

An innovative program

builds exceptional

leaders at the highest

levels of the company.



**Donna Morris,**  
Senior Vice President of  
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# THE ADOBE Leadership Experience

By Donna Morris

Adobe is one of the world's leading software companies. Now in our 26th year, our products have revolutionized the way the world engages with ideas and information.

When you see a photo in a magazine or newspaper, it was likely enhanced by someone using Adobe Photoshop. When you surf the web, the sites you visit were probably developed using Adobe Dreamweaver, Adobe ColdFusion, or Adobe Flex. When you watch a video online, you are undoubtedly using our near-ubiquitous Adobe Flash technology. And every time you open a

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These are just a few of our many industry-leading technologies, some of which are even revolutionizing the world of training and development. For example, Adobe Captivate enables workplace learning and performance professionals to create engaging learning experiences, and Adobe Acrobat Connect Pro brings employees together to benefit from high-impact meetings and courses, helping customers save on travel.



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## The Adobe Leadership and Management Criteria

After holding interviews and focus groups with many of our senior leaders around the world, we identified five key attributes that effective leaders have in common in our culture.

### Successful leaders at Adobe

- exemplify our company values
- influence and build relationships
- lead for exceptional results
- build strong global teams
- develop others.

We also described specific behaviors that go with each attribute. These include taking a genuine interest in the well-being of direct reports, adhering to strict ethical guidelines, and encouraging a culture of innovation and diversity. They also emphasize the importance of fostering collaboration, leading through change, setting clear objectives, providing honest and direct feedback, and recognizing and rewarding exceptional performance, among other best practices.

## Building a strong bench of leaders

In the past five years, Adobe has grown from 3,500 employees to more than 7,000 worldwide. As we have expanded, so has our need for programs to develop exceptional leaders across the company. We recognize that developing great leaders creates a competitive advantage and is critical to our ongoing success.

The need for exceptional leaders was intensified following our acquisition of Macromedia on December 3, 2005. As we organized to seize market opportunities and optimize our performance, it was apparent that we needed a broader bench of leaders ready to take on increased opportunities globally.

With guidance from a steering committee composed of our current president and CEO Shantanu Narayen (who was, at the time, COO) and a number of our senior vice presidents, Adobe's talent development team in HR set out to meet this need. Rather than implement an off-the-shelf leadership development program, we decided to create our own. We wanted the program to mirror who we are as a company, bringing into play our unique vision, values, strategy, challenges, and opportunities.

Our goal has been to develop exceptional senior leaders who think and act like general managers of their respective businesses. In addition, we have aimed to develop leaders who know how to engage global, cross-business teams in a manner consistent with our values, and who build a collaborative network with other Adobe leaders.

## Anticipating challenges

As we designed this new development program, we anticipated a number of challenges. First, we wanted to include an off-site classroom component that, based on our learning objectives, would require five full days of participation. As we are a fast-paced global company, we were concerned that pulling senior leaders from their other responsibilities might be met with resistance.

Next, the program content needed to appeal to a diverse group. Some of our leaders have run their own companies or divisions within multi-billion dollar enterprises. Others have MBAs or have been through development programs at *Fortune* 1000 companies. Would some question whether they needed another development program?

Additionally, while our steering committee advised us to run a pilot program with eight to 10 leaders, we believed we needed to have a full group of 24 to optimize certain program aspects, so the bar was set high to get things right the first time.

## Creating the Adobe leadership experience

In the midst of these challenges, we forged ahead and named our program the Adobe Leadership Experience (ALE). To develop ALE, we partnered with faculty from the Haas School of Business at the University of California Berkeley, and with TRI Corporation—an executive development firm that created an integrated business simulation that has proven very effective.

Employees taking part in ALE are generally senior directors and vice presidents and are nominated by an executive team member who reports directly to our CEO. Nominations are based on a candidate's outstanding achievements and potential to help Adobe achieve the next level of growth, and each participant receives a personal invitation from our CEO.

As we began to design ALE, we conducted focus groups and interviews with dozens of leaders across the company. We asked them to identify the most essential behaviors of effective leaders, with an emphasis on what it takes to be successful in our company. This resulted in the "Adobe Leadership and Management Criteria." (See sidebar.)

With our leadership criteria in place, we designed ALE to have three integrated phases:

### Phase One | individual development.

During this phase, leaders receive a 360-degree evaluation based on the Adobe leadership criteria, and each participant is assigned a coach who helps identify existing strengths to build on as well as opportunities for development. Participants also complete an e-learning module to more fully understand Adobe's best practices related to finance, and read a variety of other foundational materials.

### Phase Two | classroom experience.

The second phase is the intense, off-site classroom experience. For five full days, professors from UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business teach sections on strategy, finance, marketing, innovation, leading global teams,

and more. Then, Adobe executives, including our CEO, lead discussions on how to apply what they have learned to their work at Adobe.

In this phase, Adobe leaders break into six teams and compete with each other in a business simulation designed by TRI Corporation. In effect, the teams run a company and need to overcome immediate challenges, react to unpredictable events, and position the business for future growth. The simulations can be intense and produce unexpected results.

At the end of the five days, teams present their results to the executive team and vice presidents who have already gone through ALE, and they determine which teams have been most successful based on defined metrics related to growth and sustainability. Our senior leaders are a very competitive bunch, making this a lively part of ALE.

Throughout ALE, participants provide each other with feedback related to the Adobe leadership criteria.

#### Phase Three | action learning component.

After the off site, ALE participants begin work on an individual business challenge and have an opportunity to take part in a team business challenge with some of their ALE peers.

The individual business challenge lasts three months and can relate to a new business opportunity, process improvement, change management initiative, or something specific that will help the leader stretch his or her abilities and contribute more to Adobe. Each leader meets with an executive sponsor to track progress.

The team business challenge, determined by our senior executives, relates to a strategic project for the company. Typically, between seven and nine leaders volunteer to work on the project, for a total of eight weeks. They then present their recommendations, and decisions are made on relevant next steps.

#### Measuring success

To date, we have held three ALEs. Those invited have come from the

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United States, Canada, Europe, India, China, and Japan.

We're measuring success by tracking the retention, performance, and upward mobility of those who participate. We look at lateral mobility, too, knowing that broader experience can enable our leaders to further develop as general managers.

We have been very pleased with the effect ALE has had on internal promotions. Last year, 86 percent of our vice president and general manager positions were filled by internal candidates—up from 56 percent in 2007—and 92 percent of internal candidates taking the vice president and general manager positions were ALE alumni.

Participants have valued building relationships with executives and their peers from around the world, and our executives have enjoyed being part of ALE as well. Personally, I have thoroughly enjoyed interacting with Adobe's senior leaders and Haas Business School faculty. The conversations have been dynamic and full of valuable insight.

#### Building on momentum

Although these are challenging times for many businesses, we remain committed to investing in the development of our leaders. We are confident that

Adobe will continue to revolutionize how the world engages with ideas and information, and believe our best days are ahead of us as technology continues to transform the world.

ALE has been so well received that we plan to offer similar training for director-level leaders, beginning this year. We are optimistic that this will help us build an even deeper bench of leaders who excel in their current roles and are ready to take on greater responsibilities.

At Adobe, we know that the growth of our business is dependent on the growth and development of our people, and ALE has become a vital part of our talent management strategy. **T+D**

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T+D is published by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)

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