



USING VIRTUAL REALITY IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

A comprehensive guide: everything you need to know about VR in Learning

Using Virtual Reality in Leadership Development

Is the use of virtual reality for leadership training all it's hyped up to be? Until recently, the use of VR for any kind of soft skills development was underwhelming at best; graphics weren't up to expectations, the interactive elements were unconvincing, participants were getting sick and the cost of the technology required was prohibitive.

Fortunately, a rapid increase in demand has resulted in significant investment in VR technology and these issues are no longer a blocker for L&D. Walmart, BMW, Verizon and many other Fortune 500 companies are already using VR to develop soft skills and they're getting the results to back up the investment.

The case for Virtual Reality Leadership development

Disruptive technology, disruptive innovation, new competitors, new market dynamics and an unprecedented pace of change.... **are your leaders ready to face these challenges?** As the pace of change gets quicker, leaders are constantly having to face challenges that haven't been faced before. The good news is, L&D professionals no longer have to rely on training tools of the past to prepare leaders for these challenges. Multi-player, virtual reality leadership journeys have arrived in Dubai and we can now give leaders a competitive edge and prepare them with the tools of the future.



In this article, we explore some of the questions L&D leaders are asking:

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- **What are the benefits (and some of the objections to) using VR for leadership training? (Page 2)**
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- **What solutions are already out there for VR leadership training? (Page 4)**

If you're skeptical about VR and don't believe it can have any longer term impact on leadership capability, read on and we'll answer this and other concerns we're hearing from L&D leaders.

1. What exactly is Virtual Reality leadership training?

Virtual reality leadership training is an immersive scenario, completed by leaders wearing VR headsets that take them into a virtual world. In the case of multi-player VR training, leaders are immersed in a virtual world where they are expected to collaborate and successfully complete a series of tasks. An effective VR experience lasts 5 to 15 minutes and enables facilitators to test and observe a range of soft skills, including empathy, communication, collaboration, innovation, continuous improvement, agility and much more.

Virtual reality works by engaging our senses (sight, touch, hearing), which in turn sends signals to our brain to help us interpret and understand the world around us. With a VR headset on, your brain is tricked into believing you are in a very real environment using a stereoscopic display, which gives the impression of real world depth in 3 primary ways:

- 1. Clever use of shadows**
- 2. Making objects farther away from you move slower, and**
- 3. Displaying two slightly different angles of the scene in front of the user**

In addition to the sense of depth, the VR headset allows you to move around and interact with the virtual environment by touching objects and moving things around. In the case of the [HTC Vive](#) for example, the headset uses 70 different sensors and "room scale" tracking technology, allowing the user to move around in 3D space and use motion-tracked handheld controllers to interact with the environment. Spatial or 3D audio is used to complete the experience; this is the virtual placement of sound in a three dimensional environment, emulating sounds from different angles.

All of these techniques combine to create a fully immersive training experience, enabling facilitators to see participant's authentic, natural and instinctive reactions to the scenario they are faced with.

With such high stakes, pilots and formula one racing car drivers have been using hyper realistic simulations for many years to practice in a controlled and safe environment. The corporate training world now has the same opportunity to assess and develop leaders in equally real and challenging scenarios, using virtual reality.

With the very survival of an organisation and the wellbeing of its employees potentially at risk from poor leadership decisions, the value of leveraging VR leadership training is inevitably gaining momentum with L&D and business leaders.

2. What are the benefits of (and some of the objections to) Virtual Reality leadership training...

There are many perspectives on what constitutes great leadership and the skills and competences required to be a successful leader, but what most agree on, is that underpinning all of these is the need to be agile learners. This is essential if they are to develop and evolve capabilities such as leading through ambiguity, managing complexity and making decisions that will impact their organisation a year ahead, when they cannot predict what the economic and social environment will look like. Leaders must be

able to learn and re-learn as the business landscape evolves around them at a frantic pace. For more on this, check out this article from Deloitte on [Leadership for the 21st Century](#).

With that sobering thought in mind, how might virtual reality change leadership training? Well, there are still many sceptics who believe it won't, so let's look at some of those objections first:

OBJECTION #1

Virtual reality is great for kid's games, but can it really help with the serious business of developing leadership capability?

Virtual reality is great for gamers, that's for sure! Gaming has systematically become more immersive and realistic year on year for as long as I can remember. But, let's get academic for a moment and consider results from a number of studies that conclusively show the benefits and recommend the use of VR for leadership development.

One such article "Virtual Reality as an Emerging Methodology for Leadership Assessment and Training", published on Frontiers in Psychology in 2018*, describes virtual reality as: "a promising technology that can overcome the problems of achieving valid results from real life scenarios..." and goes on to say "... behaviours, attitudes and beliefs can be transferred from reality to virtuality, and vice versa, in a spontaneous, unconscious, unaware manner".

If you love reading this type of academic article, you can access the [full report here](#), but essentially the report concludes that VR not only enables us to assess authentic behaviour in the VR environment, but it also results in a transfer of the newly learned behaviours back into the real world. Better learner engagement, more realistic scenarios, faster learning cycles and significantly increased transfer of skills back into the real world – perfect for preparing leaders for an unpredictable future.

OBJECTION #2

VR is an engaging one off experience, but can it have a sustainable impact on leadership capability?

On its own, as a one off experience, VR is unlikely to have any significant long term impact on leadership performance for the majority of leaders. But, in the hands of forward thinking learning and development professionals who know that “one and done” training experiences don’t work, virtual reality can be used as a powerful module within a learning journey. Think of it as a catalyst to fuel the fire of learning within a learner’s journey, a tool that will have your CEO and other key stakeholders celebrating your innovative and game changing approach to leadership development.

A good example is [“Thinking and Decision Making”](#) a leadership learning journey that explores leaders patterns of thinking and challenges them to solve a complex problem in a multi-player virtual reality simulation, supporting them with observation feedback and both an individual and team action plan to enhance ongoing performance as they go back into the workplace, with a distinct competitive advantage over your competitors.

OBJECTION #3

VR is too expensive, I can use role plays to have the same impact as a VR experience

As L&D professionals, we've used role plays for decades to allow practice of new skills in a training environment and I'm sure we can all recall being part of a few awkward role plays throughout our careers. And, whilst role plays have been beneficial, they have always been lacking for a number of reasons. Here's some of the feedback we've had from leaders involved in role plays over the years:

- 1. "Poor acting didn't help"**
- 2. "Embarrassment of participants was a problem for us"**
- 3. "It wasn't a true representation of real life"**
- 4. "Awkward participants leads to hesitation and ultimately these scenarios not being taken seriously"**

Virtual reality, on the other hand, fully immerses participants and avoids any distractions that don't relate to the scenario. There are no actors in VR, the scenario is repeatable and consistent compared to the changing variables in a role play (actors, the facilitator, the environment), and participants have a more authentic response and are able to practice the same scenario, with a focus on continuous improvement, in a risk free environment.

VR also allows us to capture an unprecedented amount of data on participant behaviour; for example, by listening to the volume and type of words used in a VR experience, we can determine the quality of

communication and interaction. This data can subsequently be used to provide constructive feedback, allowing leaders to improve.

OBJECTION #4

It's just too expensive to utilize VR for leadership training

Whilst the cost of building a virtual reality leadership lab is likely beyond the budgets of many organisations, as with all technology, we are now at a tipping point where the value of including VR in your leadership journeys outweighs the investment, particularly when learning technology companies such as [Jenson8](#) are building experiences specifically designed to produce an unrivalled level of authenticity as leaders interact in a series of unfamiliar scenarios. Biz Group have made this even more accessible with the building of the Middle East's first [Virtual Reality Leadership Lab](#), allowing organisations to leverage the technology at a fraction of the cost of investing in their own facility.

That being said, in order to really address this objection, we need to fully understand the tangible benefits of virtual reality leadership training; here's a couple of big ones for starters....

Save Money

VR allows leaders to practice in a safe environment, so they avoid making mistakes in the real world. What does your organisation stand to lose if its leaders don't make the right decisions in the next 12 months?

Save Time

Immersed in a 10 minute VR scenario, we're able to capture and then provide feedback on authentic individual behaviours and team dynamics, allowing leaders to correct them in the real world. Which of your competitors will catch up or overtake you if your leaders are unable to lead through rapid cycles of change and the need to evolve and adapt to fast changing customer demands?

The question for me isn't can we afford to invest in developing our leadership talent, its can you afford not to? Ask yourself this, what's at stake if your leaders are unable to navigate the increasingly complex business landscape in your industry?

Some of the other benefits of leveraging virtual reality for leadership development include:

- VR allows participants to safely experience difficult situations and develop greater awareness of their individual and collective behaviour and how this triggers different outcomes in a team environment
- VR provides a mixture of sensory input, ideal for learning since it exposes the brain to the same information in different ways, leading to greater understanding than traditional learning tools
- VR influences us on an emotional level, because we are more likely to remember experiences that are unique, surprising and out of the ordinary

- VR has been proven to positively influence cognitive function
- VR provides an opportunity for hands on training in a gamified experience, so we can practice coming up with solutions to team behaviour challenges and are exposed to the “try-fail-learn” cycle necessary for understanding and change to take place

3. How do I introduce Virtual Reality leadership training into my learning strategy?

We’ve looked at what virtual reality leadership training is and the benefits, so you might well be thinking “...that’s all well and good, but how do I introduce it into my organisations learning strategy?”

Well, there are a number of factors to consider, but I recommend you break it down into 3 steps:

- 1. Understand your options**
- 2. Define your need**
- 3. Get clear on your measures of success**

Let’s look at each of those steps and break them down for you...

STEP 1 – Understand your options

- Have you fully understood the different levels of technology and what’s possible? Not all VR experiences are made equal, for fully immersive experiences, you are going to need high end, powerful equipment. If you’re brave enough to take the leap and build your

own corporate VR training setup, check out [this article](#) from Tech Radar on the various types of VR headsets available.

- Are you clear on the difference between augmented reality, virtual reality and mixed reality and which one is right for your particular business needs? Check out [this article](#) for more info.
- How will you ensure your VR training solution is sustainable and able to provide an ongoing return on your investment? If you engage a tech company to build a VR scenario for your current needs, how will you ensure this is updated and ready to evolve with updates in VR technology and the needs of your leadership team? It's likely to be a big investment and key stakeholders are going to be watching closely to see you get this right, there's a lot at stake when bringing VR into your organisation, so make sure you have a plan for sustainability.

STEP 2 – Define your need

What is your organisations strategy and what are the expectations of your leaders in relation to successfully implementing this strategy? With any leadership program, it's essential to understand how it fits into your overall business strategy.

What are the missing skills and competences you need to develop through your learning strategy? In order to set your leaders up for success, ensure you are crystal clear on what they are expected to do differently having completed a VR powered leadership experience.

What are the risks of not developing your leadership capability? The value derived from developing your leaders using VR must significantly outweigh

the cost of investment, so you need to look at both the benefits of a more agile, and future ready leadership team, alongside the risks of continuing to operate with leaders who are underprepared and don't have the right skills to tackle the challenges ahead of them.

What should your business leaders know before introducing VR training for leadership? If this is the first time you are using VR for this purpose, ensure you invite leaders to weigh in early and fully understand how it works, the benefits and what is expected of them. Talk about the objections mentioned above and don't let them derail your plans.

STEP 3 – Get clear on your measures of success

In simple terms, how will you know your VR powered leadership program has been a success? Consider what good looks like for your team:

- 1. Positive feedback scores?**
- 2. A detailed case study on the impact of your leadership program?**
- 3. An increase in overall knowledge of your leaders?**
- 4. Specific examples of application of learning or proven ROI in the form of cost savings or increased revenue?**

All of the above are absolutely possible when you work with the right learning solutions provider; and [Biz Group](#) helps clients achieve all of the above.

Once you have followed through on these steps, you'll want to consider who is going to facilitate your VR learning experience. Do you have senior training consultants in your L&D team who are able to observe and then facilitate difficult conversations amongst leadership groups? Are these facilitators able to manage executive leaders who might be displaying negative behaviours in the very real VR scenario they have just been immersed in?

Extracting the learning in a respectful, but meaningful way whilst keeping groups of senior leaders on track with time is tough and you'll need to ensure your VR experience facilitator has this skill, along with the relevant technical skills to ensure the experience runs smoothly.

If you'd like to get started with virtual reality leadership training for your company, you can follow these steps, or engage with a learning provider who already has all the technology and expertise to make it happen for you.

4. What solutions are already out there for VR leadership training?

In response to demand from clients for more effective leadership training solutions, Biz Group has built a Virtual Reality Leadership Lab, the first of its kind in the Middle East, incorporating the world's first multi-player virtual reality leadership scenarios from Jenson8.

This facility is ready to be incorporated into your learning strategy as an additional module, or you can engage the Biz Group learning team to help you curate and build a complete leadership program for you, including VR, workshops, digital learning and more. Examples of existing LearningJourneys™ that incorporate VR include:

1. **Problem solving and decision making** – When the cost of delayed or wrong decisions can be catastrophic for organisations, this journey incorporates the Virtual Reality Leadership Lab to prepare leaders to solve problems and take potentially high risk decisions in unfamiliar and ambiguous situations, where the future impact may be unknown.
2. **Mastering collaboration and trust** – a lack of trust and collaboration decreases efficiency, creates poor customer experiences and results in loss of market share because organisations move too slowly and remain inwardly focused. This journey uses the Virtual Reality Leadership Lab and explores the Blanchard Building Trust Model,

giving participants and teams a common language and practical approach to building trust and increasing collaboration.

Whether you are looking for one of these options, or if you are looking to build your own temporary “pop-up” VR learning facility, or build a permanent VR learning installation into your corporate learning academy, [schedule a call](#) with a Learning Solutions Advisor from Biz Group.

Biz Group is excited to launch Dubai’s first multiplayer Virtual Reality Leadership Lab in partnership with Jenson8 this September. [Find out more.](#)

VIRTUAL REALITY

L E A D E R S H I P L A B

