The State of Ed-tech Leadership Development:

Executives' Insights Regarding the Challenges of Scaling a Business

Table of Contents

Introduction

Over the past three years, the U.S. K-12 Ed-tech industry has experienced remarkable growth and evolution. This growth—driven by rapidly evolving customer needs and a confluence of robust federal funding for schools and private investment in ed-tech organizations—has exacerbated some underlying challenges experienced by many in the industry.

More than ever, ed-tech organizations are encountering obstacles when attempting to scale their organizations, and there is a scarcity of talent who have successfully navigated this particular set of growth challenges.

Companies are finding that their proven leaders within the organization are being lured away to new, high-profile leadership roles, while the existing team looks to its high-potential employees to fill the leadership void. Middle managers are becoming high-risk points of leverage, as they serve in the biggest job of their life without the degree of training and ongoing mentoring they require.

In order to gain greater insight about talent gaps, business risks and employee pain points, the Ed-tech Leadership Collective conducted a national survey in late 2022.

About the Survey

In December 2022, the Ed-tech Leadership Collective developed and sent a survey to individuals in managerial roles at ed-tech companies. All respondents were based in the United States and work at companies providing products and services related to teaching and learning in the U.S. K-12 market. Respondents were asked to complete a survey regarding "leadership development within educational technology companies."

In total, there were 145 survey respondents; they fell into the following categories:

C-LEVEL EXECUTIVES — This group includes CEOs, C-level Executives, as well as those who report directly to the CEO as part of the executive team. This group represented 27% of the respondents.

DEPARTMENT HEADS — This group includes Vice Presidents and Senior Directors who are the head of a department (such as Sales, Marketing, Product, Engineering, Customer Success, HR, etc.) but are not a part of the executive-management team. This group represented 22% of the respondents.

FUNCTIONAL LEADERS — This group includes Directors and Senior Managers who lead a functional team within a major department but are not the department head (for example, a Product Marketing Director who is not the Head of Marketing). This group represented 26% of the respondents.

PEOPLE MANAGERS — Individuals who are managers but did not fit any of the descriptions above. This group represented 8% of the respondents.

INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS — Individuals who do not have any direct reports. This group represented 17% of the respondents.

32%
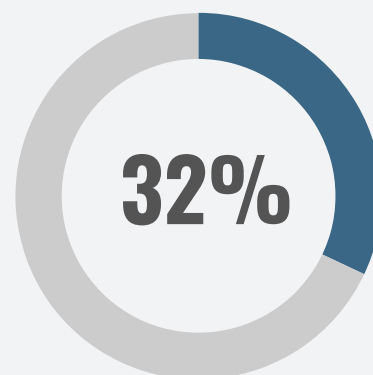
of all respondents identified as a member of a historically marginalized population. This percentage was fairly similar across all job categories.
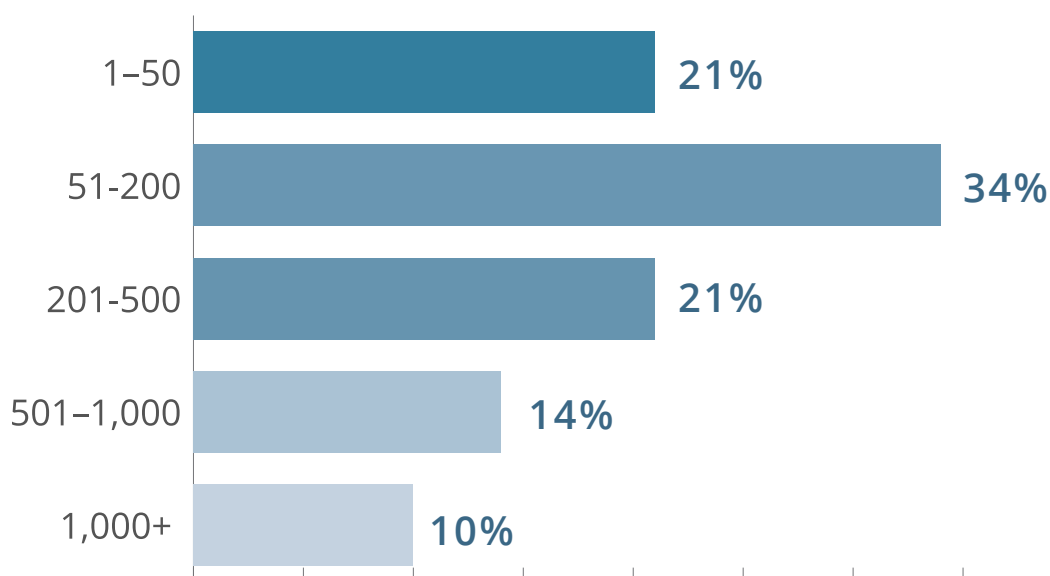
56%
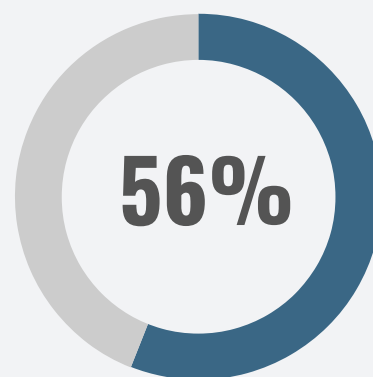
of respondents had at least 16 years of professional experience, with most (91%) bringing more than five years of experience.

Respondents were mostly (55%) from companies with 51–500 employees. None of the respondents were current members of the Ed-tech Leadership Collective.

COMPANY SIZE BY EMPLOYEES

Company Size	Percentage
1–50	21%
51-200	34%
201-500	21%
501–1,000	14%
1,000+	10%

YEARS OF PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Years	Percentage
20+	30%
16-20	26%
11-15	25%
6-10	10%
3-5	6%
Less than 3	3%
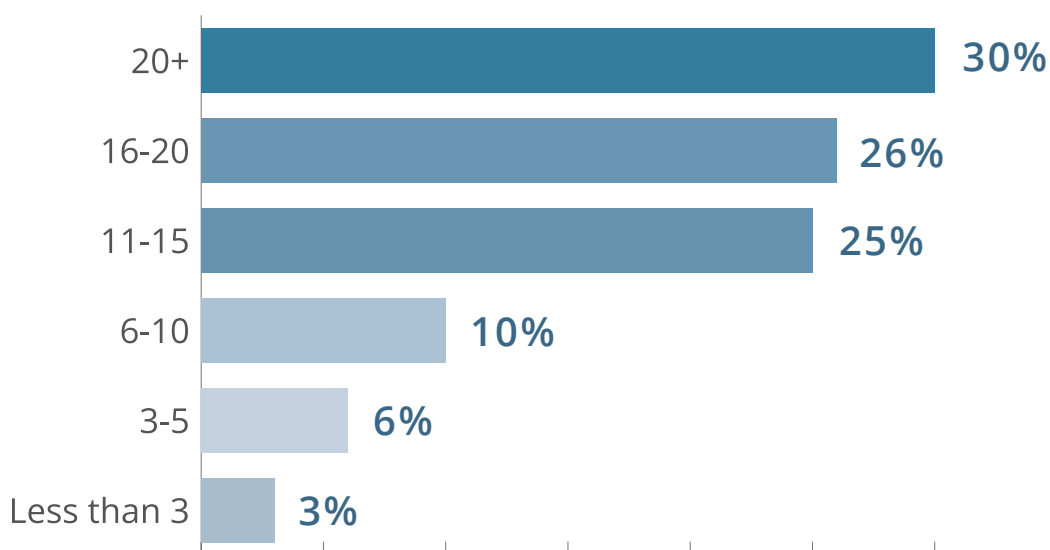
# Executive Summary

This analysis looks closely at the perceptions of C-level Executives relative to their Department Heads and Functional Leaders (sometimes referred to collectively as "middle managers") regarding the major aspects and implications of leadership development in the K-12 ed-tech industry. Highlights of the survey include the following:

- Overall, 74% of C-level Executives indicated that their middle managers had limited, little or no experience scaling an organization. Nearly a third (29%) of C-level Executives indicated that their team's lack of experience is having a major impact on their ability to scale the business.

- Most middle managers (66%) report that they are in the biggest job of their life. One out of three C-level Executives believes this number is at least 75%. Not surprisingly, 82% of C-level Executives and Department Heads agreed that the amount of mission-critical work in the hands of middle managers presents a risk to the business.

- Leadership depth is a concern shared by most C-level Executives. Only 18% have confidence that they could fill a vacancy on their executive team with an internal candidate. Almost all (93%) of those executives who weren't confident in their leadership depth also indicated that their high-potential employees were not receiving the mentoring and support they needed in order to be successful.

- Departmental siloing was a challenge for most (86%) C-level Executives and Department Heads. However, the pain was felt more acutely at the departmental level, with nearly half (45%) of all Department Heads stating that silos are creating major obstacles.
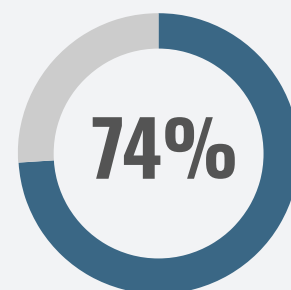
74%

of C-level Executives indicated that their middle managers had limited, little or no experience scaling an organization.

66%
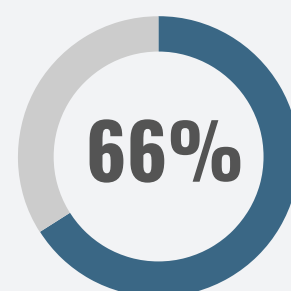
of middle managers report that they are in the biggest job of their life.

18%
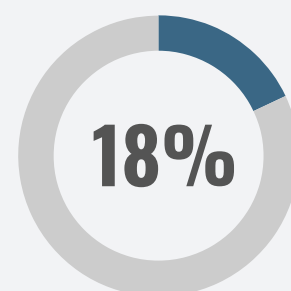
of C-level Executives have confidence that they could fill a vacancy on their executive team with an internal candidate.

- Despite many having managers with deep functional expertise, an overwhelming majority (91%) of Functional Leaders are craving opportunities to connect with peers from other companies to learn best practices and gain outside perspectives.

- Less than a third of respondents (30%) felt that their company's talent-development practices effectively meet the needs of historically marginalized populations.

- Executive coaching and professional peer groups were the methods of leadership development most likely to be pursued by most C-level Executives, Department Heads and Functional Leaders.

45%
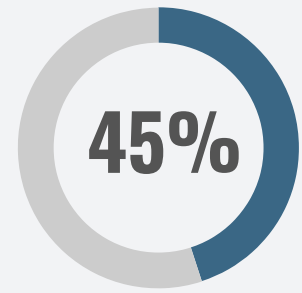
of all Department Heads stated that silos are creating major obstacles.

91%
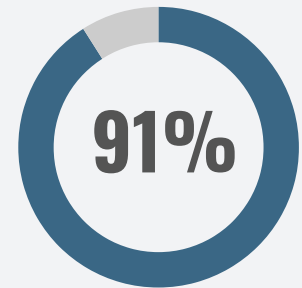
of Functional Leaders are craving opportunities to connect with peers to learn best practices and gain outside perspectives.

29%
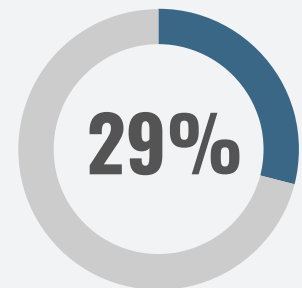
of all respondents felt that their company's talent-development practices effectively meet the needs of historically marginalized populations.

Key Findings

Experience Gap is Creating Obstacles to Scaling

Three-quarters of C-level Executives indicated that their middle managers had limited, little or no depth of experience scaling a business. More than half (57%) of all C-level Executives surveyed indicated that this lack of experience had a negative impact on their ability to grow the business. Overall, only 26% of C-level Executives felt that their middle managers had sufficient experience scaling a business, compared to 29% who characterized their team's experience gap as having a "major impact" on their ability to scale.

IMPACT OF MIDDLE MANAGERS' SCALING EXPERIENCE

Lack of experience is creating major obstacles to growth	28.6%
Lack of experience is creating minor obstacles to growth	28.6%
Lack of experience is not creating any meaningful obstacles to growth	17.1%
The group has sufficient experience scaling a business	11.4%
The group has significant depth of experience scaling a business	14.3%
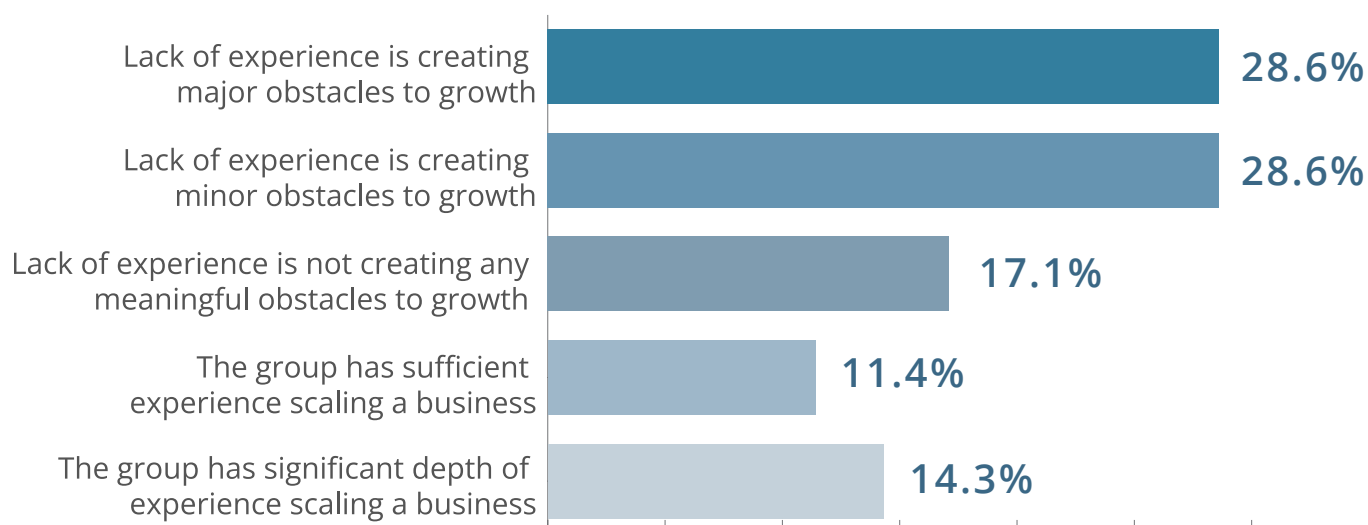
Most Middle Managers are in the Biggest Job of their Life

The widespread lack of experience scaling a business may be partly due to a high number of employees being promoted into new positions — sometimes requiring them to navigate unfamiliar territory. Approximately two-thirds (66%) of C-level Executives and Department Heads indicated that at least half of their middle managers were in the "biggest job of their life." Furthermore, a third (32%) of these leaders indicated that at least 75% of their middle managers were in the biggest job of their life. Meanwhile, Functional Leaders seem to be self-aware of this situation, with two-thirds (66%) indicating they were in the biggest job of their life.
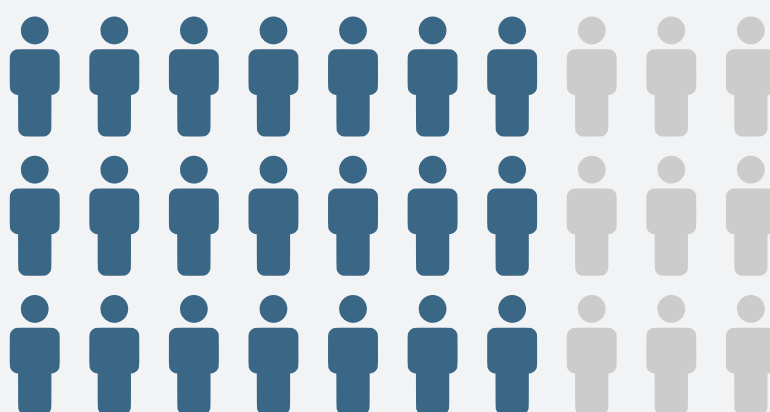
Two-thirds of Functional Leaders indicated they are in the biggest job of their life.

Middle Managers' Lack of Experience is Creating Widespread Business Vulnerability

Many middle managers are finding themselves in unfamiliar territory, while also being tasked with mission-critical work for their company. This not only presents obstacles to growth but also creates an alarming level of business risk should they begin to struggle. Overwhelmingly, 82% of all C-level Executives and Department Heads indicated that the amount of mission-critical work in the hands of middle managers is creating a business risk for their company if those employees were to struggle.

Executives are Lacking Confidence in their Team's Leadership Depth

Experienced talent is clearly at a premium in the ed-tech market. However, many companies also seem to lack capable understudies for key management roles. Only 18% of C-level Executives indicated they were confident their company had capable internal candidates to succeed their management-team members. Interestingly, there was a noticeable disconnect in the way that executives viewed the path to the C-suite, as compared to middle managers. Three-quarters (74%) of Department Heads who were not already members of the executive-leadership team felt confident in their ability to capably serve if they were asked to join the executive team. Similarly, 63% of Functional Leaders felt confident in their ability to step into the Department Head role. This major disconnect between C-level and middle-manager perspectives suggests companies lack not only strong succession plans but also lack clear communication with their employees regarding what is required to succeed at the next level.

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Essential Leadership Skills Highlight Need for Capacity Building

Given the experience gaps that exist, C-level Executives were asked to identify the crucial skills for emerging leaders.

The four skills most frequently identified were:

Delegation and empowering team members

Situational analysis and decision-making

Managing priorities and metric-based goals

Communication skills

Not surprisingly, C-level Executives emphasized competencies related to focusing teams on the right goals and empowering them to execute successfully. When middle managers struggle with managing priorities, decision-making, delegation, and communication, this can create bottlenecks and an enormous management burden on the C-suite.

When middle managers were asked what skills they perceived as most important, their responses were generally aligned with those of C-level Executives. However, in comparison, middle managers tended to overemphasize "employee development" and "emotional intelligence" and undervalue "delegation and empowering team members."

Emerging Leaders are not Receiving the Mentoring they Need

Many respondents' lack of confidence in their team's leadership depth could be caused by a lack of mentoring. Very few C-level Executives (15%) felt that their high-potential employees were receiving the mentoring and support they need in order to reach their full potential. This number was even lower (7%) among those C-level Executives who had expressed a lack of confidence in their succession plan. When Department Heads were asked about their own ability to support their high-potential employees, they were a bit more optimistic, with a third of them (36%) stating they consistently dedicate sufficient time to mentoring their high-potential employees. While half (54%) of Functional Leaders felt that their managers consistently dedicated enough time to their leadership development, there is likely room for improvement, particularly considering the amount of mission-critical work for which these middle managers are accountable.

Middle Managers Seldom Receive Constructive Feedback

The lack of time invested in mentoring is reflected in the frequency with which Functional Leaders are receiving feedback from their managers. Approximately two-thirds (63%) of Functional Leaders indicated that they receive constructive feedback from their manager only a few times per year, if at all. The frequency of such interactions may affect how useful employees find the feedback. The majority (77%) of Functional Leaders who received feedback on at least a monthly basis found the feedback to be helpful. In contrast, among those who received feedback only a few times per year, if at all, only a third (36%) of them found the feedback to be helpful.

FREQUENCY OF FEEDBACK RECEIVED BY FUNCTIONAL LEADERS

| Frequency	Percentage
At least weekly	20%
Monthly	17.1%
A few times per year	45.7%
Annually	14.3%
Never	2.9%
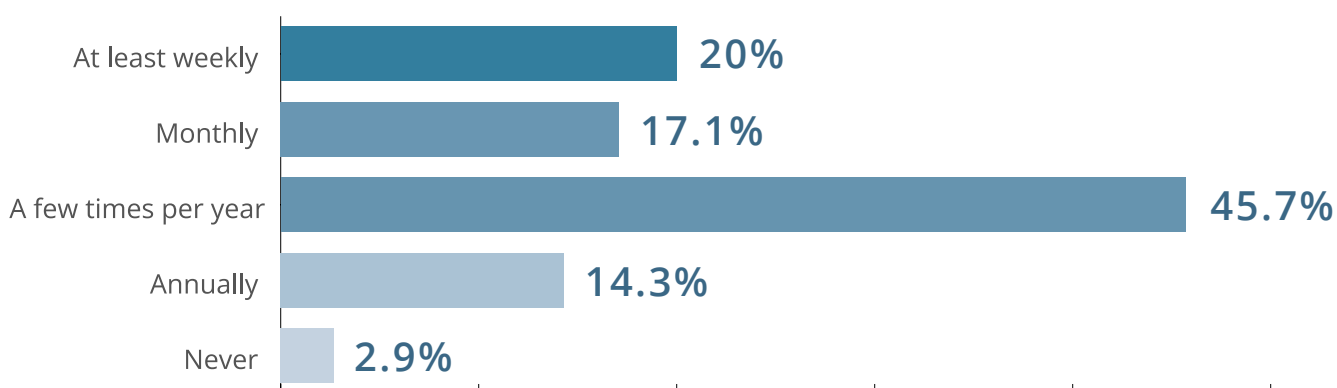
In general, only half (51%) of Functional Leaders said that the constructive feedback they received was helpful. The most frequently cited reasons that the feedback wasn't helpful are:

- "Feedback was given too infrequently."
- "I'm not sure how to put the feedback into practice."
- "My manager lacks knowledge or authority on the matter."

Middle Managers are Struggling with Cross-departmental Challenges

In addition to developing the individual leadership skills of middle managers, respondents indicated that cross-departmental obstacles continue to hamper their organization. Departmental siloing is overwhelmingly impacting companies, with 86% of C-level Executives and Department Heads indicating that it is currently an obstacle to success. Interestingly, the C-suite may lack visibility into the severity of the issue, with nearly half (45%) of Department Heads citing silos as creating major obstacles, as compared to only a quarter (24%) of C-level Executives.
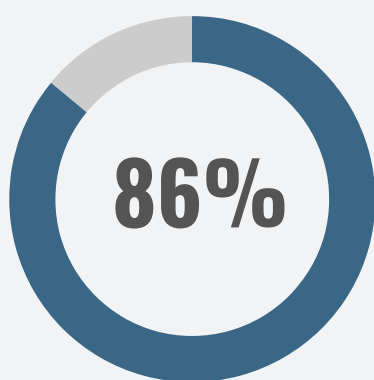
86% of leaders stated that departmental siloing is creating obstacles to success.

Functional Managers are Craving an Outside Perspective

Leading a functional area within a department can be isolating for a middle manager, particularly for those with a specialized area of expertise. An overwhelming majority (91%) of Functional Leaders indicated that they wanted more insight into best practices and outside perspectives from peers doing the same job at other companies. Oftentimes, a Department Head brings sufficient functional expertise and is able to help emerging leaders grow their careers. Half (49%) of the respondents felt this was the case, but the majority (82%) of that subset still felt they would benefit from access to a peer group from outside of their company.

Companies are Struggling to Provide Equitable Support for Leadership Growth

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) is an important part of company values for many organizations. However, according to employees, many ed-tech companies continue to struggle with providing an environment that is supportive for historically marginalized populations. Across all respondent groups, 70% felt that their company's talent-development practices did not effectively support the needs of historically marginalized populations.

Approximately a third (32%) of respondents identified as members of a historically marginalized population, with the vast majority (75%) indicating that their company's talent-development practices did not effectively support their needs. Similarly, among those who indicated they are not a member of a historically marginalized population, 71% felt that their company did not effectively support the needs of those who identify as a member of a historically marginalized population.

The perspective was fairly consistent across C-level Executives as well as Department Heads and Functional Leaders. Among all C-level Executives, 70% felt their company's practices were ineffective, with 32% of all C-level Executives identifying as members of a historically marginalized population. Among Department Heads and Functional Leaders, 69% felt their company's practices were ineffective, with 30% of all Department Heads identifying as members of a historically marginalized population.
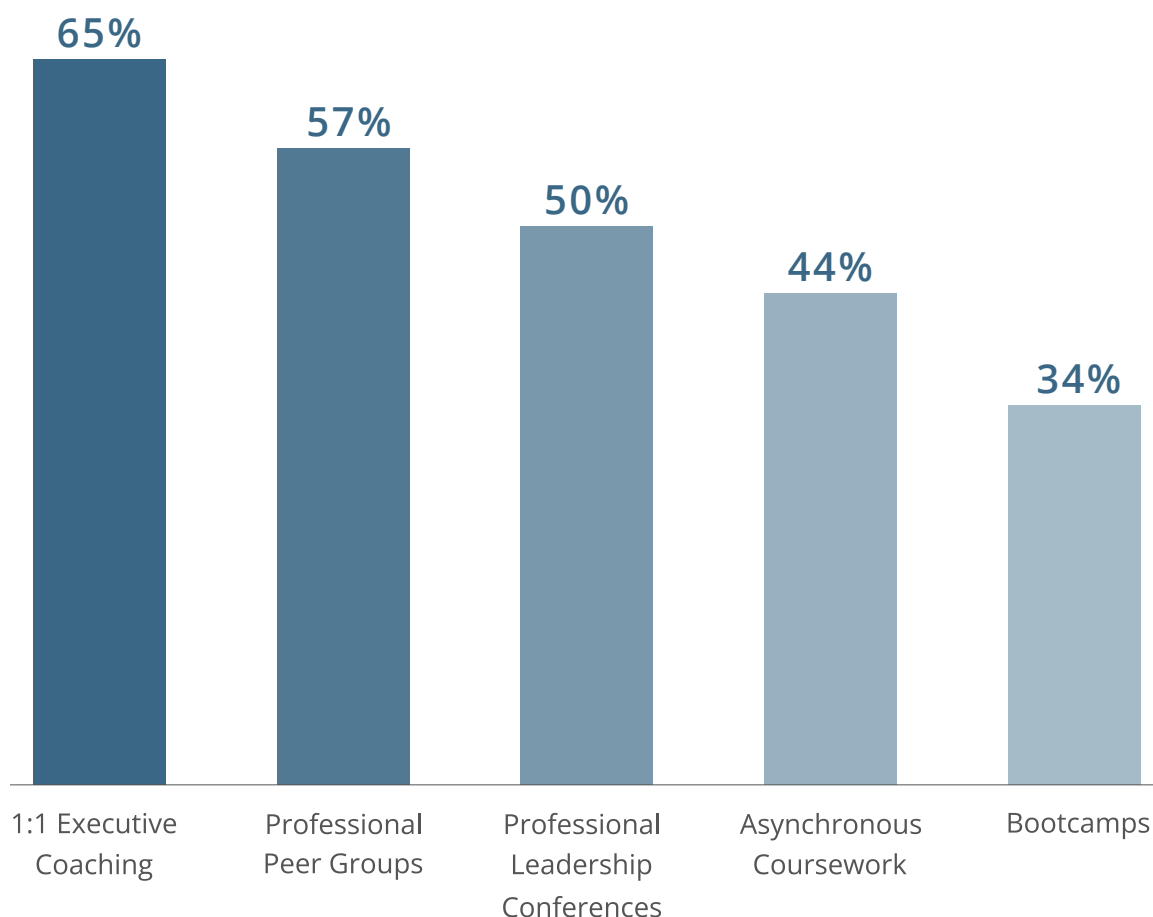
Preferred Leadership Development Methods Focus on Executive Coaching and Peer Groups

Throughout the survey, the need for mentoring and leadership development was apparent and was acknowledged fairly widely by all respondent groups. Given this need, C-level Executives were asked about which methods they would be most likely to invest in for their team members, while middle managers asked which methods they would choose to pursue for themselves. Across all respondents, two-thirds (65%) indicated they were likely or very likely to pursue 1:1 executive coaching, while more than half (57%) indicated they were likely or very likely to pursue professional peer groups. C-level Executives and Functional Leaders were more likely to choose professional peer groups, while Department Heads were more likely to choose 1:1 executive coaching.

PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS LIKELY OR VERY LIKELY TO PURSUE PARTICULAR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

Activity	Percent
1:1 Executive Coaching	65%
Professional Peer Groups	57%
Professional Leadership Conferences	50%
Asynchronous Coursework	44%
Bootcamps	34%

Conclusion

Experienced leadership is at a premium in the ed-tech industry — especially when seeking those who have previously scaled a business. Leadership depth has become a gating factor to company growth, making it critical that ed-tech companies actively cultivate talent who can lead, communicate and collaborate.

Middle managers are being asked to bear a tremendous burden, with an overwhelming number of them navigating unfamiliar waters in the biggest job of their life. Departmental siloing has become a prevalent obstacle to success. Meanwhile, critical vulnerabilities exist within the C-suite, and a lack of leadership depth means that middle managers aren't adequately prepared to step in and lead. As the survey data show, company leaders have begun to recognize these deficiencies.

Unfortunately, very few companies have reported taking the steps to provide the leadership-development support they believe is necessary. Survey respondents sent a strong message regarding the methods of leadership-development support they would likely pursue. Given the lack of long-term, sustained mentoring in many organizations, most respondents showed interest in pursuing professional peer groups and 1:1 executive coaching to address the leadership-development gap. In addition, working with outside coaching and peer groups may allow middle managers to broaden their perspective and begin breaking down some of the departmental silos, while strengthening their cross–functional skills and their functional depth.

In this moment, when time-to-market is being impacted by talent scarcity, the ability to cultivate leadership talent becomes a competitive advantage. Equally important, it becomes a critical success factor for ed-tech organizations to deliver on their mission and make an impact during this pivotal time in K-12 education.

Appendix

SURVEY QUESTIONS ASKED OF C-LEVEL EXECUTIVES:

When you consider your executives' and key middle managers' depth of experience scaling a business, what kind of impact has it had on your company's ability to grow?

What percent of your executives and key middle managers would you characterize as being "in the biggest job of their life"?

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "The amount of mission-critical work that is in the hands of our middle managers creates a potential company risk if they were to struggle."

If any of the members of your executive team resigned tomorrow, how confident are you that one of their middle managers could step up as a leader on your executive team and meaningfully contribute?

Please identify the top four skills you believe are crucial for high-potential employees and emerging leaders.

How confident are you that your high-potential employees are receiving the mentoring and support they need in order to develop and reach their full potential?

To what extent is "siloing" creating obstacles to success within your company?

If you were to invest in the necessary leadership development for your team members, how likely would you be to pursue the following methods?

SURVEY QUESTIONS ASKED OF DEPARTMENT HEADS:

When considering the depth of experience of the middle managers on your team, what percent of them are "in the biggest job of their life"?

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "The amount of mission-critical work that is in the hands of our middle managers creates a potential company risk if they were to struggle."

If tomorrow you were promoted to a leadership role on the company's executive team, how confident are you that you have the skills and knowledge to meaningfully contribute and meet expectations at that next level?

Please review the skills listed below, and identify the top four skills you believe are most important for you to operate successfully at the next level in the organization.

How confident are you that you are providing your high-potential employees the mentoring and support they need in order to develop and reach their full potential?

To what extent is "siloing" creating obstacles to success within your company?

If your company were to invest in the necessary leadership development for your advancement, how likely would you be to pursue the following methods?

SURVEY QUESTIONS ASKED OF FUNCTIONAL LEADERS:
Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement: "I am currently in the biggest job of my life."

If tomorrow you were promoted to become the head of your department (e.g., Sales, Marketing, Customer Success, Curriculum, Product, etc.), how confident are you that you have the skills and knowledge to meaningfully contribute and meet expectations at that next level?

Please review the skills listed below and identify the top four skills you believe are most important for you to advance to the next level in the organization.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement: "My manager consistently dedicates the amount of mentoring time that I need in order to support my leadership development."

How often do you receive thoughtful, constructive feedback from your manager regarding your performance?

In general, how helpful do you find the constructive feedback you receive from your manager?

Why wasn't the constructive feedback from your manager as helpful as it could be?

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement: "As a functional leader, I feel like sometimes I'm working in an echo chamber, and I want more insight into best practices and outside perspectives from peers at other companies doing the same job as me."

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement: "My manager possesses the depth of specialized functional knowledge necessary to help me advance to the next level in my career."

If your company were to invest in the necessary leadership development for your advancement, how likely would you be to pursue the following methods?

SURVEY QUESTIONS ASKED OF ALL RESPONDENTS:
How effectively do your company's talent-development practices support the needs of historically marginalized populations?

Optional: Do you identify as a member of a historically marginalized population?

About the Ed-tech Leadership Collective

This survey report was developed by the Ed-tech Leadership Collective. The organization helps high-potential employees achieve the professional breakthroughs necessary for scaling businesses to succeed.

The Ed-Tech Leadership Collective is a membership organization for people who are committed not only to growing their business but also to growing as leaders and individuals. Through industry-specific talent-development programs, members receive strategic guidance and constructive feedback on not only "what" they are doing but also on "who" they are becoming as leaders.

The organization is focused solely on the educational technology market. We leverage deep industry expertise and a wide network of professionals to create a supportive community for professional growth. Using a structured approach, the Collective helps high-potential employees develop the leadership skills and contextual knowledge necessary to step up and contribute amidst increasingly high expectations.

The Ed-tech Leadership Collective's members and Executive Coaches bring sophisticated understanding of the nuances of the K-12 market and a deep understanding of the ed-tech vernacular. The Collective's rigorous program framework creates an environment that uncovers gaps and blind spots, and embraces critical feedback, while scaffolding and celebrating success.

To learn more about the Ed-tech Leadership Collective, please visit www.edtechcollective.org or call 617-388-6061