

# A Social Identity Model of Leadership Development Implementation

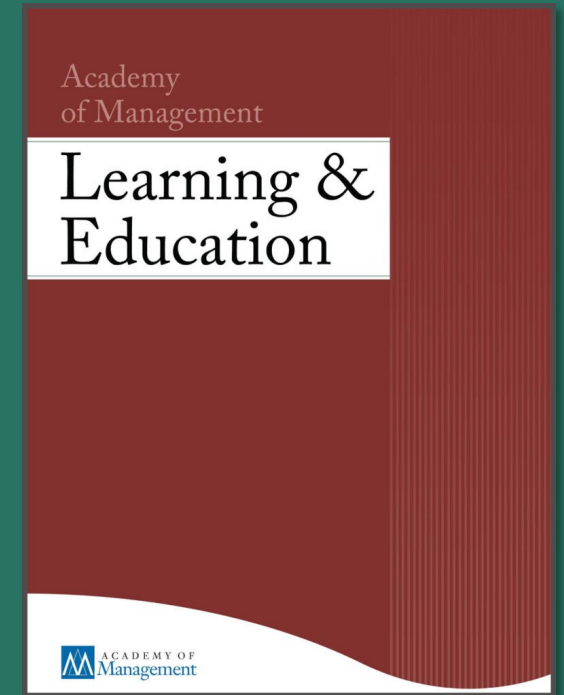
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## Teaching Material based on:

McMillan, B., Haslam, S. A., Mitchell, T., Steffens, N. K., & Peters, K. (2026).

A social identity model of leadership development implementation.

*Academy of Management Learning & Education*, in press.



The authors consent and encourage other scholars to use this material for their teaching.

# Pedagogical Note

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These slides present a **framework** for understanding why leadership development programs often fail to create lasting change, and what organizations can do about it. The framework addresses *how* to implement leadership development effectively (**process**), rather than *what* leadership approach to develop (**content**).

The materials are suited for HR directors, OD professionals, leadership developers, senior executives, postgraduate students, and researchers interested in leadership development implementation.

A free **companion practitioner toolkit** is available at: <https://simoldi.synact.com.au>

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# The Implementation Problem

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**\$80B+**

spent annually on  
leadership development

- Many **programs fail** to deliver meaningful, long-term impact
- The problem is often not program content but the **process of translating content** into sustained practice
- Organizations often select programs without first understanding what “leadership” means for their context

## Discuss:

1. Think of a leadership development program you have experienced or observed. Did it create lasting change? Why or why not?
2. Was the problem with the program content, the implementation process, or both?

# Five Key Implementation Challenges

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## Immediate

Content assumed to achieve a quick fix, with no structured mechanism for translation



## Universal

One size fits all; implementation context is not considered



## Self-perpetuating

Assumed to be self-sustaining, but motivation wears off without reinforcement



## Selective

Targeted at a select few, creating division and excluding many who might benefit



## Technical

Focus on technical challenges, neglecting the human drivers of implementation success

## Discuss:

1. Which of these challenges is most evident in your organization or experience?
2. Are there additional implementation challenges you would add?

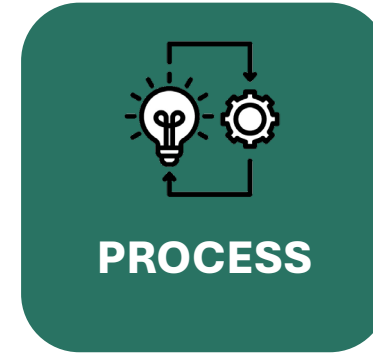
# The Content vs. Process Distinction

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## What leadership approach to develop

The theoretical approach and specific capabilities (e.g., transformational, authentic, adaptive, or social identity leadership)



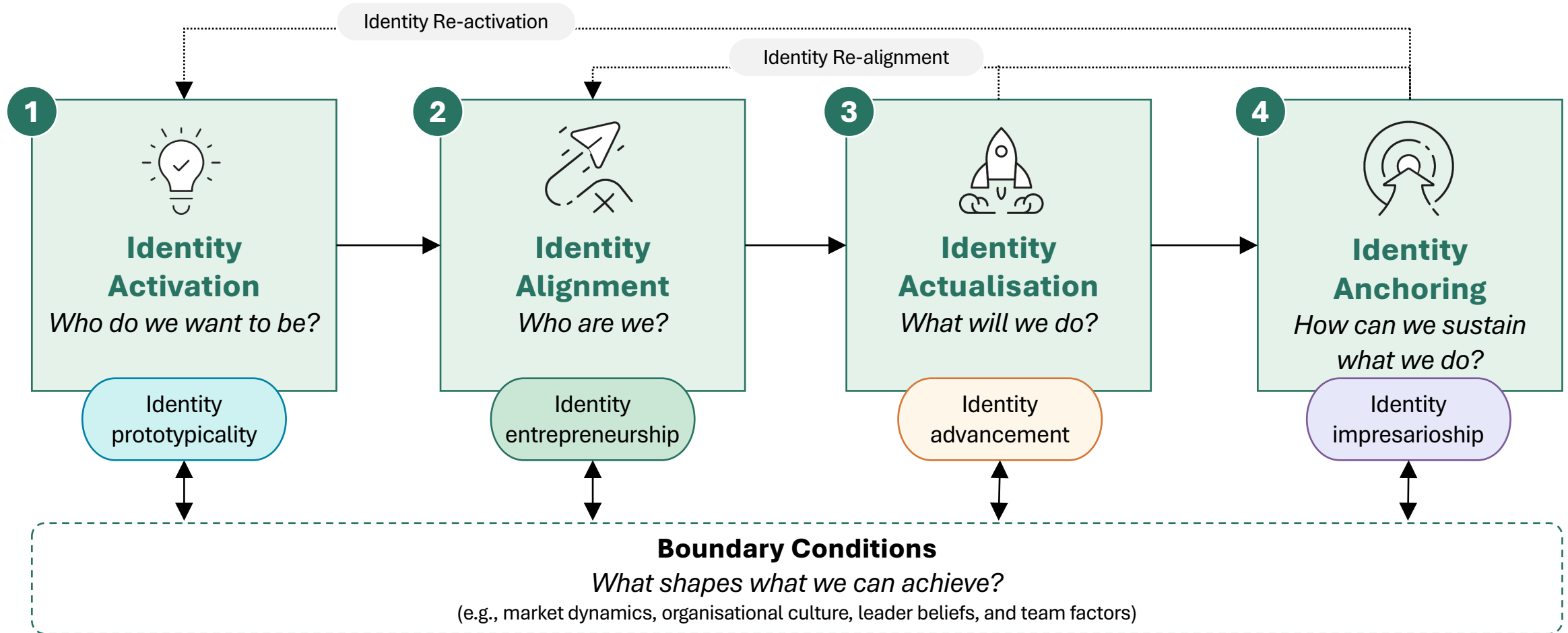
## How to implement leadership development effectively

The systematic implementation approach that translates selected content into sustained practice



SIMoLDI addresses process. Social identity dynamics shape implementation effectiveness regardless of content.

# SIMoLDI: Four Phases of Implementation



Implementation is more likely to be effective when an organization is seeking to build collective (rather than just individual) capability

# Phase 1: Identity Activation

*“Who do we want to be?”*



## Core purpose

Define and activate an aspirational leadership identity aligned with organizational goals. Requires activating two interconnected identities: aspirational **leadership identities** and aspirational **organizational identities**.

## Practical actions

- ✓ Identify activating events
- ✓ Facilitate stakeholder dialogue about leadership aspirations
- ✓ Use social identity mapping to surface current identities
- ✓ Articulate aspirational identity in organizational language

## Pitfalls:

- ✗ Limited stakeholder engagement
- ✗ Top-down imposition of aspirational identity
- ✗ Overlooking subgroup diversity
- ✗ Rushing past this phase

## Discuss:

1. What is the aspirational leadership identity in your organization? How was it developed?
2. Were diverse stakeholders involved, or was it determined top-down?

# Phase 2: Identity Alignment

*“Who are we?”*



Identity  
entrepreneurship

## Core purpose

Understand the **gap** between **current** and **aspirational** identities. Select leadership approaches that fit organizational identity aspirations. Co-design adaptations with stakeholders.

## Practical actions

- ✓ Analyze gap between current and aspirational identity
- ✓ Co-design adaptations with stakeholders
- ✓ Pilot test adapted materials with representative group
- ✓ Establish fidelity criteria (core vs. adaptable elements)

## Pitfalls:

- ✗ Superficial consultation without genuine co-design
- ✗ Inadequate gap assessment
- ✗ Selecting misaligned interventions
- ✗ Over-adapting and losing theoretical core

## Discuss:

1. How well does your organization's current leadership development align with its aspirational identity?
2. What would genuine co-design look like in your context, as opposed to superficial consultation?

# Phase 3: Identity Actualization

*“What will we do?”*



Identity  
advancement

## Core purpose

Translate identity-aligned plans into **concrete action**.  
Select and tailor interventions to **local contexts**. Build internal capacity for sustained delivery rather than relying on external providers.

## Practical actions

- ✓ Train internal facilitators (train-the-trainer)
- ✓ Create contextual support materials
- ✓ Start supported, then transition to independent delivery
- ✓ Monitor implementation fidelity continuously

## Pitfalls:

- ✗ Insufficient facilitator training
- ✗ Transitioning to independence too quickly
- ✗ Implementing without infrastructure
- ✗ Measuring attendance without tracking impact

## Discuss:

1. How does your organization currently build internal capacity for leadership development delivery?
2. What does “implementation fidelity” mean in practice, and how would you monitor it?

# Phase 4: Identity Anchoring

*“How can we sustain what we do?”*

## Core purpose

Embed new leadership practices within organizational routines and **collective identity**. Transform initial changes into **enduring practice**. Turn the idea of “us” into material reality.

## Practical actions

- ✓ Deliver multiple cohorts over years, not months
- ✓ Integrate into formal development systems
- ✓ Frame sustainment in identity terms (“Reinforcing who we are”)
- ✓ Build communities of reflective practice across cohorts

## Pitfalls:

- ✗ Declaring success after one cohort
- ✗ Treating program as one-time event
- ✗ Losing fidelity over time
- ✗ Failing to adapt to changing context

## Discuss:

1. What mechanisms exist in your organization to sustain leadership development beyond the initial program?
2. How do you prevent leadership development from becoming just another “flavor of the month”?

# Boundary Conditions

*“What shapes what we can achieve?”*

## Most effective when...

- Organizations commit to stakeholder co-creation
- Vertical integration between identity, content, and implementation
- Focus on building collective capability
- Culture supports participative approaches

## Greater challenges when...

- Rapid decisions preclude meaningful consultation
- Mandated content conflicts with organizational identity
- Stakeholders hold irreconcilably conflicting aspirations
- Implementation resources are severely constrained

**Key conditions:**

Market dynamics

Organizational culture

Leader beliefs

Team factors

## **Discuss:**

1. Which boundary conditions are most relevant in your organizational context?
2. How would they shape your approach to each of SIMoLDI's four phases?

# Vertical Integration

Implementation is most effective when there is **coherence** between foundational theory, leadership model, measurement, intervention, and practice.

## Leadership Banquet

*Integrated. Coherent. Aligned.*



Integrated, coherent approach. Theory, model, intervention, measurement, and practice are aligned.

**Each element reinforces the others.**

## Leadership Buffet

*Fragmented. Incoherent. Disconnected.*



Fragmented, incoherent approach. Mixing incompatible frameworks creates implementation failures.

E.g., servant leadership via top-down mandates

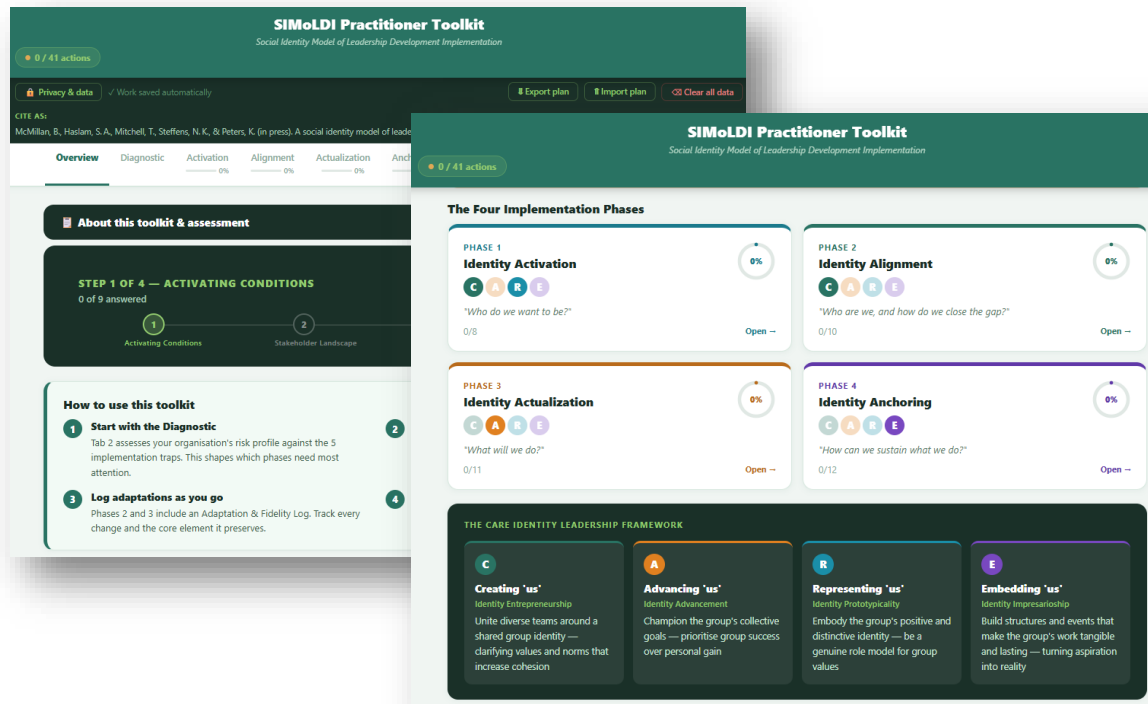
### Discuss:

1. How would you evaluate the coherence of your organization's current leadership development approach?
2. Is it a "banquet" or a "buffet"?

# Companion Practitioner Toolkit

A free, browser-based interactive resource for applying SIMoLDI in practice.

<https://simoldi.synact.com.au>



## Toolkit components:

- ❑ Context & Readiness Assessment with per-phase Focus Profile
- ❑ Implementation Traps Diagnostic with phase linkages
- ❑ Phase workspaces with practical actions, facilitator prompts, and phase gates
- ❑ Workshop Facilitator Guides (downloadable)
- ❑ Feedback Loops guidance with boundary condition notes
- ❑ Consolidated implementation plan (printable)
- ❑ Glossary of key terms

*No registration required. All data stored locally in browser. No server-side data collection.*

# Next Steps

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## Apply the framework:

- Use the free practitioner toolkit to assess your organization's readiness and plan implementation: <https://simoldi.synact.com.au>
- Map current identity dynamics using social identity mapping before selecting a program
- Evaluate existing leadership development for vertical integration (banquet or buffet?)

## Share and extend:

- Share these slides and the toolkit with colleagues involved in leadership development
- Use SIMoLDI to evaluate and improve current implementation practices
- Consider how social identity dynamics are at work in your organization, whether you recognize them or not

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