

The leadership mentality

John Morris



Scaling and learning go together. A company can only successfully navigate and sustain high growth if it is a learning organisation, in which its leaders embrace new ideas, techniques and tools, and constantly develop their own skills and those of their workforce. It's exciting to see the strength of the hunger to learn among the UK's scaleups. In this year's Scaleup Survey, more than half of scaleups cite "developing the leadership and management skills of the senior team" as one of their top three factors supporting growth.



This year, I have had the privilege to chair the ScaleUp Institute's Leadership Capacity committee. Our main objective is to identify programmes across the UK that make a real, evidential impact in this regard. So in my case, chairing and learning go together.

My preconception had been that all leadership programmes were much the same. The British Library's Innovating for Growth, with its broad reach among women, ethnic minorities, and disabled people, was a revelation to me. It demonstrates that there is both space and need for a variety of programmes – because our thousands of scaleups come in many different shapes and sizes. Their leaders have different beliefs and values, different back stories and priorities, and different measures of success.

To reflect this, a variety of mechanisms, forums and interventions are required that will enable scaleup leaders to achieve their growth objectives and outcomes.

Such a variety should apply to peer networks, which are so important for many scaleups. As the Scaleup Survey shows, access to peer-to-peer networks is the most likely form of support to be rated "vital" or "very important" to help scaleups grow their business further. Our scaleup ecosystems should harbour peer networks that vary in cost and time commitments, from which scaleups can choose.



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Many leadership programmes and peer networks tend to focus on the CEO or founder. That is both logical – and a good start. It’s encouraging that some also have mechanisms for providing access to similar leadership and talent development tools for their management teams. This is an issue that we have taken seriously at Smith and Williamson. We have collaborated with the ScaleUp Institute on a scaleup benchmark to enable companies to see how they fare against their peers. And this year, we launched our Scaleup Diagnostic tool, which helps management teams – not just the CEO – to identify strategic strengths and weaknesses that may need to be addressed in order to scale up successfully. By gaining different views of the business, this tool provides a mechanism for a business to understand both its ambition and readiness to scale.

At a local level, there is more to be done. I am hopeful that we will soon be recognising and praising local programmes that are world-class in their design, delivery and impact. This year, I attended the ScaleUp Institute’s third Driving Economic Growth course in Leeds. I would love to see a genuinely local programme emerge from this course which can stand on its own terms as an outstanding example of an initiative fostering scaleup leadership development.