

Building Leaders, Not Just Graduates

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Leadership is not a workshop. It is a formation process.

Acknowledging the leadership capability gap is analytically simpler than operationalising a response. Youth-serving organisations face a structural tension: funder pressure to demonstrate short-term employment placement metrics conflicts with the investment horizon required to build leadership capabilities.

Funders reward placements. Leadership formation takes 18-36 months to produce measurable behavioural change. This misalignment in incentive structures is not incidental. It is the primary reason leadership formation has not scaled within African employability programming.

What Integration Actually Requires

A scalable integration model requires four structural elements working together. First, a competency architecture that maps observable, measurable leadership behaviours to labour market relevance. Second, embedded rather than appended content, so that every technical skill carries questions of judgment, collaboration, and decision-making.

Third, longitudinal engagement of at least 18 months with structured re-engagement at six-month intervals. Fourth, outcome metrics aligned to formation, prioritising enterprise sustainability and earnings progression over placement rates.

1. From events to formation

Most current leadership programming is event-based: workshops, bootcamps, and short-term interventions that produce engagement but rarely produce lasting behavioural change. Effective formation requires iterative practice, structured feedback, coaching, and exposure to authentic challenge conditions. Participants must progress through structured stages of self-awareness, systems thinking, collaborative practice, and adaptive action. The difference between a workshop and a formation process is not duration alone. It is depth of design.

One Architecture That Works

LEAP Africa's cross-sector model offers one operational architecture. Rather than treating leadership development as a standalone programme, leadership competency progression is embedded across three intersecting domains: employability, entrepreneurship, and active citizenship. The model is competency-mapped rather than event-based. Participants develop capabilities across a multi-year arc rather than acquiring them in discrete modules. Leadership is the frame through which all technical content is delivered, not a separate track added alongside it.

The contrast with conventional programming is instructive. Conventional employability programmes typically run three to six months, prioritise job placement rates at the six-month mark, and either omit leadership content or attach it as a separate module with no structural integration. Leadership-integrated programmes run 18 to 36 months, prioritise earnings persistence and enterprise survival at the 24-36 month mark, and embed leadership formation across all technical content, supported by structured coaching for a minimum of 12 months.

The Funder Problem

The most significant structural barrier is not programme design. It is funder incentive structures. Development banks, bilateral donors, and philanthropic organisations currently reward placement rates and training volumes. These metrics are measurable, reportable, and legible to headquarters. They are also misleading. An intervention that places 80% of participants in employment at six months but retains only 40% at 36 months is a lower-value investment than one that places 60% initially but retains 70% over three years.

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Shifting funder metrics to earnings persistence, enterprise sustainability, and civic participation at 36-month intervals would restructure incentives for integrated programming across the sector. This is not a technical adjustment. It is a

reorientation of what the development sector defines as success.

A Practical Starting Point

Organisations that cannot commit to 18-month minimum engagement timelines should consider partnerships with dedicated leadership formation providers rather than attempting superficial integration.

Adding leadership modules to an existing three-month programme does not produce the same outcomes as a redesigned 24-month curriculum. The risk is that superficial integration produces the language of formation without the substance, allowing the sector to claim progress while the underlying design problem remains unresolved.

For organisations ready to commit to genuine integration, the starting point is a competency audit: identifying which behavioural capabilities graduates currently lack, how those gaps manifest in employment outcomes, and where within the existing curriculum structure formation work can be embedded. The goal is not to produce a longer programme. It is to produce graduates who are equipped to act, not just certified to apply.

References

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