

# Using Experience to Develop Leadership Talent

**How Organizations Leverage  
On-the-Job Development**

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# Advancing Strategic Work and Accelerating Leadership Talent at GlaxoSmithKline

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GlaxoSmithKline's (GSK) leadership strategy is closely aligned with the future strategic requirements of its global business. The strategy focuses on ensuring that GSK has the leadership needed to deliver on the organization's growth ambitions. Leadership development is a key element of the strategy, contributing to the creation and maintenance of a high-quality supply of leaders at all levels of the pipeline—leaders with the capability, capacity, and confidence to lead the organization in the face of a demanding business environment.

Historically, GSK has always invested significantly in formal training, coaching, and work-based secondments, but these have tended to happen in isolation from each other, rather than as part of a deliberate approach aimed at accelerating a leader's development. This makes it difficult for the rich learning insights to be fully integrated into the day-to-day process of leading the business. In 2010, GSK implemented the concept, popularized by Lominger, of 70–20–10: 70 percent of adult learning takes place on the job, 20 percent in developmental relationships, and 10 percent in formal training and development activities. Since then, significant work has been undertaken to experiment with different combinations of learning methodologies to ascertain what

works most effectively. One of our conclusions is that the Future Strategy Group (FSG) represents an innovative and impactful approach to work-based learning.

This chapter outlines how FSG blends organizational problem solving and leader development within the business context into one integrated, intense experience. It illustrates how the organization is becoming increasingly sophisticated about how it develops leaders over time and how it accelerates them into critical roles with the appropriate capabilities and mindsets to succeed.

## The CEO's Future Strategy Group

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The CEO's Future Strategy Group is an accelerated talent development offering that was initiated in 2010 by Sir Andrew Witty, CEO of GlaxoSmithKline. Between 2010 and 2012, sixty leaders from twenty-eight countries participated in FSG. The offering was created in response to organizational challenges in two key areas. First, there were critical, ongoing organizational issues that the Corporate Executive Team were identifying and needed to explore and resolve. Second, there was a strong sense that GSK needed to strengthen its leadership capability in innovative thinking, collaboration across the businesses, and exposure to the external environment.

The unique feature of FSG is that it is both a *think tank* to advance strategic work and a *development chamber* to accelerate mid-career talent. The CEO and the Corporate Executive Team agree on the program's agenda, and FSG is managed out of the Strategy Office—both of which give it significant prestige and power. This arrangement also distinguishes it from the vast majority of action learning in organizations that is initiated from HR and then invites participants to search for projects that may be beneficial to the organization.

The purpose of FSG is twofold: (1) to diagnose, analyze, and make a set of recommendations to deal with organizational issues identified by the Corporate Executive Team as critical to GSK's transformation agenda and (2) to accelerate the development of key emerging, mid-career talent across GSK and give them visibility to senior executives.

There have been four cohorts of participants in the 2010–2012 timeframe. Each cohort consists of twelve to eighteen leaders who have been identified as emerging talent, and they work in groups of three to four. They are drawn from across GSK's business units, geographies, and functions.

## Origins of FSG

Sir Andrew Witty created FSG as a vehicle for accomplishing multiple agendas that the organization was dealing with. Having taken over as CEO in 2008, he initiated a transformation agenda that required a number of significant changes to how GSK worked globally. FSG was designed to bring new, fresh thinking to business problems that exist across GSK businesses. The idea is that leaders who are not intimately involved in these issues on a day-to-day basis will look at the problems and opportunities from different perspectives. FSG was also designed to identify issues that GSK, as a whole, has energy for and wants to move forward on. It offers the possibility of giving visibility, priority, and velocity to internal discussions by producing a set of recommendations to the Corporate Executive Team that can be debated and acted upon. The Corporate Executive Team is the only cross-enterprise strategic decision-making group, and thus FSG was, in effect, invited to act as their thought partner.

## Selection Criteria

To ensure that the objective of accelerating the development of key, emerging mid-career talent is met, the selection criteria are of critical importance and have evolved over time. While the earliest cohort of participants was selected based on intuition and gut feel, a more tangible, specific set of selection criteria has emerged over time and become a core element of the program. The key criteria for selection into FSG are leaders who:

- Have the potential to be successful in a more senior role as identified through the GSK integrated talent management process as well as through on-the-job observation

- Have a strong development focus, a high level of learning agility, and can articulate how FSG will support their careers and personal development plans
- Have an ability to actively drive their own development in the future beyond the program
- Are currently in a director-level role
- Can relocate to London for six months, with or without their families
- Can be released from their full-time roles for six months

## Structure of the Experience

The experience is designed to be a six-month, continuous assignment with a focus on one project for the duration. Participants are located in West London at the corporate headquarters of GSK in a dedicated part of the building. The twelve to eighteen individuals are split into groups of three to four, and each group is given a project. There is no choice of who one works with or what topic one tackles, although in several cases expertise is required to be on a particular team. Cohorts begin in March and September of each year. While a process of continuous improvement over the life cycle of a cohort means that each cohort has had a slightly modified experience, the core components of the experience remain the same and include the following learning resources:

- A dedicated GSK coach
- Workshops from the Accelerated Delivery Program (ADP), GSK's internal change consultancy, to help improve skills of lean thinking, project management, and change management
- Lessons in innovation and creative thinking by an external expert organization
- Feedback from peers and senior leaders
- Resources, in the form of external contacts and money, for whatever the projects require to deliver world class research and recommendations
- Access to anyone in GSK
- A sponsor from the Corporate Executive Team

The ten projects that have been worked on over the two-year period are quite varied in scope and nature. They reflect the subjects that GSK is wrestling with. Topics include ones that are more internal to GSK (e.g., shaping GSK's 2020 environmental sustainability strategy) and those that are external (e.g., exploring how to create access to medicines for patients at the "bottom of the social hierarchy" in emerging markets and Asia Pacific).

The work of the project includes (1) comprehensive qualitative and quantitative research from multiple sources, including academic literature, best practices in other organizations, consultations with thought leaders, and internal data gathered from stakeholders and subject-matter experts on the current state of play and (2) a set of recommendations that addresses the topic in a systemic and strategic way. The intention is for the recommendations to be implementable once the project is concluded, although it is rare for the participants who completed the project to then implement them. The lack of accountability for implementation is thought to encourage innovation and more edgy ideas.

During the six months that the project is in progress, the project's sponsor acts as a sounding board to the team. The sponsor connects the team with internal and external experts, challenges their thinking, and encourages them to propose imaginative, bold, and pragmatic recommendations.

## Career Progression for Participants

Although one of the selection criteria is the participant's potential for bigger and more senior roles, changing roles is not an explicit promise made to participants. In reality, role changes are often a consequence of the participants having been out of the business for six months, and on their return, finding that organizational changes had happened during their secondment, which prompts them to look for new opportunities. Given the personal growth that participants experience, they have usually outgrown their original roles and so the move to a new assignment is positive. The critical component is a thoughtful talent plan that identifies a suitable role in a timely way to avoid any concern on the part of participants that they do not have a route back to an appropriate permanent position. One of GSK's talent strategies is to facilitate

**Table 9.1. Role Changes Made by FSG Participants**

<i>Role Change</i>	<i>Number of Participants</i>
Moved to a new role in the same function	14
Moved to a new role in a different function	7
Promoted into a new role in the same function	12
Promoted to new role in a different function	2
Returned to original role	13
Currently on projects	12

more cross-business moves, and FSG may hold the potential to naturally encourage this movement. Table 9.1 shows the number and types of role changes made by FSG participants.

## **A Researched Review of FSG**

Following the evolution and visible successes of the first two years of the FSG, we wanted to explore what it was delivering from the perspective of its various stakeholders. This work was prompted by a new vice president taking over the day-to-day running of the group with a fresh perspective on its value and potential role.

As part of our effort to understand the success of FSG and how its impact could be further enhanced, we interviewed twelve participants drawn from each of the four cohorts of the program. We also interviewed key stakeholders who were involved in establishing and running FSG. In this section of the chapter, we summarize observations about the key elements of the program. Verbatim quotes from the participants we interviewed are shown in Table 9.2 to help paint a richer picture of our findings.

### **Joining the FSG**

The process of joining FSG was similar for all participants, in spite of the fact that they were in different parts of the world, doing varied roles, and working in different businesses. Typically, they had a discussion with a senior line manager about their careers. Then they received a phone call from the CEO Strategy Office

**Table 9.2. The Voice of Participants**

<i>Findings from FSG Review</i>	<i>Participant Statements</i>
Joining FSG held surprises.	“I thought we would spend more time and focus on project work, but by the second or third week when we were coached in open forums, we realized the focus on development was true.”
Learning from experience was influenced by the context and content of FSG and by the social dynamics of the situation.	<p>“There was no way for me to get through our project without stretching my skill set and capabilities in these areas (strategic thinking and enterprise thinking) . . . That was fantastic. The other piece was senior stakeholder management and being exposed to this at a global level.”</p> <p>“The development was self-driven with a clear message that ‘we will support you’. I felt very supported.”</p> <p>“We had some really tough conversations. For the first time, we had someone who told us what he thought of us. It was undiluted . . . we were all on a journey.”</p>
Participants deepened their awareness of self, the business, a culture.	<p>“The self-reflection and coaching that [my coach] gave me really helped me identify my self-limiting beliefs.”</p> <p>“I learned that emotional intelligence is key.”</p> <p>“I picked up confidence and became more courageous.”</p> <p>“I got a valuable bird’s eye view of the company.”</p> <p>“I developed a much stronger awareness of different cultures and how to adapt, flex, and be more sensitive in these areas.”</p>

**Table 9.2. Continued**

<i>Findings from FSG Review</i>	<i>Participant Statements</i>
Home country, career stage, and re-entry expectations influenced participants' experiences.	<p>“The language barrier made it difficult to express my emotions and feelings.”</p> <p>“The relocation was a real culture shock.”</p> <p>“I feel this would have provided me with more opportunities to change tracks if this had been earlier in my career.”</p> <p>“Delegates should be mature enough to get benefit and young enough to give it back.”</p> <p>“It has been very hard going back—we are missing the energy, the buzz, and the fundamental challenge to nail a project in 5.5 months with no wiggle room.”</p> <p>“Having had to raise your game for six months, it [returning to my job] feels distinctly underwhelming.”</p>

inviting them to take part in an interview. This interview was chaired by a member of Sir Andrew Witty’s team and a global talent business leader from HR. The call briefly described the opportunity that FSG presented and asked questions about their learning and career ambitions. The majority signed up and felt privileged to be invited to join the group because of the title of the program and the explicit promise to work at the most senior level in GSK. In most cases, the details of what this meant, the learning it would provoke, and the opportunities it would create, were not fully known or understood. Nonetheless, participants expressed excitement and anticipation about what the six months would provide, and although specific outcomes were not always known at the beginning, they expressed a huge level of satisfaction and gratitude at the end.

### The FSG Developmental Experience

The head office location, project work, feedback-rich environment, proximity to power, and small working group are some of

the critical components that make FSG such a potent and intense experience. Almost every participant interviewed spoke of his or her surprise at the development all received during their time within the FSG. This surprise arose for a number of reasons: a belief that FSG was simply about the delivery of projects, a belief that the 50 percent focus on personal development was simply “spin,” and unexpected experiences during the program, such as receiving feedback in the moment and in public.

### *Key Influences on the Learning Experience*

Participants’ comments on the key elements that influenced their learning from the experience fell into two arenas: (1) the context and content of their work and (2) the social dynamics of the situation. Important aspects of the context and content of their work included the significance of being in “the center of the universe” (i.e., GSK House in London); the opportunity to work in the U.K.; working in the corporate center, which encouraged enterprise thinking; the strategic nature of the project; the six-month timeframe that culminated in a set of recommendations; the external perspective and ability to speak to a wide range of leaders, academics, and others from different organizations or disciplines; and the Accelerated Delivery Program (ADP), which brought discipline, rigor, and new language in lean thinking, project management, and change management.

Important social dynamics of the experience included new and different relationships with leaders from different businesses, geographies, and specialties; access to senior GSK leaders; the personal development, which most of them underestimated, which came from feedback from their peers, the VP who led the program, and their coach; and small and large group dynamics. The combination of these factors created a unique and incredibly rich learning experience that some participants described as life changing.

An important note is the influence of the formal training element embedded in the experience. Every participant spoke of how integral training in the ADP fundamentals was to their development, bringing some simple, practical, and methodical tools to their work. What was striking about the way in which participants spoke of ADP was that they hadn’t simply introjected the tools in

their entirety but were taking a personal and practical approach to selecting what they found helpful on a day-to-day basis. Participants spoke of improvements in the ADP delivery process between FSG cohorts and, particularly in cohort 1, how the training delivery had moved from a top-down “this is how you do it” approach to a more inclusive and engaging one.

### *Learning and Development Outcomes*

The impact of the experience was varied. Everyone seemed to have a special set of takeaways, depending on the starting point for his or her journey. However, commonly cited learning outcomes from the experience were

- Efficient ways of working that enabled participants to be more time-efficient when they returned to the business
- A global mindset and enterprise thinking
- What it means to be a great leader of people, especially the role of coaching and feedback
- A model for problem solving—one participant mentioned that he created a mini-FSG to solve a business problem in his area

Moreover, participants reported developing deeper awareness in three arenas: self, the business, and culture. Participants pointed to a deepening of their self-awareness from a combination of the 360-feedback report they received at the start of the program, the in-the-moment and very public feedback during the experience, and the ongoing coaching they received. The combination of interventions created significant personal “developmental heat” that not only challenged their capabilities and competencies but their beliefs about themselves and others. The deliberate and intense focus on developing deeper self-awareness provided a valuable counterpoint to the norms of leadership development that they had been exposed to and created an internal shift that lasted well beyond their time on FSG.

Second to self-awareness, many participants spoke of how valuable it was to develop a broader, more enterprise awareness of GSK. This awareness was stimulated by the projects they were assigned and from working with senior sponsors, but also through

being located at GSK House. One of the greatest gifts that the FSG experience appears to have given its participants is context. The boundaries of their experience were stretched by being exposed to different parts of GSK, different parts of the world, and different organizations and sectors. This has meant that, while still focusing on the local task at hand, their actions and decisions have become more informed by a broader, more systemic world view.

Finally, a number of participants, in particular those from the U.S., spoke about how much the FSG experience deepened their cultural awareness. Exposure to difference was another key factor that contributed to the developmental heat of the experience, and exposure to a culture that is different to the participant's norms was an intense learning experience. And although the challenge was of a different degree of intensity, even participants from the U.K. spoke of the different cultural norms and habits that they experienced working in a head office environment around the most senior leaders in the organization.

### *The Impact of Individual Characteristics on the Learning Experience*

As we conducted the interviews, it became apparent that, although there were some universal experiences, there were some key individual characteristics that affected the participants' experience, including:

- *Home country.* Delegates who relocated to London from another country for the period of their FSG assignment had an extra level of learning and intensity layered over and above the project and development work. Living in a different country, often away from family and friends, provided a rich source of learning and self-discovery, combined with a source of strain and a drain on personal resilience. Delegates spoke of the challenge of staying connected with their family and friends, the difficulties the language barrier presented, and concerns over what awaited them on their return.
- *Age and time in career.* During the interviews, we explored with delegates the question of when in somebody's career the FSG

experience would be most valuable. Although there was some variation in responses, the general theme was to continue to maintain the rich diversity of the group but to ideally target individuals early in their careers while they still have a strong learning agility that has not been too “contaminated” through many years in senior positions at GSK.

- *Returning to the business.* As with a number of experiential development programs at GSK, the experience of returning to the business proves as challenging and insightful as the experience itself. For example, GSK’s PULSE program gives employees the opportunity to apply their skills in an NGO in the developed or developing world for six months on full pay, and participants experience a similar issue with re-entry. These experiences provide participants with an opportunity to step back and witness their organization from a distance in an environment that is supportive of their learning and at the same time challenging enough to engender a balanced mix of excitement and anxiety—which they suddenly realize is missing in their day-to-day roles when they return.

A key factor affecting re-entry is the expectations that were set (or implied, or imagined) by the participants at the start of their experience. These expectations appear to have shifted and evolved with each subsequent cohort hearing stories from the previous cohort. The first cohort had very few expectations as to what would happen on leaving the program, and the majority of those we interviewed went on to new roles in which they were able to maintain the excitement and developmental heat that they had experienced within FSG. Those who were part of later waves spoke of their expectations that a different role or opportunity would await them at the end of their experience. No participants spoke of specific conversations in which they were told that the purpose of the FSG was to change roles, so it seems that expectations are set through a combination of success stories from previous cohorts that self-perpetuate within the current cohorts throughout their experience. These stories both fuel expectation during the FSG experience and cause an artificial sense of disappointment or even failure on returning to the business. This pattern is amplified with each subsequent cohort as additional success stories are

written and fewer big new role opportunities exist within the business compared to the early days.

A second factor affecting re-entry is the bias created by the FSG experience toward external stimuli as the triggers for developmental heat. The majority of the stretch during FSG was created through an external stimulus (e.g., in-the-moment feedback, direct contact with senior leaders). An unintended consequence of the way in which participants develop during the FSG experience may be that they become over-reliant on external stimuli to generate the challenge, excitement, and personal resilience they have become used to and subsequently find lacking back in the business.

## **Recommendations and Questions Going Forward**

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The interview process yielded rich qualitative data and themes on the strengths and potential areas for enhancement of the FSG. Initial high-level recommendations are summarized below as areas for further discussion and inquiry.

### **Professionalism of the Process**

The “form” of FSG has successfully evolved from some rather informal beginnings. Significant work has been done to formalize the components of the six-month program experience. However, there is still curiosity and mystique around the FSG that would benefit from standardizing specific elements of the processes to increase clarity and transparency. These include:

- Positioning with line managers
- Published selection criteria
- Induction process
- Training early in the process on how to learn from experience
- Ending elegantly
- Feedback on the project report quality, recommendations, and ability to implement
- Feedback on the delegates’ performance and input into their development plans

- Enhanced involvement and contact with line managers before, during, and after the experience—with clear expectations regarding their roles and accountabilities
- Career management discussions

## Organizational Value

Every participant had a rich personal learning experience as a result of a combination of the project, the relocation, and their peer group. However, there is an opportunity to bring a greater focus on the value of the experience to the organization by:

- Quantifying the quality of project recommendations and their value to GSK,
- Monitoring and tracking the impact of recommendations that were implemented,
- Gathering views of the individual by HR professionals,
- Monitoring and tracking the performance of individuals post-FSG, and
- Sustaining the FSG alumni network and deploying them strategically (e.g., to conferences, think tanks, specific projects, mentoring).

## Role of the CEO, Corporate Executive Board, and Strategy Office

The origins and the title of the FSG set an expectation that groups would work in close proximity with the CEO and the Corporate Executive Board on strategically important projects. Although this is often the case, the evolution of the group, range of the projects, and internal structuring of the FSG have evolved over time. It would be valuable to take a step back and appraise the appropriateness of the title “CEO’s Future Strategy Group,” the impact of internal restructuring and ownership of FSG, and the selection criteria of projects that are assigned to FSG participants.

## Setting Balanced and Overt Expectations

As noted earlier, the expectations of participants joining the FSG have evolved over time based on the stories passed on by previous

participants. Although participants will always carry a certain amount of expectation by virtue of being invited to participate in the program, paying attention to the messaging early on and throughout the experience will help maximize both the learning experience and the participants' impact on their return to the business. Potential improvements include:

- Continuing the balance between 50 percent project and 50 percent personal development, but focusing personal development around developing leadership skills and abilities that will benefit participants in their next roles.
- Being overt early on about how participants will succeed in the FSG experience, and addressing the covert question of “competition or collaboration” through explicit conversations.
- Being open and transparent regarding the stories of previous delegates, their experiences, and the roles they returned to.
- Shifting the focus of FSG to be a developmental experience, as opposed to an intense interview for promotion.

## Developing a Challenger Spirit

The whole premise of FSG is that an internal group of talented leaders is able to challenge the status quo and bring new thinking in from the outside to address problems and opportunities in GSK. As suggested in the title of the book by Dehnugara and Breeze (2011) on this subject, we think of this as nurturing a “challenger spirit” that encourages the participants to be agitators for change and to challenge conventional wisdom and existing orthodoxies. One area that was explored during the interviews was how effective internal leaders can really be, given that they are part of the system that they are trying to change. There was a certain sense that recommendations may be modified to fit the corporate environment. Looking at factors that inhibit this ability to challenge both organizationally and individually will further enhance the impact of the FSG. This includes:

- Reviewing the project-selection criteria and creating a bias toward projects that actively challenge the established norms of GSK or contain green field opportunities.
- Conducting a review of previous final reports in detail to ascertain whether the basis on which certain

recommendations were accepted or rejected was challenged too much or too little.

- Amplifying participants' learning by including developmental experiences that increase their ability to challenge the status quo and developing the personal resilience required to do so. This work would not only increase the impact of the participants during their projects, but would enhance their ability to appropriately challenge the organization when returning to the business.
- Enhancing participants' ability to self-generate developmental heat outside of the FSG experience to reduce a potential over-reliance on external stimuli.
- Being intentional about enhancing the development of learning agility, flexible thinking, developing others, innovation mindset, and enterprise thinking.

## Applying “Developmental Heat” Principles

The concept of *developmental heat* refers to a rich learning state that arises out of experience. Lombardo and Eichinger (1989) identified eleven common challenges in successful experiential learning (see Exhibit 9.1) of which five must typically be present for developmental heat to occur. We may think of these as environmental or outer stimuli for learning. Appraising and enhancing the FSG participants' experience against these stimuli will strengthen the impact more consistently for both delegates and the business.

In addition to environmental stimuli, we believe that a certain amount of internal developmental heat is required to ensure that participants are altered by their experiences in a way that enables them to bring their new selves to their old roles. We think of this as the “inner work” required for learning. Further work is needed to develop this concept and the criteria for stretch and challenge in the inner work of personal growth and transformation.

## Conclusion

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FSG is an impactful, edgy, state-of-the-art leadership development program that has evolved during its two-year existence. Our

### **Exhibit 9.1. Common Challenges in Successful Experiential Learning**

1. Success and failure are possible and visible to others.
2. Requires aggressive “take charge” leadership.
3. Involves working with new people, lots of people, or both.
4. Creates additional personal pressure.
5. Requires influencing people, activities, and factors over which one has no direct authority or control.
6. Involves a high degree of variety.
7. Will be closely watched by people whose opinions count.
8. Requires building a team, starting something from scratch, or fixing and turning around a team, an operation, or a project in trouble.
9. Has a major strategic component and is intellectually challenging.
10. Involves interacting with an exceptionally good or bad boss.
11. Something important is missing, such as top management support, key skills or technical knowledge, or credentials and credibility.

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recommendations reflect a desire to maximize its potential and position in GSK’s differentiated development landscape. The ambition is to create a systemic offering that guarantees a potent participant experience, ensures a professional transition into and out of the program, and maximizes the short- and long-term value for participants, stakeholders, and the business.

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