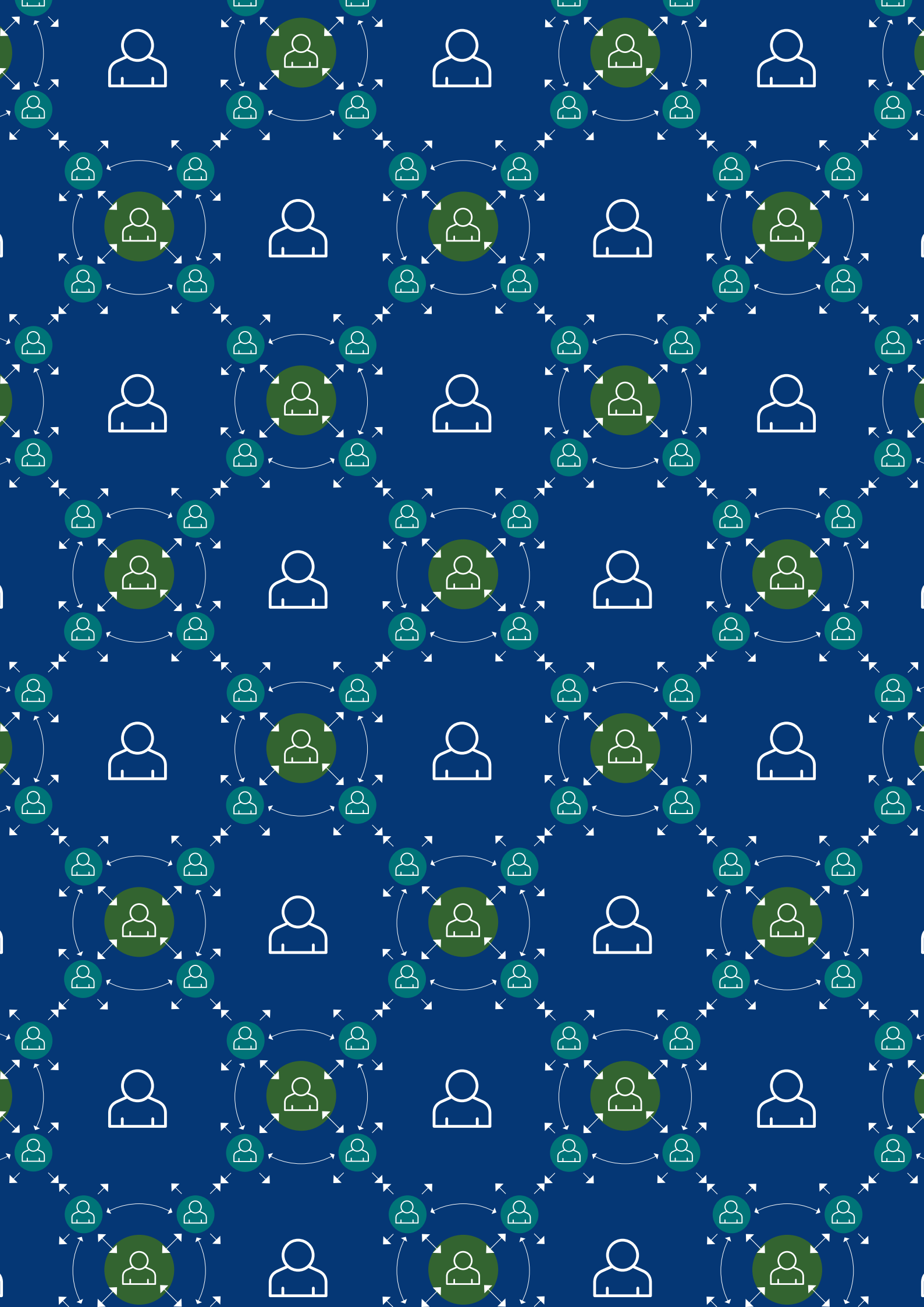
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### GIBS

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At the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), we take a personal, holistic and integrative approach to learning. The Personal and Applied Learning department is an area established within the business school to be the custodian of expertise, best practice, and thought leadership in the domains of personal change, transformation, and applied leadership practice. This department guides teams throughout the school on designing and delivering applied learning and leadership development in their programmes. The unit also delivers programmes on facilitation and coaching direct to market.

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# Abstract

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Given the tumultuous state of the world, the need for strong leaders to navigate the escalating instability and uncertainty has never been greater. Leadership development is a priority in organisations worldwide and takes many different forms – from “traditional” training programmes to more personalised engagements, such as coaching and mentoring. *Group coaching* has been attracting increasing attention in the leadership development space, although relatively few studies have set out to (empirically) measure its effects from an organisational perspective.

Essentially, group coaching is a facilitated approach to learning, where a coach guides the members of a group (coachees) in developing greater self-awareness, better understanding organisational dynamics, improving their interpersonal skills,

and enhancing their ability to influence and lead others. At the heart of the group coaching approach is the concept of “peer coaches”, where each group member contributes to the learning experiences of other group members by sharing opinions and practical insights, participating in interactive sessions, and providing candid feedback.

This white paper first positions group coaching within the context of leadership development. It then discusses an empirical study that set out to determine the effects of group coaching on participants in the Gordon Institute of Business Science’s Leading Women programme. The learning points arising from the study – some expected and some surprising – could be valuable to others considering using group coaching to address organisational and/or personal goals and challenges.



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# Introduction

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The pace of change today is unprecedented and the future is looking increasingly uncertain. At the macro level, geopolitical tensions, rapid technological advances (particularly in the field of artificial intelligence [AI]), and climate change are among the factors driving uncertainty. Moreover, COVID-19 has left its mark, especially in a business context, making hybrid working arrangements a popular, though complicated, alternative to the traditional nine-to-five day at the office. Today's workforce is also more mobile and diverse than in years gone by, which has turned organisations into proverbial melting pots of skill sets, cultures, attitudes, and values. As a result, the need for effective leadership is at an all-time high.

There are many different approaches to leadership development – from traditional training to more personalised coaching. This white paper focuses on *group coaching*, which shares some characteristics with individual (or one-on-one) coaching, but is directed at groups of individuals with similar developmental needs and aspirations, even though they may operate in different functional areas or fields. The paper should resonate with a wide range of people on the leadership development continuum – from middle managers who wish to hone their interpersonal skills to optimise their teams' performance, to experienced high achievers who wish to enhance their strategic insights and leadership capabilities (Sounding Board, 2024).

In the paper, we first discuss different approaches to leadership development and the role that group coaching can play in enhancing leadership capabilities. Second, we share the results of an empirical study on a leadership development programme (the Leading Women programme) conducted at the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) that had a strong group coaching component. Finally, we discuss the implications of the study for organisations considering using group coaching as an aid to leadership development.

## What is effective leadership?

In a nutshell, effective leadership is the ability to motivate members of a group to willingly work towards the achievement of the group's goals (Amagoh, 2009; Day & Barney, 2012). The most successful organisations are not only productive and profitable, but also adept at leveraging their human talent and external networks to produce results that help to bring about positive societal change.

While technology is certainly changing the face and pace of business, the human element remains paramount. Humans are still better (than machines) at critically and empathically analysing complex situations, solving problems, thinking strategically about the future, and helping others navigate their personal and professional journeys through life. Humans' relational character and natural tendency to connect with others make them a powerful resource in an organisation. However, their collaborative instincts and efforts need to be skilfully harnessed and enabled. Ultimately, it is the leaders in an organisation who need to pull all the pieces together in service of outcomes that matter.

Leading an organisation through times of great change and disruption requires special insights and skills, which require ongoing improvement. Continuously building awareness helps one discover new ways to navigate change. Having a personal development plan with clear pathways towards professional success helps leaders stay aspirational and motivated. This injects freshness and enthusiasm into the organisational climate.

According to leadership expert and author, John Maxwell (as cited in Vakil, 2019), "The single biggest way to impact an organization is to focus on leadership development. There is almost no limit to the potential of an organization that recruits good people, raises them up as leaders and continually develops them."

## The importance of humane leadership

In today's increasingly complex, fractured, and uncertain world, *humane* leadership is becoming a key competitive advantage for organisations. Humane leadership concerns putting people (and their well-being) first. It is about recognising that every employee, team member or associate is unique, valuable, and deserving of respect.

A humane leader is the antithesis of an autocratic leader who uses a top-down, "command-and-control" approach in an attempt to get things done. A humane leader displays compassion, empathy, and fairness towards others, and promotes collaboration, inclusivity, trust, transparency, and accountability. Such a leader also encourages and welcomes feedback, views mistakes as learning opportunities, and celebrates successes as collective achievements. When skilfully executed, humane leadership can encourage positive, sustainable results from members of the group/team as they have a new-found sense of belonging, purpose, and empowerment (Castelhana, 2023).

## Business schools and the leadership development challenge

Business schools have long been active in the leadership development field, using various forms of training to develop individuals' skills in strategic planning, critical analysis, problem-solving, and relationship building (Stefaniak, 2017). Business school leadership development programmes are designed to build academic knowledge and practical business insights, often

with the help of case studies, individual and group projects, and simulations.

Nevertheless, studies have shown that leadership development programmes rarely incorporate other learning modalities, such as coaching or mentoring, which focus more on building self-awareness and mobilising personal agency (Scheepers & Reid, 2022). This can dull the prospects of the training delivering a visible return on investment (Fleissig, 2014; Percival et al., 2013). However, organisations want more than a pleasing financial return on investment from a leadership development programme. A great development programme also creates more responsive and effective leaders, while cultivating a more humane workplace.

Recently, the research community has concentrated on the valuable role that coaching can play in management and leadership development programmes (Reid, Cook et al., 2020). For example, there is growing interest in executive (one-on-one) coaching as a way of enhancing organisational effectiveness. Yet, executive coaching has also been criticised for only focusing on individual outcomes and for being too expensive to effectively scale (J. J. Britton, 2015; Brown & Grant, 2010). As a result, embedding a culture of coaching and using *group coaching* are being advocated in some quarters as more cost-effective and sustainable ways of building leadership skills and capacity (Flückiger et al., 2017; Fusco et al., 2016a; Reid, Proudfoot, & Ackermann, 2020).

# Leadership development – human capital and social capital



There are many theories about leadership and how it can be developed. Some theories focus on *human capital* – that is, the intrapersonal competencies and behaviours associated with leaders, including self-awareness, self-motivation, agency, and self-regulation. Other theories focus on *social capital* – namely the interpersonal and relational attributes of leaders, including empathy for others, a collaborative nature, an open mindset,

an ability to influence positively, and an ability to manage conflict (Dabke, 2016; Day, 2000; Galli & Müller-Stewens, 2012; Hollenbeck & Jamieson, 2015; Noe et al., 2017).

The human capital approach to developing leaders uses methods such as education, training, coaching, and personal development plans. In contrast, the social capital approach uses methods

including networking events, interactive simulations and role play, team building, group coaching, and mentoring. The two approaches can play a complementary role, especially under the guidance of an intentional expert.

The social capital approach has been undervalued in the past, yet it resonates with the contemporary view of organisational leadership as a contextual, group-driven, and relationship-based phenomenon. It recognises that leadership is a dynamic social activity with the emphasis on collaboration and collective success (Galli & Müller-Stewens, 2012; Hollenbeck & Jamieson, 2015; Noe et al., 2017).

Figure 1 provides a simple visual comparison of the human capital and social capital approaches.

Leaders need to develop a depth of self-insight, personal agency, and an ability to dynamically prioritise what matters most in a context. Focused individual coaching is very helpful for this. Learning requires stretch and safety factors. Stretch relates to expanding one's mind, identity, and values, while safety is the result of an expert-led professional process that mitigates

resistance and allows change to be actively pursued and embraced.

Consequently, an optimal learning environment is one that is supportive *and* challenging. To enable both, psychological safety is core, especially as learners may feel out of their comfort zone and vulnerable when tasked with introspective development work. Psychological safety is the ability to ask questions, take risks, and make mistakes, without fear of negative consequences. Often evident in teams, it can lead to better decision-making and results, while encouraging a culture of continuous learning and improvement (Gallo, 2023).

As leadership involves encouraging others to strive towards the achievement of group goals, it needs to be exercised within an interpersonal context (Day et al., 2014). The most effective way to deepen insight, give feedback, and support change is in real-time social leadership interactions. A successful leadership development programme creates well-rounded leaders who are able to integrate their acquired knowledge and skills into their unique context, while also enabling others.

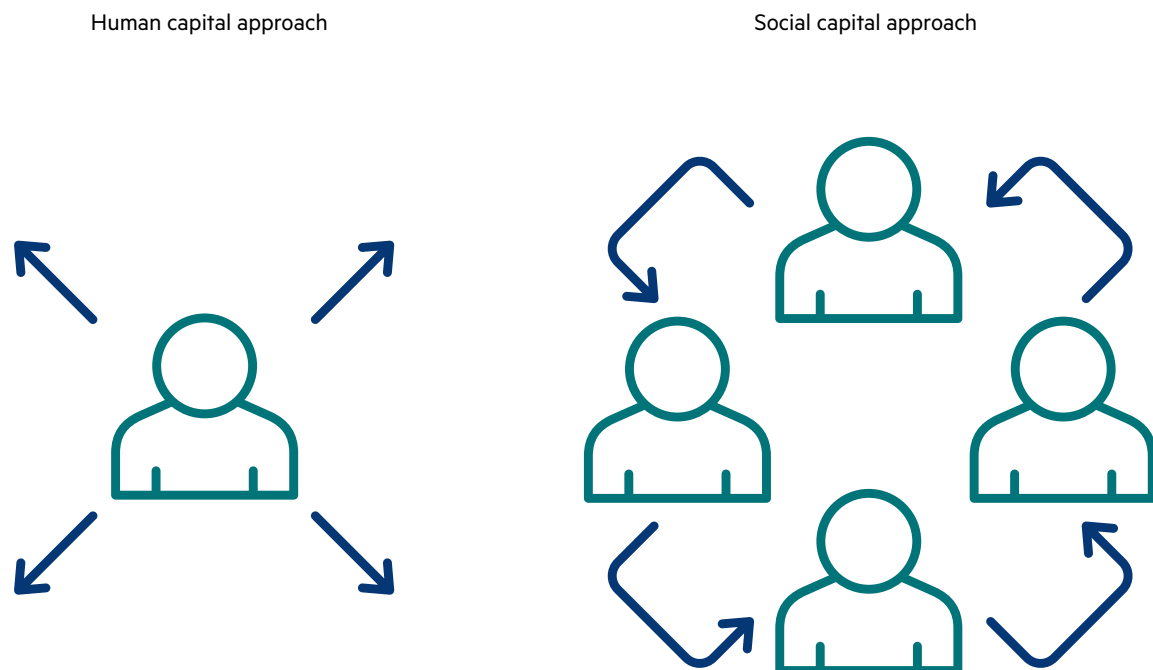
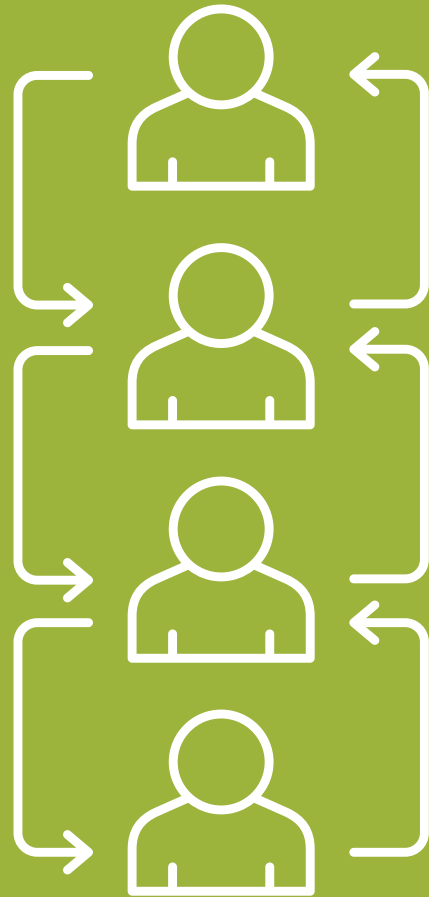


Figure 1: Human capital approach versus social capital approach



# Group coaching – a game changer for leadership development programmes?

A growing number of scholars regard group coaching as a valuable tool in leadership development (Hernandez et al., 2011). However, literature on the *measured effects* of group coaching on leadership development outcomes is sparse (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Flückiger et al., 2017; Fusco et al., 2016a). Reid, Cook et al. (2020) and Scheepers and Reid (2022) discussed the rationale for combining teaching and coaching in leadership development programmes. Nevertheless, *how different forms of coaching* can add value to such programmes requires more in-depth research (Hooijberg & Lane, 2009; Korotov, 2016; Stefaniak, 2017).

## Coaching and group coaching compared

Compared with individual coaching, group coaching is a comparatively recent intervention in the leadership development space (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Brown & Grant, 2010; Flückiger

et al., 2017; Mbokota & Reid, 2022). Both approaches prioritise working with context (internal subjective context and external applied context) as opposed to content (teaching established principles), but they also differ from each other (see Table 1).

According to Sir John Whitmore (as cited in A. Britton, 2019), who is an authority on coaching and leadership development, “Coaching is unlocking a person’s potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn, rather than teaching them.”

Leadership coach and diversity consultant, Andrea Janzen (2021), said of group coaching: “Instead of being accountable to one person (your coach), you are accountable to your coach *and* a group of your peers.”

## Differences between Individual coaching and Group coaching

<b>Individual coaching:</b> highly personalised and focused	<b>Group coaching:</b> highly interactive and dynamic
Coaching focuses on the development of individuals (coachees) through a guided process of self-examination, self-discovery, and growth.	Like coaching, group coaching focuses on the development of individuals (coachees), but within a group context. It relies on the group's active participation and feedback.
Coaches help coachees to enhance their awareness of self and others, and to find the clarity and courage to formulate and achieve their personal and professional goals.	A coach works with a few clients simultaneously, creating a supportive and collaborative environment.
Coaches actively listen, ask thought-provoking questions, and provide feedback. They encourage their coachees to draw on their insights and experiences and to alter their thoughts and behaviours to achieve better results.	Coachees learn from one another's insights and experiences and benefit from their coach's feedback and guidance.
Coaches encourage active learning, which focuses on achieving results that impact individuals' context and goals for measurable outcomes.	Coaches utilise individual coaching interventions, such as goal setting, reflection, and action planning, but supplement these with discussions and exercises designed to surface and promote collective learning.
Coaching is non-judgemental and completely confidential, allowing individuals to critically reflect on their attitudes and behaviours, and to decide what and how they wish to change.	In time, coachees can become "peer coaches" who contribute to one another's personal growth by sharing their collective insights, displaying empathy and trust, and allowing their interpersonal dynamics to play out. The group acts as a mirror, enabling members to learn from one another and more easily extend that learning into other interpersonal work contexts.
If well executed, coaching can be transformational as it can open up a whole new realm of personal and professional perspectives and opportunities.	In addition to being a repository of learning resources and techniques, the group can provide the backdrop for coachees to practise the actual skills of coaching leadership so that they can embed them in their own contexts.

Table 1: Differences between individual and group coaching

Sources: Aas and Flückiger (2016); Aas and Vavik (2015); A. Britton (2019); J. J. Britton (2015); Brown and Grant (2010); Hawkins (2011); Mbokota and Reid (2022); Scheepers and Reid (2022)

*Group coaching differs from training, in that the coach sets the broad direction and parameters for the facilitated interaction between group members, but does not prescribe the content (e.g., a training programme outline) or an evaluative or strict outcome (e.g., a pass mark of 70%). Learning takes place in a more spontaneous manner, with a development focus, but the coach still shapes and facilitates the process, the interpersonal dynamics, and the accountability for the group's chosen outcomes. This optimises the learning experience for all group members.*

## Group coaching – the team coaching versus the learning-group coaching approach

Studies have shown that about 60% of group coaching is directed at established teams of people who share a common goal and who will continue to work together as intact teams. This is known as “team coaching” (Moore, 2022). The other 40% of group coaching is directed at groups of people – who may work in the same organisation but are not part of the same working team – who come together to learn through interactive exchanges of views and experiences. This is known as “learning-group coaching” (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; J. J. Britton, 2015; Hawkins, 2011; Mbokota & Reid, 2022).

The tools and techniques used in group coaching sessions will depend on the group’s purpose, composition, size, diversity, and length of engagement (J. J. Britton, 2015). For example, a group with a common goal at the outset (e.g., to

enhance productivity or to achieve greater diversity in the organisation) might benefit from predetermined themes to steer the various coaching sessions (J. J. Britton, 2015; Kets de Vries, 2015).

## Group coaching – adding value to a leadership development programme

Group coaching can add value to a leadership development programme in a number of ways. These are outlined in Table 2.

<b>Creates a safe place for open dialogue and self-discovery</b>	It scales up the coaching effort to a few people, but still allows an intimate space for dialogue, sharing of views, and joint discovery.
<b>Unearths different perspectives and competencies</b>	It helps to build personal competencies, such as self-awareness and deep listening skills, and provides a social learning environment.
	It enables group members to consider multiple (and even contradictory) perspectives. This optimises their learning.
	It enhances group members’ understanding of and empathy for one another’s perspectives and experiences. This positively impacts group morale, cohesion, and performance.
	It brings unconscious or suppressed bias out into the open. This can be addressed in a constructive manner within the group and the solutions then applied across the organisation.
	It awakens authentic leadership qualities, such as consciousness, confidence, and congruency. It encourages innovative thinking by providing opportunities to challenge the status quo and evaluate alternatives.
<b>Facilitates practising and polishing of skills</b>	It enables group members to practise their specific leadership skills through role-play, case studies, and group exercises. From the feedback they receive, group members can then work on the areas needing improvement.
	It enables group members to practise and polish their appraisal and feedback skills.
<b>Drives greater organisational cohesion</b>	It encourages group members to “speak the same language”, which is very useful when the group is drawn from different functional units in the organisation.
	It provides the foundation for an agile and cohesive learning culture in an organisation. In time, this should deliver a tangible return on investment in the form of optimised performance.
<b>Encourages accountability and continuous improvement</b>	It allows multiple feedback loops and ongoing monitoring and support.
	It nurtures a sense of accountability.
	It encourages agency and ensures that sound ideas and solutions are affirmed and implemented.

Table 2: How group coaching adds value to leadership development programmes

Sources: Aas and Flückiger (2016); Aas and Vavik (2015); J. J. Britton (2015); De Lasson et al. (2016); Flückiger et al. (2017); Fusco et al. (2015a, 2015b, 2016b); Van der Veen and Reid (2021)

In a volatile, unpredictable world, the need to carry on learning is paramount. Group coaching is designed to leverage the power of individual and peer learning to enhance group members' innate, personal qualities and interpersonal leadership skills. However, all the necessary pieces need to

be in place for group coaching to be effective, including a suitably skilled and experienced coach, a well-chosen group of participants, and a conducive learning environment. Figure 2 illustrates the different elements in the group coaching process.

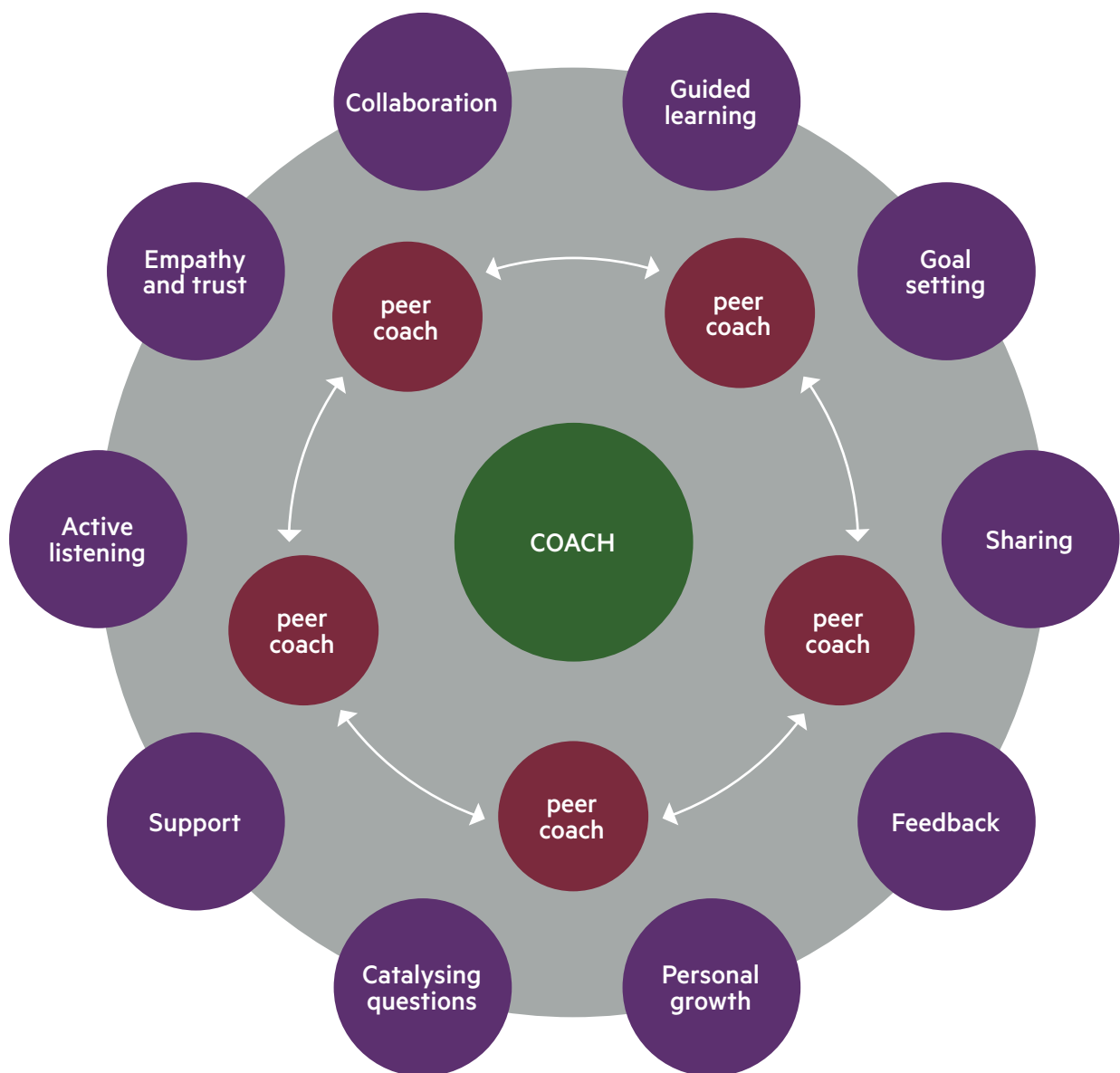
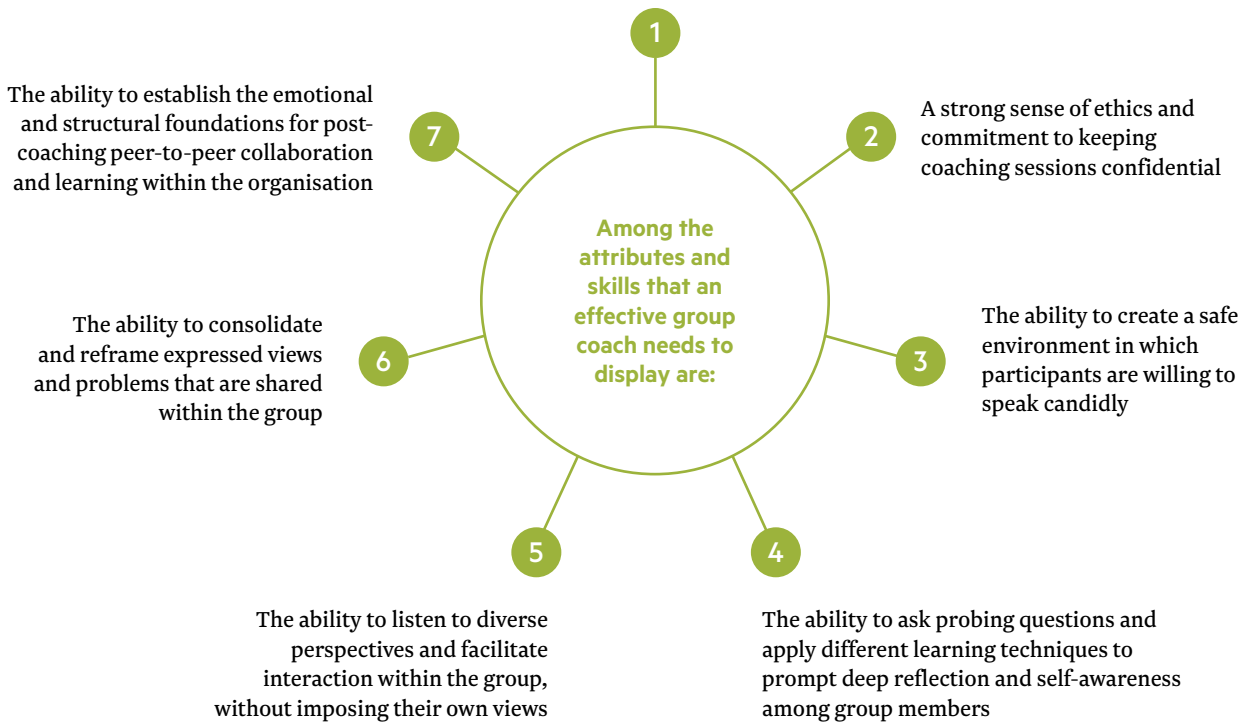


Figure 2: Elements in the group coaching process

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Experience in both individual and group coaching techniques, as the former complements the latter



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It is also important to know what the various useful applications are for group coaching and when it is not the best approach to use. These different applications were laid out in the book written by N. Cunningham (Ed.) Rethink: Growth and

learning through coaching and organisational development, the chapter on Group coaching, dealing with applications (Reid, A. 2014) and these are laid out below:

### Different applications of group coaching

Interventions aimed at building or enhancing leadership capabilities take a variety of forms – from formal, standardised training and development programmes spanning several weeks or months to individually tailored coaching and mentoring sessions. Group coaching can be applied in various ways – either as an accompaniment to or as the central pillar of a development programme.

For instance, group coaching may be used to build leadership skills at different levels of an organisation that is on an expansion path or among female managers who are finding it difficult to get ahead in a traditionally male-dominated industry, such as manufacturing. In addition, it may be valuable when a corporate takeover or merger has left the organisation with a mixture of incompatible leadership styles, which need to be aligned. Group coaching may also be effective in forging higher levels of teamwork between functional units within an organisation that currently operate in silos or between the organisation and members of its external supply chain. Another variation is “triad coaching” involving a coach, a client, and the client’s line manager, which adds a strong dose of realism and practicality to the coaching sessions.

The size of the group in a group coaching session can vary, but it should always be “small” – with 15 being the maximum number of group members and three or four being the minimum number, according to some studies. When a group is too big, it can discourage people from candidly sharing their views and group members may not be given the individual attention they need. If a group is too small, the interactive experience and opportunity to learn from other group members may be compromised.

Likewise, there are no hard and fast rules regarding the duration of group coaching sessions or how many should be conducted. It depends on the scope of the opportunity being explored or the depth of the problem being probed, as well as the envisaged end result. Time and budgetary constraints can also significantly influence the design of a group coaching intervention. In this regard, virtual coaching may be a reasonable alternative to face-to-face coaching, although the power of direct, personal engagement is undeniable.

Various tools can be used in group coaching sessions to stimulate interaction and support the learning process. Role plays, simulations, PEST (political, economic, social, and technological) analyses, and 360-degree feedback mechanisms are all useful tools.

## When is group coaching not an advisable option?

Group coaching can sometimes disappoint as a leadership development tool when compared to, for example, one-on-one coaching. Refer to Table 3 for some scenarios in which group coaching is discouraged.

<p><b>When attention needs to be given to individuals' personal needs and aspirations</b></p>	<p>As group coaching is designed for a diverse group, individuals might not be given the same level of attention as in one-on-one coaching, particularly if the coaching sessions have strict time limits.</p>
<p><b>When there is insufficient trust within the group</b></p>	<p>Group coaching's effectiveness will be influenced by the attitudes and dynamics within the group. For example, some members may not trust each other enough to communicate openly and honestly or might be reluctant to challenge one another for fear of reprisal.</p>
<p><b>When the organisational culture does not support it</b></p>	<p>The organisational culture may not support a collaborative learning environment in which individuals learn through frank interpersonal exchanges, feedback, and self-discovery.</p>
<p><b>When the individuals do better in one-on-one situations</b></p>	<p>Some people thrive in groups, while others do better when they receive one-on-one attention. This is often owing to a lack of confidence and/or reluctance to share their personal thoughts and feelings openly in a group, in case they are judged.</p>

Table 3: When group coaching is not advisable

Sources: The Bader Group (2024); Browning (2021); Pandey (2023); Spence (2024)

The drawbacks outlined in Table 3 can be mitigated by having a well-qualified and experienced group coach and agreed coaching outcomes.

## The study



To gain richer, more practical insights into the role of group coaching in enhancing leadership capabilities, two academics from GIBS conducted a study on a leadership development programme run by the business school, the Leading Women programme, which has a strong group coaching component.<sup>1</sup> The study was conducted and written up by Alison Reid, and the findings written and published as an academic journal article titled "The role of group coaching in developing leadership effectiveness in a business school leadership development programme". *South African Journal of Business Management*, 53(1), a3105 (Mbokota & Reid, 2022). The study intention was to put various group coaching theories to the test and arrive at a better understanding of the group coaching process, its impact

on leadership effectiveness, and how it can be optimised for different organisational contexts.

The study had two objectives, namely:

- To investigate changes in managers' leadership effectiveness after they had participated in the leadership development programme; and
- To establish the role that group coaching played in the development of effective leaders.

Although the study was not conducted with individuals from one single organisation, as participants were from various corporates, the underlying assumption was that the results would be similar if the participants' organisations were similar.

<sup>1</sup> The Leading Women programme on which the empirical study was based had two main components: (1) classroom plenary sessions (the emphasis being on facilitation as opposed to lectures), with topics including global organisational trends, self-leadership, personal mastery, and women in business, and a number of guest speakers (industry leaders) being invited to share their experiences and insights with the group; and (2) group coaching sessions (which were the focus of the empirical study discussed in this white paper).

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## Study methodology

An exploratory, mixed-methods approach was used for the study (Subedi, 2016), which comprised both quantitative and qualitative research elements. The quantitative study constituted *phase 1*, which involved the administration of a 360-degree, multisource feedback instrument (an online questionnaire) to determine participants' leadership effectiveness before and after they participated in the leadership development programme.

### Consider the case of Thobekile Nxumalo,<sup>2</sup> a senior leader and participant of the 2023 cohort of GIBS's Leading Women programme:

When I enrolled in the GIBS Leading Women programme, I had a clear understanding of what it meant in terms of navigating the corporate landscape. As a black female professional who has already gained some exposure in the field, I was very aware of the unique challenges I face as part of a marginalised group.

I felt somewhat disconnected from my true self and aspirations [and] was allowing external expectations and stereotypes to influence how I perceived myself. I hoped this programme would provide me with the tools and resources to achieve my professional aspirations and succeed in leadership roles.

## Phase 1

### Completing the questionnaire

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This phase aimed to establish whether the programme had improved participants' leadership effectiveness. The qualitative study constituted *phase 2*, which extended the analysis by exploring the specific role of group coaching in the development of leadership effectiveness. This phase involved in-depth interviews with selected participants.

#### Participants

The study's sample was made up of 51 participants drawn from the ranks of upper-middle and senior female managers who had previously participated in a GIBS leadership development programme.

#### Programme format

The leadership development programme in this study consisted

of six sessions – one session per month over a six-month period. Each session comprised a half-day classroom session, followed by a half-day structured group coaching session. The classroom sessions were not traditional teaching sessions; but were instead facilitated sessions incorporating case studies, guest speakers, and various forms of participant engagement. The group coaching component covered approximately half the programme and followed the learning-group coaching approach (Mbokota & Reid, 2022).

#### Group coaching themes

Each of the six group coaching sessions had a specific theme (see Figure 3). These were:

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<sup>2</sup> Thobekile's feedback on the Leading Women programme was not specifically solicited for this white paper. She shared her thoughts as part of GIBS's standard evaluation process, which asked for insight like, "Tell us about your experiences during this programme". We are very grateful to Thobekile for allowing us to use her feedback in this paper and giving readers a real-life (and very personal) account of group coaching and its many benefits.

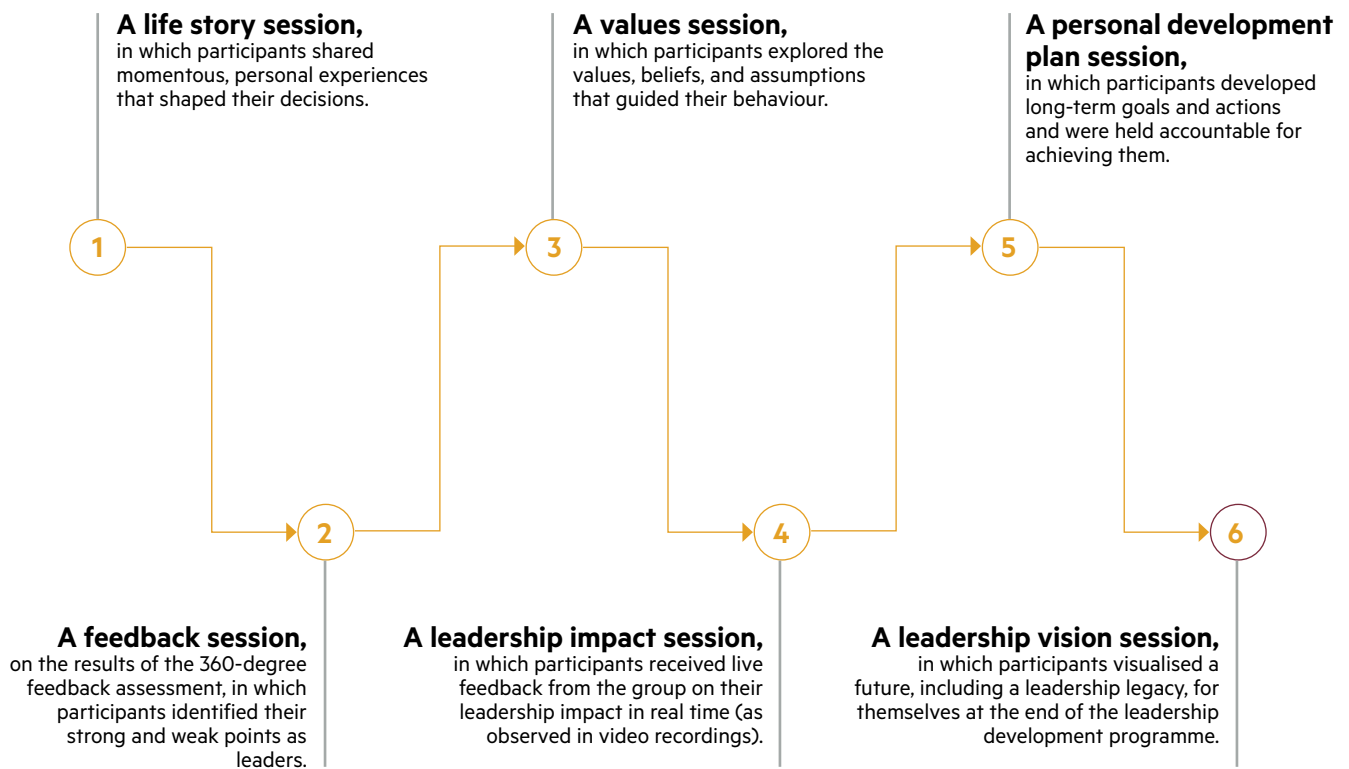


Figure 3: Group coaching themes

Various coaching tools and techniques were used to encourage participants to integrate and internalise their learning during the different sessions (Griffiths, 2015).

## As Thobekile continued on her Leading Women programme journey, she had the following reflections about some of the specific thematic sessions in the programme:

### Life story:

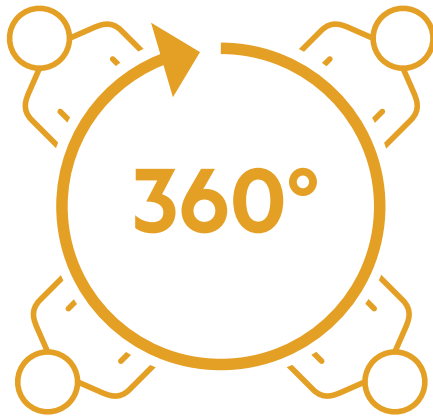
The life story exercise challenged me in a way that I had never experienced before, forcing me to confront myself honestly and gain a profound understanding of the person beneath the surface. It was a mind-blowing experience to see how, beneath the tip of the iceberg that everyone sees, there lies a vast range of key life experiences.

### 360-degree feedback:

Learning how to interpret the feedback from the 360-degree feedback review was a game changer for me. It brought a new dimension to accepting constructive criticism and utilising it effectively. I particularly appreciated the concept of how feedback provides insight into our superpowers and the needs others may be trying to convey to us.

### Leadership vision:

I have gratitude for the creative and insightful sixth coaching circle where we formulated our vision statements and shared them with the group. Hearing how others viewed me using different symbols and characters that aligned with my vision statement was a humbling and heart-warming experience.



### 360-degree feedback assessment

The 360-degree feedback questionnaire and assessment by Thornhill Associates (2023a) formed the core of the quantitative study (see Box 1). At the start of the leadership development programme, the participants were asked to identify individuals

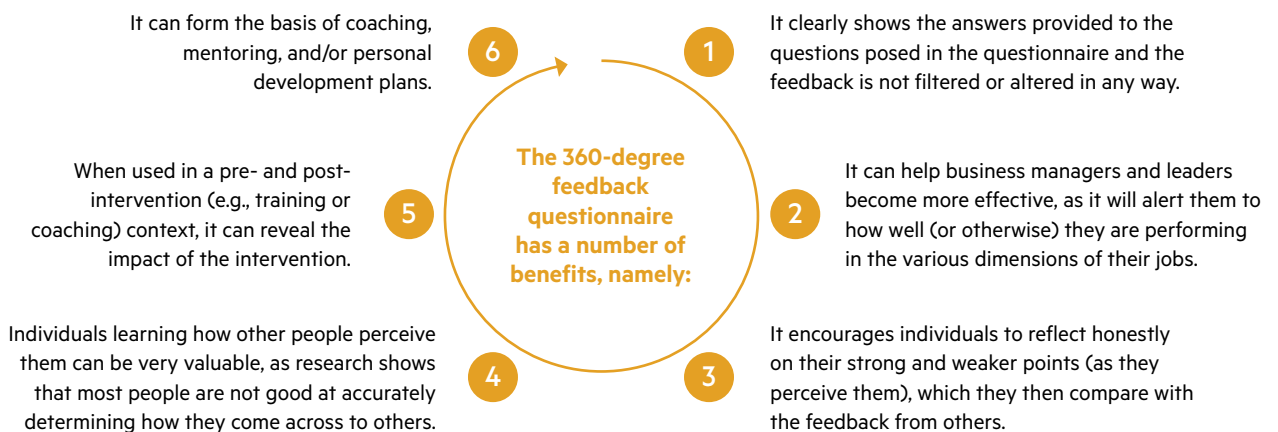
with whom they were in regular contact, including immediate managers, peers, and subordinates (hereafter referred to as respondents), to complete an online questionnaire – both before the start and six months after the completion of the programme, for comparison purposes. Participants also completed the questionnaire.

The questionnaire comprised 50 questions (supported by a Likert-style response scale) that GIBS had previously used in several of its leadership development programmes to assess changes in participants’ leadership effectiveness as a result of the programme. The questions had originally been compiled in line with the Nicholls (1994) “*head, heart, and hands*” model, which assesses leadership behaviours according to *head* factors (e.g., strategic vision, strategic pathways, and organisational culture), *heart* factors (e.g., inspiration, beliefs, feelings, vision, and purpose), and *hands* factors (e.g., capability and commitment) – refer to Box 2. Subsequently, GIBS extended the model by including 12 *impact* questions relating to how the leadership behaviour impacted others.

#### Box 1: What is a 360-degree feedback questionnaire?

A 360-degree feedback questionnaire allows individuals to gather information about themselves via an online questionnaire. The questionnaire is completed both by the individuals and by others to whom they choose to send it. It is called a “360-degree” feedback questionnaire because it is designed to solicit feedback on individuals’ behaviour and/or performance from people who surround them in the work

environment, such as their managers (above); their direct reports (below); and their peers, suppliers, and customers (alongside). The feedback from each group is collated into a report that highlights, for example, the individuals’ strengths, interpersonal and leadership capabilities, and areas in need of development.



Source: Thornhill Associates (2023a)

The leadership dimensions and key components are summarised in Table 4. Respondents had to select the relevant option from the seven-point scale, ranging from “seldom effective” to “always a strength”.

Leadership dimension	Description	Key components
<b>Head</b> (creating direction)	Relates to understanding the business in its broader context, including the need for a forward-looking and solutions-based approach	Big picture, vision, business understanding, solutions focus, innovation, decision-making
<b>Heart 1</b> (enabling self)	Relates to the personal aspects of leadership and emotional intelligence	Self-awareness, openness, growth, energy, self-control, action, authenticity, confidence
<b>Heart 2</b> (enabling others)	Relates to the interpersonal aspects of leadership and emotional intelligence	Listening; respect; valuing and celebrating others; support for and confidence in others; building, coaching, and support for others' decisions
<b>Heart 3</b> (enabling groups and the organisation)	Relates to exercising influence in effective ways and ensuring that people can work together constructively	Self-confidence, influence, ability to act for the team in thought and practice, management of conflict and power dynamics, networking, ability to inspire loyalty
<b>Hands</b> (execution)	Relates to holding people and processes accountable and ensuring that they are properly developed	High standards, clear objectives, consequences for poor performance, use of resources, training implementation
<b>Impact</b> (of leadership)	Relates to what people feel about an individual's manager when in their company	Aspects influenced by the heart of the leader

Table 4: Thornhill's 360-degree leadership effectiveness assessment  
Source: Adapted from Thornhill Associates (2023a, 2023b)

## Interview format

In-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015) to: (1) add to the data obtained in phase 1; and (2) assess the extent to which the group coaching component in GIBS's leadership development programme had contributed to enhanced

leadership effectiveness among the participants (Subedi, 2016). However, the questions posed in the semi-structured interview guide related to the effects of both the classroom plenary sessions and the group coaching sessions. The interviews were recorded and supported by field notes and general observation.

### Box 2: Using the head-heart-hands model to gauge a person's leadership style

Leaders often display head, heart, and hands leadership behaviours, but in different measures, according to their natural strengths and innate style. However, organisational psychologist and change consultant, Barbara Trautlein (as cited in Walter, 2013), asserted that leaders today should ideally have a blend of these three styles, as this will make them a "whole leader", capable of adapting to ever-changing situations and people demands. Trautlein (as cited in Walter, 2013) explained that a whole leader: "is able to lead with the head – focusing on the big-picture goal and business objectives; the heart – knowing how to engage, coach and motivate people; and ... [the] hands – providing the tactical tools and skills necessary like a project manager".

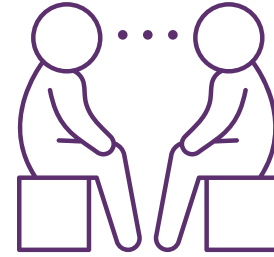
This is not to say that individuals should attempt to change their leadership style. It is important for leaders to recognise and leverage their natural strengths and inclinations. Nevertheless, they should also understand the value of adapting their leadership style when circumstances dictate.

Those leading with their head are focused on the big picture, are goal-orientated, and are preoccupied with tangible achievements and growth. Those leading with their heart are collaborative and inclusive, and thrive on the energy they receive from people and relationships. Those leading with their hands excel at planning and executing tasks, and sometimes break the typical leadership mould by rolling up their sleeves to help others get the job done (Gambhir, 2017).

# Phase

# 2

## Conducting the interviews



### Participants

At the conclusion of the leadership development programme, six (12%) of the 51 participants in phase 1 (the questionnaire) were invited to be interviewed in phase 2 (the interviews). A simple random sampling technique was used to select the six participants (Short et al., 2002), who were then further checked to ensure they were suitably representative of the industries from which they were drawn.

### Results of the study

This section first presents the pre- and post-programme assessment results pertaining to each of the elements and associated components listed in Table 4. Moreover, this section discusses some of the key findings from the interviews in relation to these dimensions and components. The results relate to the development of leadership effectiveness as a whole, namely resulting from both the classroom facilitation and the group coaching components.

## Pre- and post-programme assessment results



### Head: Creating direction

The *questionnaires* revealed that participants did not feel they had improved in terms of the leadership dimension. However, other respondents (i.e., the participants' managers, peers, and subordinates) felt that participants' ability to formulate a vision and create direction had greatly improved.

The *interviews* indicated that group coaching had helped participants to remain on course once they had set the direction and goals and established the game plan. Among the techniques participants used were setting objectives, introducing checks and balances, and evaluating their performance against the objectives in the interest of continuous improvement. For instance:

And then just to define it, refine it and forever work on it and even when encountering challenges somehow in your mind you have a framework, an understanding that this is a game plan, so to speak, that I am working. (Research participant)

Personal development objectives, self-introspection, things that needed changing, things that needed improvement. I believe life and everything you do is about continuous improvement. (Research participant)



### Heart 1: Enabling self

The *questionnaires* revealed that participants saw some improvement in their awareness of self and authentic self, which they associated with "learning more", "delving into self", "learning about whole self", and "opening my eyes". Several participants reported that they had acquired "new insights" when it came to "knowing authentic self". Moreover, participants mentioned understanding themselves better, which they viewed as an innate ability, rather than a hard skill.

The *interviews* showed that most participants felt their self-confidence had improved, which manifested in greater certainty and courage. This positive shift enabled them to speak out more, voice their opinions more confidently, capitalise on their strengths, and focus on pursuing their beliefs and passions. For example:

And I think if you understand [yourself] as a leader, if you get to know who you are, then it is easy for you to deal with other people. So, with this course, I started learning and understanding myself better, and my values. (Research participant)

I initially thought that there is a set of skills and things that you need to learn and practise before you can lead, but actually the one thing that the programme taught me is going back inside yourself and asking: "What do I already have that makes me an influential leader and how can I use what I have already got?" (Research participant)

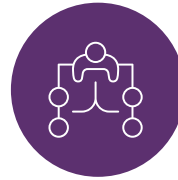


## Heart 2: Enabling others

The *interviews* revealed that both participants and respondents acknowledged some improvement in terms of leadership components, such as listening to, respecting, and valuing and celebrating others. The *interviews* confirmed that participants had noticed improvements in their ability to understand and engage with others. For instance:

I think it has changed my outlook on how I look at my subordinates, the fact that you need to be sensitive to where they are coming from, what the situation is ... if you have people who are happy and who you can relate to as a human being. (Research participant)

Because they feel valued and they feel there is some acknowledgement for who they are. So that has been very key, critical to me. (Research participant)



## Heart 3: Enabling groups and the organisation

The *questionnaires* reported that respondents saw a significant change in the participants, despite the participants themselves perceiving no significant changes in their leadership effectiveness in terms of this dimension. However, the *interviews* revealed that participants noted an improvement in their ability to influence others, including being motivated to set goals and to mentor and empower subordinates. As an example:

What true leadership is about is mentoring. You cannot proceed as an authentic leader if it is all about self and how you get up the corporate ladder ... When you can walk away from an organisation and people turn around and say, "It is because of you that I am in his position". (Research participant)

I want the guys to come in and participate. I don't feel I need to be the one that is handling everything, so it is delegating and giving them freedom and opportunity. (Research participant)



## Hands: Execution

The *questionnaires* unveiled that respondents saw a significant change in the participants, despite the participants themselves perceiving no significant changes in their leadership effectiveness in terms of this dimension. The *interviews* were not particularly revealing as to whether or how participants' execution effectiveness had improved as a result of the programme, though there was substantial commentary on goal achievement, having a game plan, and ensuring a sense of direction.



## Impact of leadership

The *questionnaires* showed that respondents saw a significant change in participants' views, despite the participants themselves perceiving no significant changes in their leadership effectiveness in terms of this dimension.

**When Thobekile reflected on her Leading Women programme journey, she noted the kind of impact that the particular format of group coaching had had on shifting her internal world of values and beliefs as well as the growth she experienced through peer support and feedback:**

The most significant [thing] I've gained ... is a profound shift in perspective, primarily achieved through [the coach's] adept questioning. One of [the coach's] questions that resonated deeply with me was: "What does a particular experience unlock for you?" This inquiry has enabled me to gain a better understanding of my core values and has allowed me to better define my purpose more clearly.

I've come to realise why I make certain decisions and how my values shape the environments and relationships that bring out the best in me. Through the interactive peer feedback process, [the coach] allowed us to experience how we could coach others and facilitate their growth, while simultaneously experiencing personal growth ourselves. I learned that coaching isn't about having all the answers, but about asking the right questions and serving as a sounding board to help someone make sense of their thoughts.



# Key takeaways from the study

The empirical study produced some important takeaways, which could guide other education providers and organisations that are considering using the group coaching approach in their leadership development programmes. These takeaways are outlined below.



## Enhanced personal and social competencies:

The group coaching enhanced participants' personal (in relation to self) and social (in relation to others) competencies, which is really the “best of both worlds”. Personal competencies are associated with greater self-awareness, self-confidence, and authenticity; an enhanced sense of direction (having a “game plan”); and agency in having an improved capacity to set and achieve goals. Social competencies relate to a greater understanding of others and an ability to influence and empower others.



## Improved interpersonal skills:

In group coaching sessions, participants were able to polish their interpersonal skills – asking questions, expressing their views, challenging others' opinions, and showing support. These are the sorts of behaviours that leaders need to display on a regular basis, but which they may struggle with if they do not know themselves – or others – as well as they should.



## Importance of “peer coaches”:

While participants were given the opportunity to explore their inner thoughts, emotions, and attitudes, as well as to uncover hidden attributes or bias, they also learnt from other members of the group (their “peer coaches”). This gave them a richer understanding of their stronger and weaker points and the areas in need of change.



## Enhanced leadership effectiveness:

The combination of classroom facilitation and group coaching enhanced participants' leadership effectiveness across the head, heart, and hands dimensions. Interestingly, participants sometimes did not feel that their own leadership skills had improved as a result of the programme, although other respondents (i.e., their managers, peers, subordinates) invariably saw a marked change for the better. This reinforces the general finding in literature that people have blind spots and do not really know how they come across to others. Individuals tend to hold onto an existing idea of who they are, even when they have changed in a positive direction.

# The benefits of group coaching as a leadership development tool

The way in which group coaching contributes to leadership development is depicted in Figure 4.

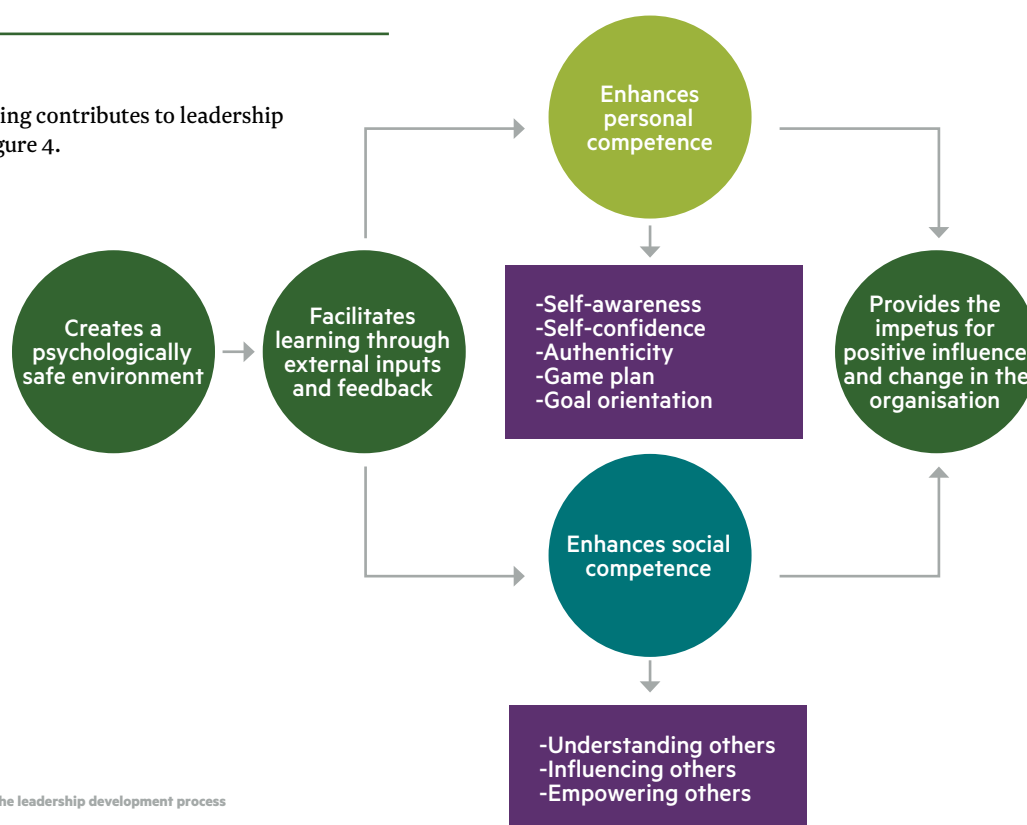


Figure 4: How group coaching contributes to the leadership development process

## Thobekile’s personal reflections of her leadership development journey highlight how some of these factors enabled, supported, and cultivated leadership for her in her own story:

What I found most valuable within my learning group was the profound realisation of how closely our challenges aligned. The ability to express ourselves openly in a non-judgemental space fostered a sense of psychological safety, where our voices were genuinely heard and understood.

Through interactions within the coaching circles and the one-on-one sessions, I’ve unearthed my individuality, my essence, and the unique lens through which I view the world. I no longer make choices solely based on external pressures or societal norms. Instead, I align my decisions with my core values, ensuring that they resonate with my authentic self. I’m becoming more assertive in the workplace and confident in expressing my ideas and advocating for myself.

I now feel better equipped to establish daily habits and practices that can lead me toward more substantial goals. I’ve become more deliberate in my actions, both personally and professionally. In essence, this coaching journey has not only deepened my self-awareness, but also empowered me to navigate life with newfound clarity and intentionality.

Understanding and harnessing my agency has transformed every aspect of my life, from the way I show up in the workplace to the relationships I form and my decision-making process. I’ve also discovered the strength in bringing my unique perspective as a black South African woman to the table, recognising that my experiences and insights are valuable assets.

I’m gradually learning to set boundaries that protect my well-being, while also fostering collaboration and inclusion. I am not only committed to nurturing my own growth, but also to passing this invaluable gift on to others, helping to foster their personal development.

### According to Thobekile:

While I acknowledge that I’m still a work in progress, I feel I am becoming more in tune with my own unique strengths and “superpowers”. I am not just “becoming” – I am already evolving into a better, more authentic, and purpose-driven version of myself.

The value of group coaching as a leadership development tool is heavily dependent on the coach (who must have the right experience and expertise), the participants (who ideally have similar goals, which lend themselves to productive coaching sessions), and the environment (which includes having the right venue, the right equipment, and enough time devoted to each session, without distractions or unnecessary interruptions).

### **Reflecting on how her coach enabled the growth she experienced, Thobekile alluded to the quality of coaching, which paved the way for this type of experience:**

[The coach's] ability to provide us with valuable insights and tools greatly contributed to shaping and moulding the person I long to become and the future "experiences" I am striving towards. [The coach's] coaching has seamlessly blended with this programme and, honestly, if I could hit the rewind button, I'd relive this entire experience all over again.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, group coaching may not be the optimal approach for everyone or every organisation. Some people may find it too revealing or invasive if they have sensitive or cautious natures. Others may be looking for a more personalised, focused approach, given their particular circumstances and priorities. However, with the right planning and ingredients, group coaching has the potential to become a tool of choice in the development and nurturing of more aware, authentic, confident, and accomplished leaders.

The most effective outcomes come from cultivating leadership that continues to give. If an enabled leader wants to and has learnt how to enable others, the impact truly scales.

### **Looking back at the whole experience, Thobekile said she felt inspired to actively create positive change for others – not only in being the leader she felt she could be, but also in catalysing the desire in others to lead:**

I can't wait to share the future results of all the valuable tools imparted to me as a "leading woman". I'm eager to continue growing as a leader, and I owe so much of that to [the coach's] unwavering support and the incredible environment ... created for transformation and self-discovery.

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## **Conclusion**

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If organisational success was simply a matter of creating structures and crunching numbers, leaders would have less-demanding jobs than they do. Running an organisation is largely about dealing with people – staff, customers, suppliers, service providers, officials, and many more. Successful organisations are normally imbued with technical skills and "soft skills", which are evidenced in how people work and interact with one another. Soft skills are difficult to develop and exercise, because they tend to be neglected in early education and are heavily context driven. They also centre on changing people's mindsets and behaviours, which may be deeply entrenched. Nevertheless, mental and behavioural shifts are essential if an organisation is to grow, prosper, and contribute to society.

Emerging evidence suggests that the inclusion of a group coaching component in a leadership development programme can pay dividends, both figuratively and literally. Not only is this type of coaching more cost-effective than individual (one-on-one) coaching, but "the collective approach taps into the power of collaborative exchange, replicating the social framework of a team or office space" (Reid, Proudfoot, & Ackermann, 2020). Therefore, it can deliver more practical results faster,

as well as enable scale and embed a coaching type of leadership culture. Group coaching encourages personal awareness, agency, and growth, while also finding solutions to group goals and challenges. Coaching sessions are intimate enough for participants to be candid, but large enough for them to learn from one another. Moreover, as group coaching focuses on actual business issues in real time, it enables participants to seamlessly transfer what they have learnt into the workplace, which hastens the return on investment.

Arguably, the biggest benefit of an intervention like group coaching is its ability to catalyse and scale leadership development. While technology has an important role to play in this regard, the human dimension will always be at the centre of the process. In an increasingly complex world, organisations need competent, motivational, and forward-thinking leaders, but they also need humane leaders – those who bring understanding, empathy, and compassion to their role. Group coaching and humane leadership have a symbiotic relationship, which lends itself to different types of analysis. This study has laid a valuable foundation for future research on the role of group coaching in humane leadership development.



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# Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

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The study's main limitations are the relatively small sample size and the composition of the sample. The fact that the sample comprised just female middle managers means that the results cannot be generalised to their male counterparts. Therefore, the study remains exploratory in nature. It is recommended that similar research be conducted using larger samples and covering both genders.

Furthermore, group coaching must move with the times and its specific impact and mechanisms of impact on leadership effectiveness need to be more extensively researched. For example, it would be useful to explore how coaching-inspired leadership changes are applied in the workplace, the effects of group coaching on leaders' performance, and this study's results replicated in other contexts.

There is much talk in professional circles about AI and its potential to replace humans with machines in a myriad of areas, including those requiring traditionally human skills, such as critical thinking, discernment, and empathy. Will disruptive

technologies interfere with the coaching profession, ultimately making human coaches redundant? What would that mean for group coaching in a leadership development context? All these are crucial areas for future research. At this point in time, it seems that effectively leveraging AI as an enabler or a "co-pilot" to support the best of what remains essentially human coaching could add value, access, and scale.

As technology continues to advance, group coaching sessions – both online and offline – could benefit from AI-generated case studies on specific themes raised within the group, as well as syntheses of the various coaching sessions, revealing key learning points and suggested action steps. The human coach will (at least for the foreseeable future) still have an important role to play, using various digital or AI applications to tailor-make an innovative and stimulating learning environment. Just as group coaching already benefits from practical interactions in real time, so will technology become an increasingly valuable companion in this process.

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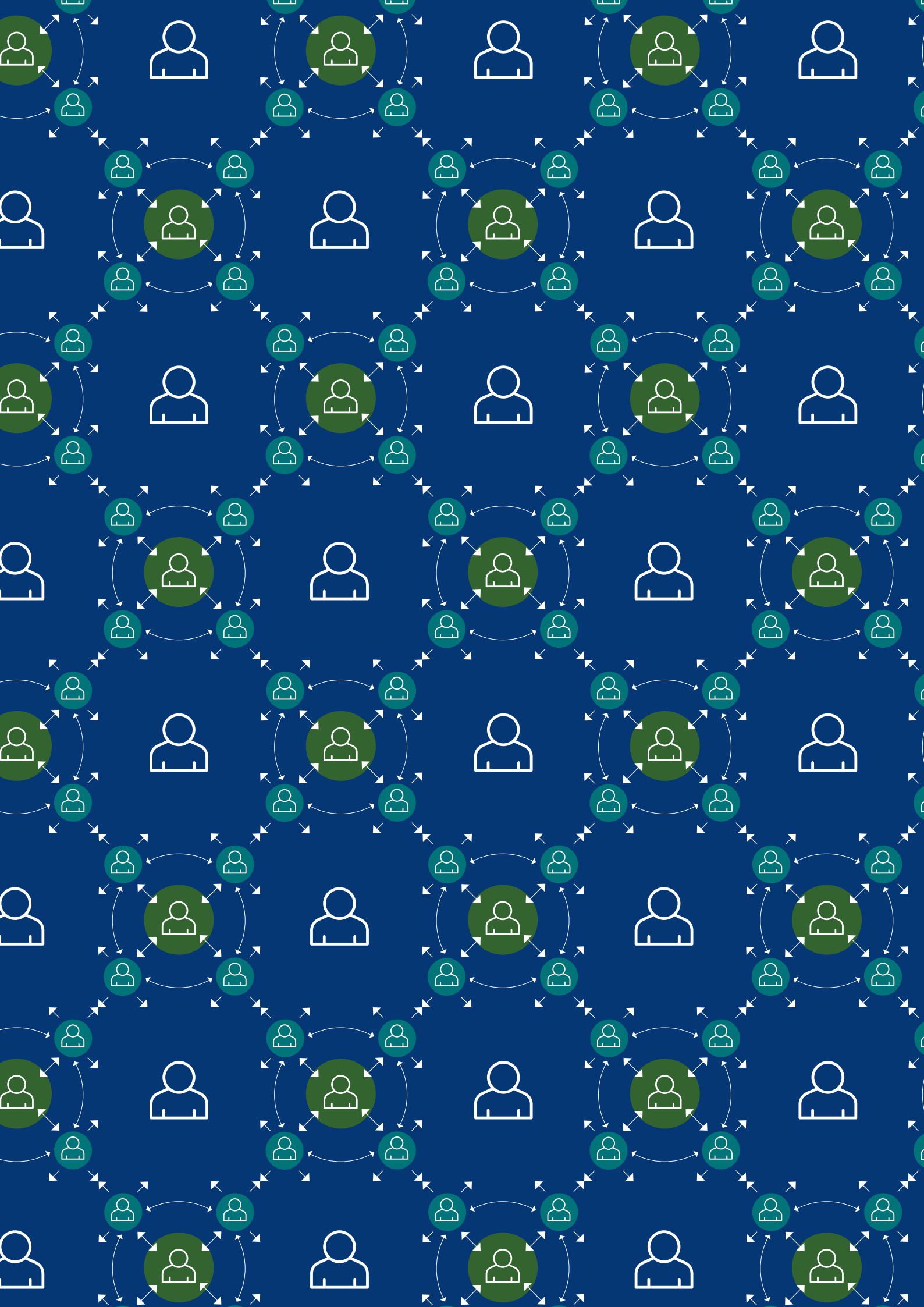
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