



Why the 20% of 70-20-10 Cannot Be Left to Chance

Social Learning Is Too Important to Remain Informal, Inconsistent, or Unstructured

By Sonia Mejias | Founder & CEO, Pinnacle Paths

The 70-20-10 model offers a helpful reminder: most development happens beyond the classroom.

It suggests that roughly:

- 70 percent of development occurs through experience and challenging assignments
- 20 percent occurs through relationships, coaching, feedback, and social learning
- 10 percent occurs through formal education and training

The percentages are not fixed, and they do not need to be. The main idea is that formal learning is only one part of development.

People also learn by doing, reflecting, getting feedback, and talking through challenges with people they trust.

That is the role of the 20 percent, yet it is often the least intentionally designed part of leadership development.

Informal Learning Is Not Always Effective Learning

Formal learning gets scheduled, funded, and measured. Experience is supported through stretch assignments and expanded responsibilities.

Social learning, however, is often expected to happen on its own.

We hope leaders find mentors, managers make time to coach, and peers share useful feedback. Sometimes that happens. Often, it does not.

Even when informal learning happens, it may reinforce weak assumptions, avoid hard topics, or limit leaders to advice from people who think like they do.

Support matters, but leaders also need challenge. Feedback matters, but its quality and frequency vary.

A more useful question is whether social learning helps leaders grow in the direction the organization needs.

Experience Alone Does Not Guarantee Development

Experience matters, but it does not automatically lead to growth.

Two leaders can face the same situation and learn very different lessons. One reflects and adapts. The other gets defensive or repeats the same behavior.

The difference is often how they interpret the experience.

Coaching, peer dialogue, and feedback can help connect experience to insight. Without that support, leaders may gain years of experience without fully learning from it.

The 20 percent gives leaders space to ask:

- What happened?
- What role did I play?
- What assumptions influenced my response?
- How did my behavior affect others?
- What should I do differently next time?

Those questions turn experience into development.

The 20 Percent Is Where Application Becomes Visible

Formal learning introduces an idea. Experience gives leaders a chance to try it. Social learning helps them see what worked and what they might do differently next time.

A leader may understand a framework for difficult conversations. The real test comes when they address performance, resistance, or conflict.

Afterward, reflection matters. Was I clear? Did I listen? What did I avoid? What should I do next?

A peer group, coach, mentor, or facilitator can help the leader make sense of the experience and prepare for the next conversation. That is where application becomes visible and behavior begins to change.

Trusted Peer Environments Improve Judgment

Leadership can feel lonely at times. As leaders advance, decisions become more complex, even as the pressure to appear certain grows.

A trusted peer environment gives leaders a welcome place to think out loud, test assumptions, spot blind spots, and learn how others have handled similar situations.

The value is not just reassurance. It is better judgment and more intentional action.

Of course, simply bringing leaders together is not enough. Developmental peer learning works best when it includes:

- A clear purpose
- Psychological safety
- Skilled facilitation
- Connection to real work
- Continuity
- Accountability

With these conditions in place, conversations can move beyond the surface and connect directly to real leadership behavior.

The Risk of Leaving the 20 Percent Unstructured

When social learning is left to chance, access is uneven.

Some leaders naturally build strong networks, find mentors, and ask for feedback. Others may not have the same access or may be unsure how to build those relationships.

That inconsistency can reinforce silos. Leaders may learn only from people in the same function, level, or location, which keeps their perspective narrow.

By designing social learning intentionally, organizations can widen access and perspective, connecting leaders across functions, generations, disciplines, and experiences.

It also makes feedback, reflection, and peer learning less dependent on personal networks.

Leaving the 20 percent unstructured does not stop social learning. It simply limits the organization's influence over its quality, consistency, and direction.

The 20 Percent Shapes Culture

The 20 percent shapes culture as well as individual growth.

Culture is reinforced through everyday conversations, observed behavior, challenged assumptions, and shared standards.

When leaders talk openly across the organization, they build common language and expectations around trust, accountability, performance, collaboration, and communication.

They take those conversations back to their teams, so development begins to influence how people work together.

Social learning is more than an extra. Done well, it can become a valuable part of the organization's leadership infrastructure.

A Different Question for HR and L&D Leaders

Organizations often ask whether they offer training, coaching, mentoring, and stretch assignments. Those are important questions.

Here is another question worth asking:

How intentionally have we designed the 20 percent?

Do leaders have to find developmental relationships on their own? Does coaching depend on each manager's time and skill? Are mentoring and peer learning broadly accessible and connected to real work?

Is there a clear structure for reflection, practice, feedback, and follow through?

Together, the answers show whether the 20 percent is a real developmental system or simply a good intention.

Activating the 20 Percent

At Pinnacle Paths, we believe the 20 percent deserves thoughtful design. That belief is what inspired Pinnacle Networks.

Pinnacle Networks are structured, facilitated peer learning environments where leaders work through current challenges, learn from one another, practice new approaches, and strengthen behaviors that shape culture and performance.

They complement formal learning, assessments, coaching, and experience by connecting those investments to real application.

The opportunity is not always to add more content. Often, it is to create the right conditions for people to discuss, challenge, reinforce, and apply what they already know.

That is the work of the 20 percent. It helps leaders interpret experience, challenge assumptions, and turn knowledge into behavior.

It also helps individual learning shape organizational culture. The 20 percent is too important to remain informal, inconsistent, or dependent on chance.

With thoughtful design, it can become one of the most valuable parts of leadership development.

About the Author

Sonia Mejias is Founder and CEO of Pinnacle Paths. She brings more than 25 years of global experience in learning, leadership development, and executive coaching. Her work helps organizations turn leadership knowledge into sustained application, behavior change, and capability.

About Pinnacle Paths

Pinnacle Paths helps organizations close the gap between leadership knowledge and application by activating the social learning component of the 70-20-10 model.

Through Pinnacle Networks, executive coaching, team effectiveness solutions, assessments, and tailored support, Pinnacle Paths helps build leadership capability, strengthen culture, and turn learning into measurable behavior.

Bridging Knowledge. Building Leaders.