

# Why Avatar-Based Simulations Are the Future of Leadership Learning

**Organizations don't struggle to develop leaders because they lack relevant content. They struggle because the "traditional" learning strategies we know to drive behavior change take space and time.**

"Traditional" learning might begin with a lecture or other way of taking in content, followed by a related discussion (active social learning, a chance for what's called "elaboration" - the work of connecting new information to what they already know). That learning would be delivered over time (spacing!), and that spaced repetition of key ideas would create opportunities for "retrieval practice," alongside opportunities to debrief and reflect. And over time this would build more complex skills and knowledge.

In today's workplace — defined by fear, overwhelm, new expectations and constant change — leaders need new skills. But more importantly, they need new ways to practice those skills safely, repeatedly, and under realistic conditions. And so traditional learning is something organizations understandably struggle to deliver well. Time and budgetary pressures, paired with customer demands and the sheer pace of change means that organizations are forced to privilege and use other learning methods.

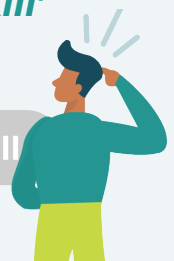
But those learning methods can't meet their needs.

And that's because organizations are often looking for a shortcut to achieve the same outcome.

They want one session - as short as possible, please! - to somehow download new skills and knowledge into their leaders' long-term memory, like **Tank downloading Kung Fu directly into Neo's brain.**

**"There is no 'download skill' button."**

Download Skill



You know: *“just in time”* learning, right? Well, we wish (maybe).

And until we reach some transhuman future where we’re all biologically enhanced by machines, we’re forced to get creative with different tools, modalities and methods—because no one in today’s organizations has time to sit and learn in the “traditional” way we still know to be best.

### **So what’s our shortcut, you’re wondering? What’s the future of leadership learning?**

- We know things need to happen faster (shorter seat time) and more flexibly (fully autonomous, self-serve).
- We know it’d be best to practice *“with”* someone - my peers? - but gosh I’d like to try and fail privately, please. (I’m still learning, after all.) So, actually: personalized feedback on the spot would be excellent.
- And we know people want to sneak in this judgment-free practice when it’s convenient for them.

**This is everything our avatar-based simulations have to offer.** This is the best shortcut we have come up with that still gets your people where you want them to go, to prepare them for the moment that matters: a difficult conversation, a tense 1:1, a conflict between colleagues, a moment when giving advice feels easier than asking a question.

## What Learning Actually Requires

### Safety:

To change behavior, people must practice and learn under conditions that feel real — but are safe enough to allow mistakes.

This is where avatar-based simulations change the game.

Practicing leadership skills in the real world often carries real consequences. And one of the most well-established findings in psychology is that people cannot learn when they feel defensive. When fear activates the brain’s threat response, reasoning, memory formation, and creative thinking shut down.

So it’s no surprise that our leaders are walking around with their lizard brains on overdrive. The stakes are high—even if they’re not a matter of life and death—every time a leader coaches a struggling team member, has to give difficult feedback, or finds themselves navigating conflict.



Even if the stakes aren't always *objectively* high, the emotional risk is real. *For them.*

Simulations create a “safe container” for experimentation, and one that recreates some of that heat, that risk. The difference is that learners can try, struggle, misstep, and try again — without reputational or organizational cost. The simulation is enough to get their heart racing but not enough to prevent solid, skill-building practice.

Research from fields like medicine and aviation has long demonstrated that simulation-based practice allows professionals to develop complex skills more effectively than observation or theory alone.

**Psychological safety is not a luxury in learning. It's a prerequisite.**

## Engagement and Control

The history of adult learning has steadily moved away from passive instruction toward active engagement. *Flip the classroom!* – we know this well.

We know that people learn better when they are involved: when they make decisions, receive feedback, and experience consequences (not so much that fear is triggered, but again: enough to get their heart rate up a bit).

By actively engaging learners, simulations dramatically increase agency, and now:

- Instead of being told what to do, learners identify opportunities to use the right techniques in the right contexts.
- Instead of simply understanding a model, they use it to drive their own decision-making.
- Instead of observing a conversation, they are able to be intentional about how they participate in one.

**This active engagement strengthens retention, builds confidence, and accelerates skill development.**



## Practice — Over Time

### Practice makes experts. But not all practice is equal.

Targeted spaced practice - practicing to get better at *specific thing* you know you need to work on - is made possible by personalized feedback, which creates a learning moment—that gap between where you are, and where you want to be.

Cramming practice into a single event does little for long-term retention. Repeated practice, spaced over time, and targeted at specific areas for development, produces stronger memory formation and easier retrieval under pressure.

There's good data to support this. [Research by Angela Duckworth](#) and others shows that what sets apart the very best students - the ones who routinely crush national spelling bee competitions - is that they engage in deliberate practice: solitary, effortful, and, at times, frustrating, this kind of practice involves intense focus on improving specific, weak areas.

### How do they do this?

It's not just by reading a lot (though they do that, too). Reading is fun and while it creates familiarity it doesn't simulate distress and it doesn't force students to struggle with (retrieval) practice—and so it doesn't effectively move those words into long-term memory (which is to say: they never *really* “learn” them).

Some of the runner-ups practiced writing out words, and other similar quizzing strategies.

But the winners? The ones who really manage to move those words to long-term memory, where they can quickly and easily retrieve them under distress, are those students who engage in the tough, deliberate practice of trying to memorize the words with the aid of flashcards to check their work. These students didn't cram, either: they engaged in this form of repeatable practice over time.

**Simulations allow for distributed, repeatable, deliberate practice.** Practice that's focused on a single skill, and on where practicing that new skill is still tripping people up. In closing that learning gap, learners can revisit scenarios, apply skills in varied contexts, and build capability gradually — not in a single burst of effort, but as part of a deliberate practice strategy that more effectively makes this skill second nature to them.



## Realistic Practice Drives Real-World Transfer

Finally, for learning to transfer, practice must resemble real life: not visually, but psychologically.

Coaching and leadership conversations are cognitively demanding, wouldn't you say? They require attention to tone, timing, emotional cues, and shifting dynamics. There is nuance and ambiguity in every exchange.

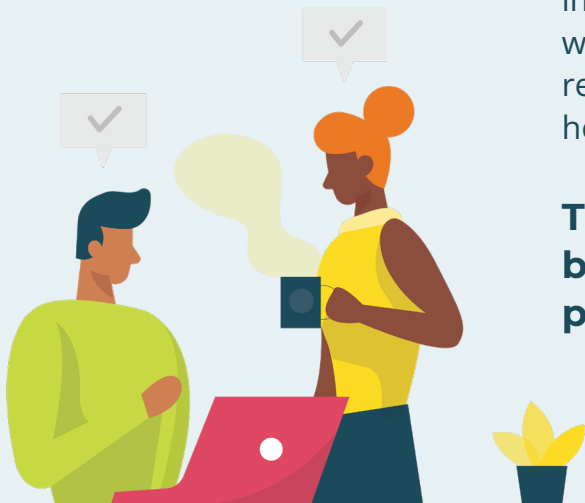
Text-based interactions – though they do represent much of how professional communication happens today – limit our ability to perceive and engage with this complexity. They may make practice easier, giving the user time to pause, think, rephrase, and retype a response. But they also reduce psychological realism.

Avatar-based simulations better recreate the interpersonal and emotional nuance of human interaction. They generate a greater sense of immediacy and social presence — the feeling of being in a real conversation with a real person.

When learners experience authentic emotional engagement — even in a simulated environment — memory encoding improves. The brain stores not just the information, but the experience.

This is critical for transfer. If the simulation mirrors the cognitive load of a real interaction, the transition from practice to workplace becomes smoother. The brain recognizes the terrain, thinks: "I've been here before."

**That familiarity makes new behavior more accessible under pressure.**



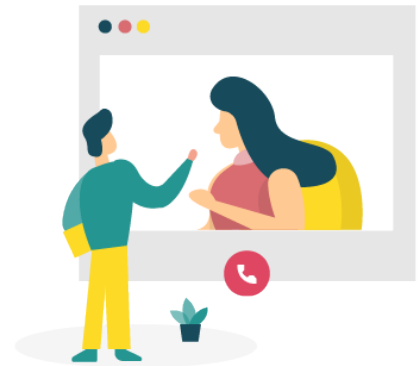
# A Proven Model for High-Stakes Skill Development

For nearly a century, industries with no tolerance for error (think aviation, medicine, military operations) have relied on simulations to prepare people for volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous conditions.

Leadership today operates under similar pressure. In fact, we'd go so far as to say that the pace of change today makes "VUCA" times seem a bit quaint.

## Avatar-based simulations uniquely combine:

- ✓ Psychological safety
- ✓ Active learner engagement
- ✓ Repeated, spaced practice
- ✓ Immediate, individualized feedback
- ✓ Emotional realism
- ✓ Scalability and adaptability



And look: **we think that organizations only work if people work.**

If we want leaders who can navigate complexity, manage emotion, and practice coach-like curiosity under pressure, we must give them environments that allow them to practice those skills — realistically and safely.

Avatar-based simulations provide exactly that. They're the best "shortcut" we've come up with, because:

- They create safe, but real practice environments
- They enable deliberate, spaced practice
- They fit the time pressured reality of your leaders' work lives

**... and so perhaps most importantly, they bridge the gap between theory and action, between learning and doing. And that is what makes learning stick.**

**The future of leadership learning isn't more content — it's better practice.**

If you're ready to give your leaders a safe place to build real capability under pressure, **let's start the conversation.**

**box of crayons®**