



# DEVELOPING LEADERS VIRTUALLY:

A case study on the transition from in-person to virtual program delivery

# The history

**Founded in 1964, Cascades is a Canadian company that provides sustainable, innovative, and value-added solutions for packaging, hygiene, and recovery needs. Cascades employs more than 12,000 people in more than 100 operating units in North America and Europe. Today, Cascades is a leading collector of recycled fibres in Canada and is a North American leader in sustainable packaging and hygiene solutions.**

Over the course of the last two decades, technological innovation, enhanced sustainability, and improved economic conditions have ideally positioned Cascades for an attractive growth trajectory in the packaging and hygiene solutions industries. Yet the shifting dynamics of the paper products market has required Cascades to become even more agile and adaptable to meet the needs of its customers.

For Cascades to continue to execute its growth strategy and adapt to the changing needs of the paper product market, its leaders needed to be developed and aligned

to the over-arching organizational strategy. Each layer of leadership within the organization needed to have a broader, company-wide perspective in the way they make decisions. Additionally, there needed to be greater collaboration among business units to adjust to shifting market demands. Cascades needed to equip their leaders with the leadership skills to take on greater responsibility, improve employee engagement, and create a resilient and adaptable culture. To meet these objectives, Cascades chose an executive education solution.



## Developing the growth strategy

In 2018, Cascades partnered with The Ivey Academy and Catapult Executive Consulting to deliver a comprehensive leadership development program that would address eight key objectives:



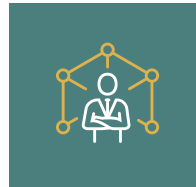
Close the growth vs. talent gap



Develop leaders who model key Cascades competencies



Reinforce the culture of "The Cascades Way"



Experience the benefits of cross-functional collaboration



Prepare high potential leaders for key positions



Improve engagement



Retain talent



Integrate diverse cultures



# The learning and development (L&D) initiative

Recognizing that different levels of leadership within Cascades have different needs and goals, The Ivey Academy designed three separate programs with distinct objectives:

**The LEAD program:** Delivered with Cascades' senior management team at the launch of the L&D initiative, LEAD is focused on working together as a high-performance team, leading organizational change, leadership behaviour in the context of strategy and change, and developing a customer-centric culture.

**The LEAP program:** Delivered in person over five days with leaders who report to the senior management team and their potential successors, this intensive leadership program cultivates advanced leadership behaviours and strategic thinking. Through case discussions and experiential exercises, program participants raise their ambitions and develop solutions to the challenges facing the organization.

**The LIFT program:** Delivered in person over three days with leaders at the middle management level, such as plant managers and sales managers, the LIFT program focuses on the interpersonal leadership and decision-making skills required to be effective at leading people and orchestrating change. It is delivered once or twice per year, with two sub-cohorts – one in French and one in English – running simultaneously.





# Transitioning to virtual learning

**The LEAP and LIFT programs include “learning journeys” that continue for six to nine months following the conclusion of the formal business school portion of the program, facilitated by Cascades partner Catapult Executive Consulting.**

In these learning journeys, program participants work directly with their supervisors and with an executive coach to finalize and implement an individual development plan. This partnership enhances each participant's leadership and performance, further developing the lessons from the Ivey Academy programs. Through a process of inquiry and dialogue, areas of strength and growth are identified, and both the supervisor and the coach provide feedback and coaching through action steps and experiences to facilitate development.

The programs have been delivered at either Cascades' Alain Lemaire Competency Development Center in Kingsey Falls, Quebec, or the Ivey Spencer Leadership Centre in London, Ontario. The outcome of all three programs is the same: a professional development experience that equips participants with essential leadership skills to reinforce the Cascades vision, culture, and values, and to ensure strategic alignment throughout the organization.

## **The LIFT program and the transition to virtual delivery**

The LIFT Program is designed to deepen program participants' understanding of Cascades' vision and culture, and to provide opportunities to further develop the competencies tied to success under this model. The program

builds managerial courage, team leadership, coaching, partnering, change leadership, and emotional intelligence. In order to create meaningful learning opportunities for each competency, the LIFT Program includes several components. The program was created specifically to enhance the competencies that are critical to Cascades' future success and, therefore, to program participants' continued leadership.

In early 2020, businesses around the world were shocked by the disruptive forces of a global pandemic. With employee health and safety being the top priority of Cascades, the decision was made to postpone the scheduled March 24 delivery of the LIFT program. While many organizations cancelled their L&D initiatives entirely, Cascades knew it was more important than ever to develop and support their leaders who were facing unprecedented uncertainty during this time of crisis.

“For Cascades, the development of our people is not something we compromise. The people taking this program are the ones who execute our strategic vision. Even though we are in a huge crisis due to the pandemic, we don't stop developing and supporting our leaders because of a disruption. We always need our leaders to be the best they can be. If we were to wait to develop these leaders, what would be the impact on the company?”

**MARIE-JOSÉE LEMAIRE,**  
Supervisor, Skills Development  
& Learning, Cascades,

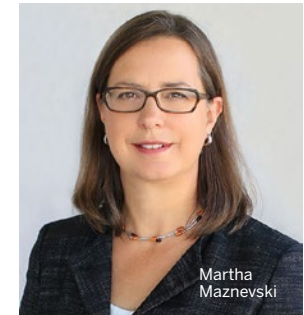


## Making it work virtually

Cascades immediately began internal discussions and engaged in dialogue with The Ivey Academy to assess the feasibility of delivering the LIFT program virtually. Initially there were concerns about the ability of a virtually-delivered program to replicate the interactivity of a traditional, in-person program. The structure of LIFT presented additional challenges; the simultaneous French and English program delivery added a layer of complexity in organization and design.

“There was pushback, but we talked about how we could make it happen. The way you develop leaders virtually has to be the same as the way you develop them in-person. I believed it was possible, but the only way to know is to try. So that’s what we did,” said Lemaire.

Faculty Director Martha Maznevski was tasked with managing the transition of the LIFT program from a traditional, in-person program delivery to a virtual format. The LIFT program had been delivered across three full days, starting 8:00 a.m. and concluding in the evenings. Maznevski looked at the parts of the program curriculum that could be replicated virtually and the parts that couldn't. The virtual program design resulted in three half-days of virtual programming with two full days of self-paced learning activities. A day and a half of in-person learning was scheduled to conclude the program at a time where the health and safety of participants could be assured. These final days would feature the parts of the curriculum where the impact of the sessions is greatest when delivered in-person.



# Virtual program delivery benefits

**The LIFT program was re-scheduled to be delivered in July of 2020, less than four months after its initial postponement.**

Prior to the launch of the virtual version of LIFT, there was considerable apprehension from both Cascades' L&D team as well as program participants. Would participants be as engaged as they would be in-person? How can the program be designed to make the experience as human as possible? Could the social and networking aspects of the in-person program be replicated virtually? As the program commenced, these concerns were quickly alleviated. Additionally, unforeseen benefits stemming from virtual program delivery quickly became apparent.

## Participant networking

The greatest challenge in moving a program from in-person to virtual delivery is the replication of social and networking activities, especially in a program that aims to increase collaboration across the organization. "We have a very social culture, very friendly. Everyone in the organization is treated like family, from the CEO all the way down through the organization. That culture is mindfully embedded in the program as well – we intentionally incorporate social events and networking. We were afraid that aspect couldn't be replicated virtually – that was one of the main concerns," said Lemaire.

“To make it fun, we sent program participants a “survival kit” to help prepare them for a multi-day virtual program (See Appendix A). We incorporated fun games and quizzes to encourage program participants to get to know each other and break up the day.”

**MARIE-JOSÉE LEMAIRE,**  
Supervisor, Skills Development  
& Learning, Cascades,

Maznevski staggered the workload across three days to allow participants to do an experiential exercise that fostered teamwork and communication. Throughout the exercise, participants were able to virtually socialize and network during and after the program – an experience that was remarkably similar to an in-person networking event.

Lemaire believes that the virtual version of the LIFT program delivered an even stronger networking experience than the in-person version. Said Lemaire, "When an in-person program is completed, we go back to our regular lives and the relationships we made during the program can fade away. Following a program delivered virtually, participants are more accustomed to connecting to each other virtually so it becomes easier for them to maintain contact with each other. In LIFT, one of the participants had a change management issue he was struggling with. So, he contacted the peer

group he had been working with during the program via Zoom so he could get their perspectives and feedback. I'm not sure that would have happened had the program been delivered in-person."

## Participant engagement

One of the concerns about virtual delivery – whether it be a virtual executive education program or a virtual team meeting – is that participants aren't as present due to distractions at home and with work. These concerns are especially amplified during a time of crisis. At Cascades in particular, supply chains were shutting down and the uncertainty regarding COVID-19's impact on the business had made work stressful and hectic. Would program participants view the time away from their own day-to-day roles to work on their learning and development be worth it? Would work and family distractions take precedence when program participants are working virtually?

For Jim Burlingham, a Sales Manager at Cascades Containerboard Packaging and LIFT program participant, the program struck a perfect balance between learning and work. Said Burlingham, "I felt the virtual learning environment provided a very effective and efficient timeline for the agenda. The shortened days allowed us to have time in the early morning and evenings to complete regular work tasks and continue to support the business. I felt this reduced the overall stress of the commitment by removing distractions





and resulted in a highly engaged audience during the sessions. I also feel with the virtual program, there was a focus in the peer groups to ensure everyone had equal time for participation.”

Laura Boitnott, U.S. Sales Manager, Specialty Products Group at Cascades agreed. “Normally I travel six to eight nights a month. Being home cut out all of the travel stress and allowed me to really be present in the discussion.

“The work balance was definitely better. Knowing I had time in the afternoon allowed me to stay more focused. Also, had we all been together in-person, (my colleagues and I) would have spent all our social time talking about work. That might have become a little overwhelming. The virtual program gave me personal space which helped me to reflect on the content.”

Added Lemaire, “We didn’t know if people would be as engaged as they would be in-person, if they would get as much out of the program as they would in-person. Yet we also knew people would also be more rested and present for the program – they could sleep in their own bed, they could reconnect with their family at the end of the day. Participants open up more because they’re in a safe environment – they’re at home. I found that program participants were more open to sharing.”

### **Logistical flexibility**

While virtual program delivery eliminates the need for travel, it also creates some logistical flexibility in the way the program is delivered. For example, members of Cascades’ executive team play a significant role in the LIFT program. When the program is delivered in-person, aligning the schedules of busy executives with fixed program dates can present formidable logistical challenges because they need

to travel to the program location. When the program is delivered virtually, it makes it much easier for executives to participate – and most importantly – be present.

Additionally, virtual program delivery allows for more breakout discussions and generates more involvement. There’s no time spent commuting from a classroom to a discussion room, there’s less disruption, and no waiting for group members to go to the bathroom or grab a coffee.

Another unexpected benefit of virtual program delivery is the fact that international participants, who would previously have been excluded from the program due to travel restrictions to Canada, are able to participate. The ability to support all of its leaders is significant to Cascades, as inclusivity is an important value in the organization.

### **A level playing field**

In a classroom, the instructor is positioned at the front of the room and participants are seated throughout – some are close in proximity to the instructor, some are far removed. This presents an inherent inequality in the experience of program participants. Some participants may experience the program differently as a result of where they are positioned, and may feel less inclined to engage in the discussion or ask important questions based on the classroom design.

In a program delivered virtually, these inherent inequalities are eliminated. Everyone has a voice, so there is more engagement and participation. It is rare for a virtual program to have a participant who dominates the conversation, and if that situation is presented, facilitators have tools at their disposal to ensure the discussion is more equitable.





Virtual programs allow for participants to reflect and react in real-time without disturbing the flow of the session. In an in-person program, it may not be appropriate to interject, interrupt, or make a point after the discussion has moved to a different topic. When delivered virtually, the inherent interactivity of the live sessions allows for participants to reflect and respond in the chat room or use the Q&A function to ask a question that can be answered at an appropriate time without disturbing the flow of the session. This encourages and invites more diverse input from participants.

Laura Boitnott experienced these benefits firsthand. “All the group dynamics – influence, critical thinking, risk taking, persuasion, self-confidence – are enhanced when learning virtually. Removing non-verbal cues forced us to better articulate our points. I saw those participants who are normally able to influence more in-person felt less in control when only represented by a little square picture. I enjoyed observing the task as much as participating,” said Boitnott.

Faculty director Martha Maznevski designed the program format to intentionally cater to all learning styles. Said Maznevski, “In a virtual program, people with different learning styles are able to be accommodated; mixing up the style of delivery ensures that everyone in a group is learning. There are more opportunities for reflection, and through the use of Google Docs, information can be shared in real-time to allow for participants to reflect on what others are writing. These different learning modalities engage different parts of the brain.”

Laura Boitnott, a program participant who learns best from writing and reflecting, found the virtual delivery of the LIFT program to be especially beneficial.

“ I learn best when I have some time to reflect on the information. The virtual learning experience allowed me time to ‘chill’ with the information and focus on applying the knowledge immediately. If the program was delivered in-person, I would have been involved in social time and the reflection would have been delayed until I was home and back into my work. The virtual learning style allowed me to apply what I learned on the same day. The format moved quickly and kept my attention.”

**LAURA BOITNOTT,**  
Program Participant

Cascades and The Ivey Academy worked together to deliver a deeply human learning experience. The goal was to allow participants with different learning styles to connect with the learning on a deep level.

“How do we create those same ‘wow’ moments that happen when you deliver a program in-person? We’ve always thought that we need to be sitting next to each other physically to make those moments happen. But we watch movies, and they can make us feel a wide array of emotions – they can bring us joy, make us angry, and even make us cry. It’s the same thing in a virtual program, and we were able to incorporate those experiences in the program by using different modes of learning,” added Marie-Josée Lemaire.



# Accommodation of different learning styles

Adult learners have specific motivations and routines that can both raise barriers to learning and enable them. Learning styles are a popular concept in psychology and education and are intended to identify how adults learn best. There are many different ways of categorizing learning styles, but Neil Fleming's VARK model is one of the most popular. Fleming introduced the VARK model in 1987 to help adults learn more about their individual learning preferences. The VARK model identifies four different types of learning – modes that fit people's personalities for engaging the learning process:



**VISUAL LEARNING:** Visual learners learn best when seeing diagrams, graphics, powerpoints, or flipcharts.



**AUDITORY LEARNING:** Auditory learners learn best when they hear information and appreciate lecture-based learning with reflection.



**READING AND WRITING:** Preferring to process information by seeing words in print, adult learners who work best in the reading and writing modality prefer to make lists, read textbooks, and take notes. Learning is synthesized in the act of writing and reflection.



**KINESTHETIC:** Kinesthetic learners are hands-on and participatory. They prefer to learn through experience and practice, either simulated or real. Learners who prefer this modality appreciate demonstrations, simulations, videos and movies of real things or situations, as well as case studies, practice, and applications.

**Highly effective learning mixes these four modes, no matter what the learner's main preference is. For programs delivered in-person, interactive learners are well served – in-person programs are great for discussing concepts and ideas. But for people who learn through writing and reflection, it doesn't work quite as well.**

## The success of virtual learning

**Due to the success and positive reception from program participants following the initial virtual delivery of the LIFT Program, Cascades has planned to incorporate virtual learning into its leadership programs moving forward.**

“Post-pandemic, I believe there has been a shift in societal values – people want to have more time for themselves, more time with their families. So, I don’t think we’re going to go back to doing all of our leadership development in-person. Based on the feedback we received, virtual learning has been such a success. Groups met outside the defined activities of the program because they were so enthusiastic about the experience and wanted to share more. The virtual programming gave them so much that we’re not afraid to do it again. In fact, we don’t want to go back to delivering a program entirely in-person – we don’t want to go back to all of the travelling and people leaving so exhausted,” said Lemaire.

Sylvie Daigneault, Director, Talent Management, Cascades, echoes the sentiments expressed by Lemaire. Said Daigneault, “Initially I was opposed to doing this program virtually, but after having lived the virtual experience I can confirm that we will review our ways of doing things for the next cohorts of this program. Virtual program delivery is equivalent – if not improved – because participants have no other distractions and are very focused on the instructor and cohort. The technology used and the pace of the learning with several different learning activities made the participants love the program. The overall impact of the virtual learning was as important as if we had done it in the classroom. We thank Ivey for demonstrating that we can deliver a high-quality program both virtually and in-person.”

**Cascades plans to replicate the virtual program delivery format for its 2021 LIFT cohort.**



Dear participant,

We would like to thank you for your hard work and availability so far and we want to provide you with a few items to survive this great and inspiring role as a Leader:

### **Leadership Survival Kit!**

**Coffee** – To help you keep going and going

**Button** – For the times when you may need to button your lip

**Elastic Band** – To help you stay flexible, don't snap just bend

**Jigsaw Pieces** – To remember, a team works better together, and everybody is a valuable piece in the game

**Candies** – To give you energy to get through each day

**Candle** – To brighten up your day when things get tough

**Star** – To help you inspire your team members and colleagues

**Paper Clip** – To help you hold things together

**Soap** – To wash away troubles

**Mask** – To keep you and others healthy

**Magnifying Glass** – To see the bigger picture

**Brain** – To keep you creative and innovative

**Playing Card** – To help you "deal" with any situation

**Toothpick** – Attitude is everything, so remember to pick a good one

**Hair net** – To keep your hair on

**Glove** – When you need an extra pair of hands

**Eraser** – To remind you that you can always start again

**Tea Bag** – Remember to relax at the end of the day

Participants received a "survival kit" to help prepare them for a multi-day virtual program. The kit included fun games and quizzes to encourage participants to get to know each other and break up the day.