

# The Curious Council

*Supporting people through Leadership Transitions:*

April 24, 2026

## The Context

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The Curious Council is a format we've created at Navigati to enable peer learning in the community of L&D and HR leaders. Each time we invite a group of 8-12 folks from across industries to share candid, practitioner-level experiences - without self-promotion, without judgment, and with genuine curiosity.

This session brought together professionals from Applied Materials; IIHS; ITC Foods; Nvidia India; Quest Global; Saks Global India; Tata Motors; Times Internet and Wayfair to explore the question: **how do we enable leaders to successfully navigate transitions from one level of leadership to the next?**

Participants noted, almost without prompting, that the challenge is universal. Whether you are in a fast-scaling tech company, a legacy manufacturing conglomerate, or a US-based e-commerce firm building an India centre, the pressure points around leadership transition turn out to be very similar.

The conversation was structured loosely:

- The questions that Seekers (yes, very Harry Potter-ish indeed) brought into the room served as an implicit agenda
- Sharers offered 3–4 minute accounts of what their organisations have tried.

## Commonalities Across Approaches

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Several consistent principles emerged.

### 1. Segmentation by Role Complexity, Not Just Band or Level

Each of the Sharers spoke about how their organisation represented had/was moving away from band-based segmentation toward one based on what the role demands and the kind of workforce they lead. For example designing journeys for four groups: first-line managers, tenured managers, emerging leaders, and leaders

### 2. Business Literacy as a Core Pillar

Multiple organisations have embedded business understanding as a non-negotiable component of leadership programmes. For example, one organisation has a session that shows first-time managers how to read the P&L, calculate the cost of attrition, and understand the revenue impact of a bad hire. So the managers get a real sense of what it means to be accountable for a team.

The philosophy is this: before you can manage people well, you need to understand what the business is actually trying to do and how your team fits into that.

### 3. Experience-Heavy, Education-Light Design

Without exception, the programmes described skew heavily towards experience and exposure, with formal instruction serving more as a frame.

#### 4. L&D as Ecosystem Builder, Not Programme Owner

A striking theme across the room was a deliberate step back from L&D as the hero of the story. The Seekers described partnering systematically with HRBPs and ensuring managers of participants have skin in the game. The message was consistent: if the manager of the participant is not invested, and if the HRBP is not present, even the best-designed programme will not stick. Whether organisations are structured to reward or even support L&D leaders in operating in this way is a different and unanswered question.

#### 5. Creating Pull Rather Than Push

Getting leaders into the room is a persistent, universal struggle. The solutions that emerged share a common logic: create conditions where people feel they need this, rather than conditions where they are told they should want it.

- One Sharer spoke about how they deliberately run a small number of high-quality programmes, creating scarcity and therefore desirability.
- Several spoke about how they involve participants and their managers in co-designing the programmes, so that when invitations go out, people already feel a stake.
- Another company waits a year after someone takes a new role before inviting them to the programme - because by then, they arrive with real questions and real hunger.
- Another spoke about how for critical or high-cost roles, they start the intervention before or immediately at positioning, because the cost of failure is too high to wait

On a more philosophical note, one Sharer spoke about how they have learnt to accept that there will always be a cohort of non-engagers. The energy has shifted towards investing deeply in those who do show up, trusting that the ripple effects will be real, even if invisible.

### Noteworthy Ideas

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Beyond the common threads, several approaches stood out.

#### The One-Year Wait

Rather than training people before or immediately upon promotion, this model deliberately lets people sit in their new role for a full year before the structured programme begins. The rationale is that only after you have experienced the discomfort, made some mistakes, and developed real questions does learning genuinely land. This creates authentic pull - participants arrive loaded with specific situations and frustrations.

The counter-argument, raised in the room, is that some people will have already figured things out by then or figured them out in the wrong way. This is a trade-off and one suggestion was to use proficiency-level assessments to differentiate what is covered at each stage, ensuring the programme remains challenging even for those who have independently developed some of the skills.

#### Cross-Company Exposure

One company's ability to send emerging leaders to shadow leaders in other members of the group is a structural advantage not all organisations have, but it points to something replicable in principle. The insight is that perspective-broadening at senior levels is often more valuable than skill-building, and the most effective way to build perspective is direct exposure to leaders in genuinely different contexts.

#### Measuring Ecosystem Change, Not Just Learning Outcomes

One Sharer spoke about how they use a continuous employee mood-sensing tool, to take pre- and post-programme readings from the teams of managers who have gone through their first-time manager programme. Rather than measuring what the manager learned, they measure whether the team experienced any change. This reframes the question from 'did the programme work?' to 'did the system around this leader shift?'

## Global Perspective Cohorts for Senior Leaders

One global company has designed its senior programmes (directors and above) to bring participants from every country into a single cohort. The incidental effects (building peer networks, gaining perspective on how leadership challenges differ and align across geographies) - are treated as equal in value to the formal content. For more regional programmes (senior managers), they create APAC-level and Europe-level cohorts, preserving the cross-context benefit at a smaller scale.

## Real-Time AI Coaching

One company spoke about being in the early stages of piloting an AI chatbot designed to coach managers in the moment (when they are about to have a difficult conversation, or when they need to think through a situation and do not have a trusted colleague available).

There are still unanswered questions: what kinds of conversations should not happen with AI? Where does the absence of a human relationship undermine the coaching itself?

## Reverse Mentoring and Early-Career Voice

Two Sharers described structured forums where early-career employees speak directly with senior leadership - not as token gestures but as genuine learning exchanges. One organisation spoke about how they give Gen-Z employees a platform to tell leaders what they need to succeed and how they experience work, in a psychologically safe format.

The value runs both ways: leaders gain unfiltered insight, and early-career employees gain visibility and the experience of being taken seriously.

## Unanswered Questions

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The most honest part of any gathering of thoughtful practitioners is what does not get resolved. Several questions were raised but not answered - or answered partially, with explicit acknowledgement that there is more work to be done.

### How Do You Build Psychological Safety from the Top?

One Seeker named the critical muscle they now want to build: enabling leaders to create psychological safety for their teams (safety to experiment, to surface ideas, to fail publicly). The group noted that this cannot be built bottom-up; it has to start with the CEO and cascade down. If first-line managers are not themselves safe, they cannot give safety.

But the meeting did not produce a satisfying answer to how you shift this at the senior-most level in a traditionally hierarchical organisation, especially when speaking truth to power remains culturally fraught. Coaching interventions can address this, but requires the organisation's most senior leaders to become aware of how they show up.

### How Do You Use AI Without Losing the Human?

The question was raised in multiple forms. One participant described a performance-conversation tool that gave managers helpful scripts but risks turning feedback into a script-reading exercise, erasing the authenticity that actually brings about change. Another described using AI to analyse thousands of employee self-reviews and pulse survey responses to understand what the workforce is actually thinking.

The room agreed on the problem - AI can support, but cannot replace, the relational and contextual dimensions of leadership development. Where the boundary lies is yet to be determined.

## How Do We Track Ownership and Success in Transitions?

Who is responsible when a leadership transition fails or succeeds? Is it the individual, the L&D team, the HRBP, the manager, the business? Multiple speakers touched on this, and the data from employee feedback approach is one attempt at an answer. But most of the room acknowledged that they do not have robust, shared metrics for transition success. Tracking promotion rates and engagement scores are proxies; they are not the same as understanding what actually enabled or derailed a specific leader's transition.

## What needs to change when leading Gen Z?

One Sharer offered the perspective that Gen Z are not fundamentally different people, but they are asking questions that previous generations either did not ask or did not feel safe asking. They need purpose, meaning, and clarity on what the organisation is offering them in exchange for their engagement.

The leaders above them were often rewarded for knowing things, for being the one with the answers. That model is increasingly obsolete in a world where a new hire may have more up-to-date knowledge than a twenty-year veteran. The open question is less 'how do we handle Gen Z?' and more 'how do we help senior leaders genuinely let go of being the expert in the room?'

## Closing Observations

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What made this conversation truly valuable was the willingness of practitioners to share not just what worked, but what they are still struggling with, what they have given up on, and what they are experimenting with. Thank you all for your generosity.

At Navigati, we intend to convene a Curious Council every month or so. If you'd like to be a part of our next one, do write back to [sunitha@navigati.in](mailto:sunitha@navigati.in) with a question you'd like to answer/have answered.