

“Think, feel, do” (TFD): a marketing framework to advance leadership development

Abstract

Purpose – This conceptual paper highlights the importance of integrating cognitive strategies to enhance decision-making, emotional engagement to increase motivation, and behavioral changes to embed leadership practices.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper critically examines the integration of the TFD marketing framework to enhance leadership development programs, analyzing how cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components can improve leadership effectiveness by providing practical insights for professionals and scholars.

Findings – Applying the TFD framework to leadership development illustrates how cognitive strategies, emotional engagement, and behavioral changes influence the cultivation of influential leaders at all levels of the organization. Such interdisciplinary integration provides organizations with a comprehensive approach to developing leaders, ensuring they are prepared to navigate complexity.

Practical implications – The recommended TFD framework emphasizes the iterative cycles of cognition, emotion, and behavior to promote sustainable change. It starts with diagnostic clarity (“Think”), develops relational capacity (“Feel”), and embeds habits (“Do”). Designed as a short, blended, work-integrated cycle (e.g. 12 weeks plus 90-day consolidation), it combines strategic challenges, empathic listening, and habit formation. Responsibility extends across governance levels, with evaluation at four points: baseline, mid-cycle, end-cycle, and follow-up, monitoring adoption, cognitive and emotional shifts, behavioral transfer, and organizational outcomes. This approach highlights intentional practice, feedback, and systemic support rather than episodic training.

Social implications – Integrating TFD principles into national leadership standards and public-sector training policies can help close the gap between intention and action in policy implementation, ensuring that leadership development leads to measurable social outcomes. Broader societal benefits include increased trust in institutions, improved public service delivery, and stronger community participation.

Originality/value – The proposed conceptual framework provides innovative insights for leadership development professionals and offers a structured approach to leadership programs. By situating the Think–Feel–Do pathway in relation to experiential learning, emotional intelligence, transfer-of-training, and transformational leadership theories, the paper clarifies how the framework incorporates and advances these established models within a leadership development context. This addresses the vital gap between traditional leadership practices and sustained leadership behaviors that align with organizational values. The study’s interdisciplinary approach enriches existing leadership literature by exploring how marketing principles can be applied to leadership development.

Keywords: “Think, feel, do”, Leadership development, Cognitive engagement, Emotional engagement, Behavioral change

Introduction

Leadership development programs are designed to identify, train, and nurture individuals who can drive innovation, inspire teams, and navigate change (Hsu, Chang, Liou, Cheng, & Miao, 2023). However, the efficacy of these programs often hinges on the methods employed to stimulate cognitive understanding, as well as emotional and behavioral transformation. The TFD marketing framework provides a robust and holistic method, combining cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects to shape and guide individual actions and attitude effectively.

The “Think” stage represents the cognitive dimension of consumer behavior, and encompasses consumers’ rational and logical thought processes when evaluating a product or

service (Jain, Aagja, & Bagdare, 2017). This stage is characterized by cognitive activities such as problem recognition, information search, and alternative evaluation (Quesada, Kintsch, & Gomez, 2005). The cognitive processes are shaped by intrinsic elements, including motivation, perception, attitudes, and beliefs, alongside extrinsic factors, such as marketing communications, word-of-mouth referrals, and situational determinants (Wang & Ruhe, 2007). By engaging with the cognitive aspects, communicators can effectively elucidate complex concepts, present logical arguments, and address potential counterarguments (*ibid*). This method fosters a sense of reason and critical thinking, enhancing the message's credibility and encouraging the audience to make informed decisions based on rational consideration (Wang & Ruhe, 2007). Consequently, the cognitive dimension becomes a pivotal element in persuasion, ensuring acceptance is based on understanding, forming a basis for emotional and behavioral responses.

The “Feel” stage follows in the TFD framework. The emotional component is pivotal in influencing consumer behavior by engaging the inherent emotions and motivations that underpin purchasing decisions, thus cultivating a profound affinity between the brand and its target demographic (Solomon, Russell-Bennett, & Previte, 2012). Various stimuli, including advertisements, brand associations, social influences, and personal experiences, can trigger emotions. Emotions can be categorized extensively as positive (e.g. joy, excitement, hope) and negative (e.g. fear, anger, sadness), each manifesting a unique impact on consumer behavior (*ibid*). This dynamic connection extends beyond mere transactional exchanges, fostering brand loyalty and enhancing customer retention (*ibid*). This stage plays a critical role in consumer decision-making, complementing the cognitive processes of the “Think” stage with affective considerations.

The “Do” stage represents consumers’ actionable/behavioral dimension. This phase focuses on consumers’ behavioral responses and purchase intentions after completing the cognitive and emotional stages (Jisana, 2014). Numerous elements, such as attitudes, motivations, perceptions, emotions, social norms, and situational constraints, influence consumer behaviors. The promotion and facilitation of the intended result or conduct necessitate the establishment of a setting wherein individuals are incentivized and provided with the essential means and assets to engage (Dennis, Merrilees, Jayawardhena, & Tiu Wright, 2009). This stage is characterized by executing decisions made during the “Think” and “Feel” stages, translating cognitive and emotional processes into consumers’ tangible behaviors, which represent the concrete results of the cognitive process of making choices, mirroring consumers’ inclinations, goals, and contentment (Joubert & Poalses, 2014). Focusing on actionable steps addresses potential barriers to implementation and empowers individuals to integrate new behaviors into their daily routines seamlessly (*ibid*). Therefore, the emphasis on actionable steps within the behavioral aspect is essential for achieving lasting and meaningful outcomes for sustainable and effective behavioral change.

This conceptual article explores integrating the TFD marketing framework as a novel approach to leadership development. First, we critically examine how cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, long established in marketing theory, can be applied to enhance leadership programs; and second, we address the limitations of traditional leadership development models that often overlook the interplay of these elements. In developing this argument, the paper builds on established leadership and learning perspectives, including experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), emotional intelligence (Caruso & Salovey, 2004), transfer of training (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume, Ford, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010) and transformational leadership (Bass, 1985). We discuss how cognitive strategies improve leaders’ decision-making and strategic alignment, illustrate how emotional engagement fosters empathy, motivation, and stronger team relationships, and highlight how behavioral reinforcement enables sustainable leadership practices through practice, feedback, and

organizational support. By integrating these dimensions, this conceptual article advances interdisciplinary scholarship, offers leadership professionals a structured pathway for cultivating more effective leaders, and contributes to the ongoing discourse on innovative, evidence-informed approaches to leadership development. Therefore, the guiding research question of this conceptual paper is:

RQ. How can integrating the TFD marketing framework lead to impactful leadership practices that enhance leadership development programs by fostering leaders' cognitive and emotional engagement, as well as driving behavioral change?

Furthermore, by critically examining these aspects, our study aims to advance the progressive domain of leadership development by presenting a unique perspective that challenges conventional methodologies and fosters creative thinking, which could lead to more profound and lasting impacts on leadership capabilities in subsequent sections.

Overview of leadership development

Leadership development initiatives are designed and implemented to cultivate and enhance individuals' knowledge, skills, and behaviors as they aspire to undertake leadership roles (Fabisch, Kjellström, Ockander, & Avby, 2024). These programs are crucial in pinpointing and supporting up-and-coming leaders, promoting the advancement and growth of current ones, and steering organizational triumph through implementing effective leadership strategies (Gina Hernez-Broome et al., 2004). Leadership development initiatives encompass techniques and approaches, such as classroom training, coaching, mentoring, and job assignments, which are highly informed by the power dynamics inherent within the context of management and leadership initiatives (Edwards, Hawkins, & Sutherland, 2021). While traditional leadership development programs have traditionally focused on imparting technical expertise and domain-specific information, modern efforts increasingly emphasize the significance of interpersonal skills and behavioral proficiencies in molding competent leaders (Amagoh, 2009). This shift in viewpoint highlights the evolving landscape of leadership and the diverse needs of modern leaders, thereby necessitating a more comprehensive and cohesive strategy for leadership development (Kars-Unluoglu, Jarvis, & Gaggiotti, 2022). Given these evolving patterns, we argue that leadership development programs progressively integrate innovative methodologies and top practices to elevate their efficiency and relevance. This section outlines both conventional and modern leadership development techniques, further highlighting their key characteristics, advantages, and limitations.

Traditional leadership development methodologies involve a structured and sequential method for developing leadership, focusing on providing domain-specific knowledge, technical skills, and managerial competencies to aspiring and current leaders (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019). These methodologies are characterized by a didactic and prescriptive approach, highlighting knowledge imparting and acquiring necessary skills through formal training programs, workshops, and seminars (Sen & Eren, 2012). While these traditional approaches have played a crucial role in fostering essential leadership competencies, they are now complemented by innovative strategies that address the intricate and ever-changing challenges faced by contemporary leaders (Raelin, 2020).

Contemporary leadership development methodologies encompass various innovative strategies and best practices to enhance the effectiveness and significance of leadership development efforts (Zhu, Yang, Yang, & Sosik, 2024). These methodologies emphasize hands-on, collaborative, and learner-centered approaches, which foster intrapersonal and interpersonal skills crucial for successful leadership (Sen & Eren, 2012). Contemporary leadership development methodologies are grounded in the principles of adult learning theory,

highlighting the significance of self-directed learning, experiential learning, and reflective practice in shaping leadership skills (Day & Kragt, 2023). These approaches utilize various educational tools and methods, such as action learning projects, executive coaching, peer mentoring, and leadership simulations, to provide participants with engaging and transformative learning opportunities (Woodard & Hyatt, 2024). Contemporary leadership approaches foster self-awareness, interpersonal effectiveness, and strategic thinking by engaging individuals in authentic and challenging leadership scenarios (Urilla & Eva, 2024). Thus, they equip leaders with the requisite skills and attributes to navigate complex and ambiguous environments.

Existing leadership and learning scholarship already articulates the importance of cognition, emotion and behavior. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, for example, conceptualizes learning as a cyclical movement between concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Emotional intelligence theories highlight leaders' ability to perceive, understand and manage emotions as central to interpersonal effectiveness (Caruso & Salovey, 2004). Transfer-of-training research examines the conditions under which learning acquired in formal programs is maintained and applied at work (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume et al., 2010), while transformational leadership theory specifies how leaders inspire and develop followers through vision, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990). However, these frameworks are rarely combined into a single, practical pathway that sequences cognitive, emotional and behavioral work and embeds reinforcement and cultural alignment. This is the gap that the TFD framework seeks to address.

Having discussed traditional and contemporary leadership development methodologies, the following section applies the TFD marketing framework to leadership development programs to explain how cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components can enhance the effectiveness of these initiatives.

Applying the TFD marketing framework to leadership development

The TFD framework aligns with the multi-dimensional nature of leadership development through its cognitive (Think) aspect to support problem recognition, critical decision-making, and alignment with organizational strategies. The framework's emotional (Feel) dimension also highlights empathy and commitment as essential elements for influencing and motivating teams. Finally, the behavioral (Do) angle emphasizes action and application to ensure learned leadership skills transition into real-world practices. Applying this marketing framework helps address gaps in traditional methodologies by embedding an interdisciplinary approach.

“Think”: cognitive strategies in leadership development

When applied to leadership development, the “Think” phase of the TFD marketing framework emphasizes the cognitive processes leaders undertake to enhance their leadership capacity. Similar to how consumers in marketing first identify a need before seeking information, leaders and organizations should begin their development journey by recognizing the gaps in their leadership skills and understanding the necessity of addressing them. This initial recognition is crucial as it forms the foundation for meaningful leadership growth, fostering self-awareness and instilling a sense of urgency for improvement.

Leaders and organizations undergoing development should first confront a fundamental question: Why is leadership development necessary for them? This corresponds to the cognitive concept of problem recognition, an essential step in decision-making. As Sims, Carter, & Moore De Peralta (2021) argued, relevant gaps may stem from deficiencies in knowledge, skills, or behaviors or broader organizational challenges, such as unclear expectations or insufficient support, assigned to generational differences and other individual characteristics.

On an individual level, leaders should recognize not only their leadership gaps but also how these gaps may hinder their ability to contribute effectively to their teams and organizations. Understanding the need for leadership development creates a cognitive shift from complacency to action. For instance, a leader may realize that they need more critical strategic thinking skills or that their communication skills could be more conducive to building trust within a team; these recognitions trigger the next phase of cognitive engagement, which involves searching for information on addressing these deficiencies (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020).

From an organizational perspective, leadership development needs can be effectively identified through a structured process called a leadership needs analysis. A well-executed leadership needs analysis can pinpoint the specific leadership skills that individual leaders and organizations need to develop within their unique contexts (Loumpourdi, 2024). Leveraging insights from a learning needs analysis could enable organizations and leaders to understand the most relevant leadership skills based on factors such as managerial level, team dynamics, and current organizational and industry challenges. This would ensure that leadership development efforts are grounded in a comprehensive understanding of individual and organizational needs.

Moreover, aligning the leadership development process with the organization's strategic vision and goals ensures that development initiatives enhance individual leadership capabilities and support broader business objectives (Phillips & Phillips, 2025). This systematic approach helps avoid generic, one-size-fits-all leadership development programs that may fail to resonate with participants. Instead, the leadership development experience is tailored to the unique needs of leaders and the organization. Once the need for development is identified, leaders and organizations should engage in an information search, including a systematic exploration of available resources, development pathways, and developmental options. Drawing parallels from marketing theory, this phase involves gathering relevant data to inform decision-making, like consumers searching for the best products or services to meet their needs. Leadership development might include exploring formal training programs, coaching, mentoring, on-the-job learning experiences, or job shadowing opportunities (Phillips & Phillips, 2025). A well-rounded information search could ensure leaders select development methods most aligned with their needs and career aspirations.

The final cognitive task in the "Think" phase is evaluating alternatives. Leaders and organizations should critically assess the various leadership development options and determine which best suits their needs and objectives. This evaluation requires thoroughly comparing different methods based on relevance, practicality, and potential for real-world application. Therefore, it is crucial for leaders and organizations to carefully evaluate the content and structure of these initiatives, particularly given the significant global investment in leadership development each year. Leadership development should not be a one-size-fits-all process. Instead, it should be tailored to the leaders' specific leadership needs and challenges, organizational culture, and long-term development trajectories (Lee, Kim, Noh, Hoon Jang, & Lee, 2024). Involving leaders in the evaluation and selection process personalizes the development experience, making it more impactful (Loumpourdi, 2024). Therefore, when leaders feel a sense of ownership in their development, they are more motivated to engage meaningfully and apply the lessons learned to their leadership practice (Phillips & Phillips, 2025). Moreover, this evaluation process requires critical thinking and the ability to estimate the return on investment, not just in terms of individual growth but also in how enhanced leadership skills can contribute to team and organizational effectiveness (Abner, Valdez, & Perry, 2021). Leaders who invest time in thoroughly evaluating their development options are more likely to commit to those programs that offer meaningful, long-term benefits.

In conclusion, the "Think" phase emphasizes the importance of cognitive strategies in leadership development. By recognizing their development needs, conducting a comprehensive

search for information, and critically evaluating alternatives, leaders and organizations can ensure that their development initiatives are relevant and aligned with individual and organizational needs. This cognitive approach provides a strong foundation for the emotional and behavioral phases of leadership development, ensuring that leaders understand their development needs and are equipped to take meaningful action to address them. This sequence mirrors the reflective and analytical components of experiential learning models while making explicit the concrete decision-making tasks that precede emotional and behavioral change in the TFD pathway (Kolb, 1984; Day & Dragoni, 2015).

“Feel”: emotional engagement in leadership development

Much like marketers employ emotional appeals to forge positive connections with their brands (Mitsakis, 2024), leaders harness emotional appeals to cultivate meaningful relationships with their participants. This capability to interpret and respond to emotional cues is essential for effective leadership (Caruso & Salovey, 2004).

While cognitive strategies are crucial in shaping leadership development, emotional engagement provides a profound learning experience within leadership programs (Loumpourdi, 2024). At the team level, emotional engagement is foundational to success through building “intuitive working relationships” that could challenge traditional leadership forms (Bolden, 2011 approach). Leaders who emotionally engage their team members can empower them to seize career and personal growth opportunities, fostering solid interpersonal relationships that are essential for cohesive teamwork (Han, Yim, Oh, Kwon, & Lee, 2023).

Emotional engagement in leadership development is not an automatic outcome of cognitive strategies. Instead, it represents a motivational state reflecting how effectively leaders inspire employees to invest emotionally in their roles (Peak, Hanson, Eadeh, & Lambert, 2016). Empathy is a crucial strategy for sustaining emotional engagement in leadership development. While empathy is commonly associated with positive leadership outcomes, recent research highlights potential drawbacks, including cognitive overload, exhaustion, and bias (König, Graf-Vlachy, Bundy, & Little, 2020). Leaders must, therefore, establish boundaries and ensure that empathy is reciprocated, maintaining a balance between giving and receiving empathy (Bachmann & Faundes, 2021). As a critical competency for demonstrating care toward followers, society, and the environment, empathy profoundly impacts leadership development. Effective empathetic listening involves being present, observing non-verbal cues, appreciating others’ ideas and situations, asking questions, and providing thoughtful responses (Bakker & Sanz-Vergel, 2013). Gathering feedback from individuals and teams and adjusting programs accordingly is essential to designing and implementing empathy-focused leadership development programs. A lack of crucial resources, such as social support, job autonomy, and opportunities for learning and personal growth, can quickly trigger negative cognitive and emotional processes, diminish motivation, and negatively affect engagement (ibid).

This phase highlights the importance of understanding, managing, and effectively utilizing emotions within a leadership context. Emotionally engaged leaders are better positioned to inspire, motivate, and foster strong team relationships, creating a more cohesive and productive work environment (Matta & Alam, 2023). Leaders build robust connections with their employees through emotional appeals, such as storytelling, humor, and nostalgia (Mitsakis, 2024). Thus, leaders must go beyond appealing to logical reasoning and establish an emotional connection by fostering a shared sense of purpose and commitment to both individual and organizational growth. Emphasizing the personal and professional benefits of leadership programs, such as enhanced job satisfaction, career advancement, and overall development, ensures that the value of these initiatives is compelling and relevant (Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway, & McKee, 2007). Leaders frequently share personal stories of successes, challenges, and failures to humanize themselves and relate their experiences to build trust, align goals, and

motivate employees (Cope, Kempster, & Parry, 2013). By narrating their journeys, including vulnerabilities and growth, leaders strengthen the leader-employee relationship and enhance the effectiveness of leadership development programs, encouraging deeper engagement with the leader's vision and objectives (Arnold et al., 2007). These narratives should illustrate how leadership development can improve current roles and prepare individuals for future organizational positions.

Bakker (2022) also emphasized that positive emotions, including hope and optimism, influenced follower attitudes and behavior. Leaders who effectively convey positive energy through their behaviors are more successful in emotionally engaging their followers, which helps explain why such leaders are often more practical (Bakker, 2022; Nikolova, Schaufeli, & Notelaers, 2019; Pircher Verdoner, 2019). Viewed through the lens of emotional intelligence theory, the "Feel" phase operationalizes leaders' capacity to perceive, understand and regulate emotion in themselves and others as a core mechanism for influence (Caruso & Salovey, 2004). The following section will further explore the behavioral dimensional changes in leadership development.

"Do": behavioral changes in leadership

This stage is critical in leadership development as it marks the transition from theoretical understanding and reflection to the practical application of learned concepts. While cognitive and emotional engagement strategies shape leadership development, many programs fail to produce enduring behavioral change and the desired organizational outcomes (Botke, Jansen, Khapova, & Tims, 2018; Hieker & Pringle, 2021).

A key strategy to sustain behavioral change is providing leaders with structured opportunities to apply newly acquired skills in real-world contexts (Loumpourdi, 2024). This approach extends beyond classroom-based learning, embedding leadership practices into the daily fabric of organizational life. One effective mechanism for encouraging such application is through stretch assignments, such as challenging tasks designed to push leaders beyond their comfort zones and offer practical experiences that test and refine new skills (Liebold, Rasmussen, Boyce, & Poskas, 2013). Stretch assignments may encompass leading cross-functional teams, managing high-stakes projects, or addressing complex organizational problems (Gupta & Agarwal, 2024). Such tasks facilitate the application of new behaviors and expose leaders to multifaceted challenges that test their adaptability, resilience, and strategic decision-making capabilities (Waller, Reitz, Poole, Riddell, & Muir, 2017).

Creating an environment conducive to behavioral change is another essential element in leadership development. New leadership behaviors must be supported and reinforced by an organizational culture that fosters experimentation and encourages learning through failure (Botke et al., 2018). Moreover, sustained support from senior management is critical in reinforcing new leadership practices; thus, leaders require continuous feedback, mentoring, and guidance to navigate their developmental journeys effectively (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). Direct managers play a pivotal role in reinforcing positive behaviors and identifying areas for further improvement (Avolio & Hannah, 2008). For behavioral changes to take root and become second nature, leaders must perceive that their new leadership practices are endorsed by their teams and aligned with the broader organizational culture (Galperin et al., 2024).

Post-training follow-up can also ensure that behavioral changes endure. After-action reviews and reflective sessions can promote self-awareness and reinforce leadership behaviors (Day & Dragoni, 2015; McCauley & Palus, 2021). In an after-action review, leaders critically reflect on their recent experiences, evaluating their decisions, challenges, and outcomes of their actions. Such structured reflection could enable leaders to assess the effectiveness of their leadership strategies, identify areas for growth, and reinforce their learned behaviors. This reflective practice would encourage leaders to remain accountable for their ongoing

development and allow for continual adjustment and improvement in their leadership approaches.

Leadership development should be a continuous, iterative process to facilitate sustained behavioral change. Leaders should be encouraged to view their development as a journey, achieved not through isolated learning experiences but through a cyclical process of practice, reflection, and adjustment. This iterative approach ensures that new leadership behaviors become embedded in the leader's identity, transforming them from theoretical concepts into intuitive, everyday practices.

Furthermore the “Do” phase of the framework emphasizes the importance of practical application in leadership development. To solidify behavioral changes, leadership programs must offer structured practice opportunities, foster a culture of learning and experimentation, and provide ongoing feedback and reflection. By embedding these elements into leadership development programs, organizations can cultivate leaders who think and feel like leaders and act as influential leaders in their day-to-day roles. These design features respond directly to evidence from the transfer-of-training literature that practice, feedback and work- environment support are critical for sustained behavior change (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume et al., 2010; Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013) and supply the behavioral grounding often assumed but seldom specified in transformational leadership development (Bass, 1985).

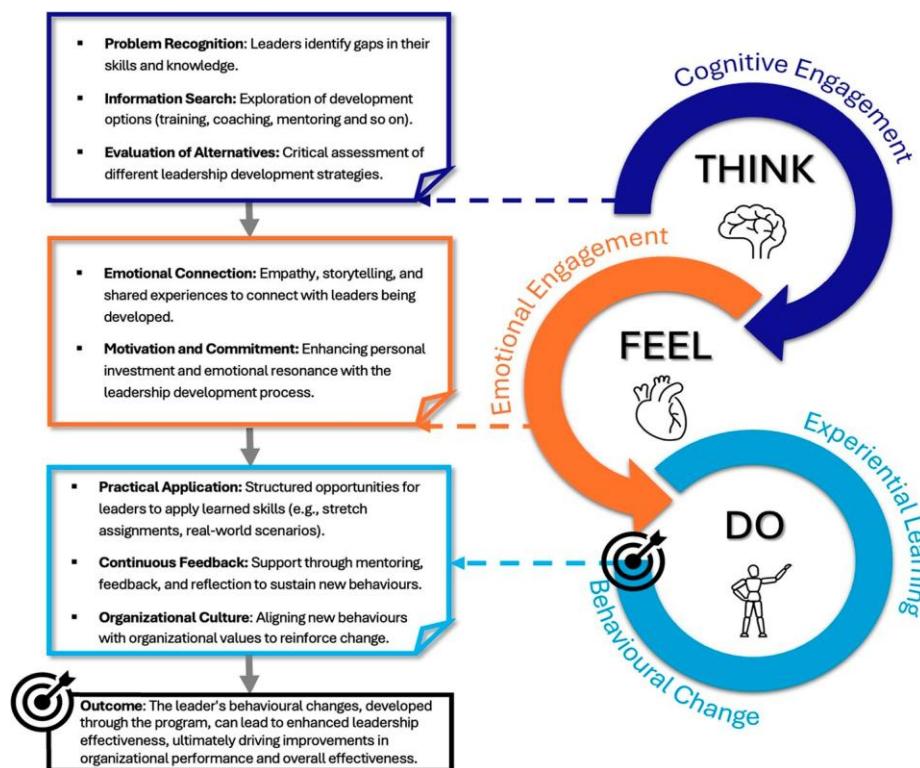


Figure 1. A TFD pathway to leadership development

A TFD pathway to leadership development

Following the discussion of each stage of the TFD marketing framework for leadership development, the proposed framework below (Figure 1) provides a holistic approach to leadership development by visually capturing how cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements come together, along with supportive aspects like organizational alignment and practical reinforcement to leverage leadership development initiatives.

Through cognitive engagement (“Think”), leaders focus on the mental processes involved in leadership development. The process begins with problem recognition, where leaders

identify gaps in their skills and knowledge. This is followed by an information search, where they explore development options such as training or mentoring as part of their career development plan (Phillips & Phillips, 2025). Finally, evaluating alternatives involves critically assessing various strategies to select the best fit for their development needs.

Emotional engagement (“Feel”) emphasizes the importance of personal connection and emotional investment in leadership growth. This phase involves building an emotional connection through empathy and storytelling, making the development process more relatable and impactful. Motivation and commitment ensure that leaders are emotionally invested, heightening their engagement and commitment to their leadership development journey, usually through experiential learning and mentoring (Phillips & Phillips, 2025). Finally, experiential learning (“Do”) translates thinking and feeling into action through behavioral change, echoing Kolb’s (1984) view of learning as grounded in cycles of experience and reflection. Leaders engage in practical application, using real-world scenarios to apply learned skills. Continuous feedback through mentoring reinforces new behaviors. Finally, organizational culture aligns individual behavioral changes with broader organizational values, ensuring sustained impact (Phillips & Phillips, 2025).

The framework’s cyclical structure outlines leadership development as an iterative process. Behavioral change is reinforced through cognitive, emotional, and experiential strategies that guide leaders through self-improvement, positive behavioral change, and organizational alignment. These strategies enhance personal and professional growth and improve leadership effectiveness, ultimately driving improvements in individual and organizational performance and overall effectiveness (Umrani, Bachkirov, Nawaz, Ahmed, & Pahi, 2024). In this sense, the TFD pathway can be read as a leadership- specific instantiation of experiential learning cycles that makes the distinct cognitive, emotional and behavioral tasks explicit (Kolb, 1984).

Positioning the TFD framework within established leadership models

Leadership development is already underpinned by several established frameworks that emphasize cognitive, emotional and behavioral processes. Experiential learning theory conceptualizes development as repeated movement between concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization and experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Emotional-intelligence approaches to leadership highlight the importance of accurately reading and managing emotions to build effective relationships and guide behavior (Caruso & Salovey, 2004). Transfer-of-training research focuses on whether and how skills acquired in formal programs are applied back in the workplace (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume et al., 2010). Transformational leadership theory identifies the behaviors through which leaders inspire followers and support their development (Bass, 1985; Podsakoff et al., 1990). The TFD framework aligns with this body of work by treating leadership development as a cognitive–emotional–behavioral process, but extends it by sequencing the stages explicitly and incorporating reinforcement and organizational alignment derived from marketing practice.

First, while Transformational Leadership (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006) and Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Liden et al., 2008) both emphasize cognitive (intellectual stimulation, foresight), emotional (inspirational motivation, empathy), and behavioral (individualized consideration, stewardship) components, the TFD framework differs by structuring these dimensions as an iterative, interdependent cycle. The “Think” stage develops diagnostic clarity and cognitive decision-making; “Feel” builds relational commitment through empathy and motivation; and “Do” consolidates behavioral change through deliberate practice and reinforcement. This cyclical sequencing operationalises what traditional models often treat as parallel or assumed processes, explicitly closing the intention–action gap (Gollwitzer, 1999; Ellis & Davidi, 2005).

Second, the literature clarifies that, unlike the COM-B model of behavior change (Michie, van Stralen, & West, 2011), which focuses primarily on the individual mechanisms of capability, opportunity, and motivation, TFD integrates these within a leadership development context that links cognitive insight and emotional engagement to sustained behavioral enactment through structured evaluation and reinforcement. Thus, TFD extends COM-B by embedding behavioral engineering principles into leadership learning cycles rather than general behavior change.

Third, in comparison with the Leadership Challenge model (Kouzes & Posner, 2002) and training transfer research (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Day et al., 2014), TFD emphasizes micro-behaviors, feedback loops, and organizational alignment as the carriers of durable leadership change. Its evaluation structure—baseline, mid-cycle, end-cycle, and 90-day follow-up—addresses longstanding critiques that many leadership interventions measure only short-term reactions rather than long-term behavioral transfer (Blume et al., 2010).

Finally, the manuscript explicitly acknowledges that while TFD shares the cognitive-emotional-behavioral logic of these established theories, its distinct contribution lies in the integration of marketing-derived sequencing (Think, Feel, Do) and habit design mechanisms to embed leadership behaviors into organizational routines. This marketing-informed logic offers a novel interdisciplinary pathway for leadership development by making explicit the link between thought, emotion, and sustained behavioral change.

Contribution to the leadership literature, research and practice

The study broadens leadership's conceptual and practical scope by applying marketing principles to leadership development, demonstrating the value of interdisciplinary integration of cross-domain methodologies.

Unlike traditional approaches that primarily emphasize technical competencies through structured training (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019), or contemporary models that promote experiential learning and self-directed practice (Day & Kragt, 2023; Raelin, 2020), the TFD pathway explicitly unites cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions in a cyclical process. In doing so, it addresses a persistent limitation of prevailing frameworks, including experiential-learning-based leadership development (Kolb, 1984), emotional-intelligence-informed interventions (Caruso & Salovey, 2004), transformational leadership development (Bass, 1985) and the COM-B (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation–Behavior), model (Michie et al., 2011), which tend to privilege either motivational/emotional or capability-based pathways without fully capturing their iterative interaction.

Furthermore, the proposed framework (Figure 1) offers leadership development professionals a structured pathway for tailoring leadership programs, further ensuring public leaders' readiness to navigate complexity with empathy, strategic thinking, and action-oriented behavior. By integrating cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components, the TFD approach enables public leaders to make informed decisions, foster emotional connections with stakeholders, and implement sustainable behavioral change. This triadic integration advances leadership theory by offering a structured, evidence-informed, and practice-oriented model that bridges individual learning with organizational outcomes more holistically than existing frameworks. Emphasizing organizational culture as part of behavioral reinforcement further provides leadership professionals with insights into sustaining leadership behaviors that align with organizational values. In conclusion, these features position TFD as an applied integration of experiential learning, emotional intelligence, transfer-of-training and transformational leadership perspectives, reordered through a Think–Feel–Do sequence that is directly actionable for programme designers.

Implications for organizational practice, public policy and social impact

To demonstrate the practical utility of the proposed framework, we delineate what a leadership program explicitly organized around Think–Feel–Do (TFD) would entail and how such a design would be evaluated. In contrast to conventional offerings that treat cognition, affect and behavior as parallel threads, a TFD program sequences them as an iterative mechanism that first sharpens diagnostic clarity (“Think”), then builds relational and motivational capacity (“Feel”), and finally locks learning into observable habits and routines (“Do”). This ordering follows the manuscript’s argument that sustainable leadership change depends on repeated cycles of sensemaking, emotional investment and behavioral reinforcement rather than on episodic training inputs alone.

In terms of program architecture, a TFD intervention is best conceived as a short, blended cycle embedded in work rather than a classroom-bound course. An illustrative structure is a 12-week, cohort-based sequence followed by a 90-day consolidation phase. The initial weeks privilege cognitive work (problem recognition; information search; evaluation of alternatives), using leaders’ own business challenges as the object of inquiry to ensure strategic alignment. Mid-cycle sessions explicitly cultivate empathic listening, narrative competence and psychological safety as emotional levers that sustain engagement and trust. The latter weeks prioritize behavioral transfer through habit design, action learning, after- action reviews and structured manager check-ins. This cadence operationalizes the cyclical pathway depicted in Figure 1 and reflects the framework’s emphasis on deliberate practice, feedback and organizational support as the basis for enduring behavioral change.

Rather than assigning “training” to HR alone, a TFD design distributes responsibility across governance layers. Senior sponsors set the strategic intent and remove barriers; OD or L&D practitioners curates the curriculum and assure fidelity to the TFD sequence; line managers provide proximal reinforcement through brief, routine check-ins focused on micro-behaviors; and participants are accountable for documenting application through reflective “do logs” and capstone reports. In keeping with the framework’s call for contextual alignment and follow-up, people analytics functions support the effort by preparing baselines and pulse measures at pre-agreed intervals.

We recommend evaluating TFD programs at four time points: baseline before the intervention, mid-cycle, end-cycle, and 90-day follow-up, using a layered strategy that distinguishes adoption, intermediate change, and outcomes. “Adoption” refers to simple signs that participants are engaging with the intervention (e.g. attendance, completion of practice tasks). Intermediate change should be captured at two levels: cognitive and affective. Cognitive change could be assessed with a brief decision-quality audit of two real work decisions, scoring whether leaders stated explicit criteria, generated alternatives, consulted relevant stakeholders, and conducted a premortem (a prospective risk analysis in which the team imagines the initiative has failed and lists plausible causes so these can be prevented or monitored). Affective change is assessed through (a) coded empathic listening markers; for example, the proportion of open questions, accurate paraphrases, and explicit acknowledgment of others’ emotions in short-recorded conversations, and (b) a brief psychological-safety pulse to team members (items such as “It is easy to ask for help in this team”). Behavioral transfer could then be examined through evidence that intended habits appear in day-to-day work: a simple habit tracker and “do logs” document whether leaders routinely solicit dissent before decisions, conduct brief after-action reviews (structured reflections immediately after a task to identify what to keep or change), and use repair moves following errors (open acknowledgment of a misstep plus a specific corrective action to restore trust). Finally, where feasible, these indicators could be linked to project-level performance metrics that matter to the organization (e.g., cycle time, error/rework rates, customer escalations). Collecting the same measures at these four points (baseline before the intervention, mid-cycle, end-cycle, and 90-day follow-up) would allow

stakeholders to test immediate effects, durability over time, and the relationship between individual practice and system-level outcomes.

The TFD cycle outlined above structures evaluation at four anchors: baseline; mid-cycle; end-cycle; 90-day follow-up. This temporal design responds to critiques that many leadership programs measure only immediate reactions and not transfer or durability; it also mirrors the framework's premise that development is iterative and identity-forming rather than event-based.

By equipping leaders with cognitive clarity, emotional intelligence, and behavioral resilience, the TFD framework contributes to building ethically responsible, empathetic, and action-oriented leadership across sectors. This has broader societal benefits, including improved trust in institutions, enhanced public service delivery, and stronger community engagement. For public policy, the framework offers a structured model for leadership capability-building in government and non-profit organizations, supporting initiatives aimed at inclusive governance, crisis preparedness, and sustainable development. Embedding TFD principles in national leadership standards and public-sector training policies can help close the intention-action gap in policy implementation, ensuring that leadership development translates into tangible social outcomes.

Distinguishing TFD from transformational and servant leadership development

Although Transformational and Servant Leadership approaches have yielded important insights, their development modalities typically privilege either inspirational-motivational processes (such as visioning, meaning-making, follower inspiration), or prosocial, other-oriented processes such as stewardship and empowerment (Bass, 1985; Podsakoff et al., 1990; van Dierendonck, 2011; Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, van Dierendonck, & Liden, 2019). By contrast, the TFD approach organizes development as an interlocking cycle in which cognitive sensemaking is followed by affective commitment and then consolidated through explicit behavioral engineering, repeated in the learner's real work context. Rather than assuming that inspiration or a service ethos will generalize to daily practice, TFD specifies mechanisms, such as habit design, brief "friction" audits to remove barriers to enactment, and routine after-action reviews, to close the intention-action gap and support transfer (Gollwitzer, 1999; Ellis & Davidi, 2005; Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013; Lally, van Jaarsveld, Potts, & Wardle, 2010).

The approaches also differ in their primary unit of change. Transformational and Servant Leadership programs often index change through attitudes and follower perceptions (e.g. MLQ-type scales or climate/trust measures) (Bass, 1985; Podsakoff et al., 1990; Eva et al., 2019). TFD centers micro-behaviors and team routines as the proximal carriers of leadership, meaning how decisions are actually made, how dissent is solicited and integrated, and how errors are acknowledged and repaired, positioning experiential, work-embedded learning as the route to durability (Edmondson, 1999; Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume et al., 2010).

These differences cascade into program design and pedagogy. Transformational and Servant Leadership offerings are frequently workshop-centric, emphasizing visioning, storytelling, coaching, service projects and community-building; transfer structures are often variable or implicit (Bass, 1985; van Dierendonck, 2011). TFD, in contrast, is explicitly work-embedded and iterative: decision labs and premortems stress cognitive quality; empathetic-listening drills and brief psychological-safety pulses target affect (Edmondson, 1999; Kluger & Itzchakov, 2017); and habit design plus after-action reviews anchor behavioral consolidation in ongoing tasks (Lally et al., 2010; Ellis & Davidi, 2005; Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013). Manager check-ins and friction audits are used to adjust local constraints so that the desired behaviors are easier to enact *in situ*. Finally, the approaches diverge in evidence standards and evaluation cadence.

Transformational and Servant Leadership programs commonly report immediate post-program reactions and follower ratings; direct behavioral or KPI-linked outcomes are less

frequently specified (Podsakoff et al., 1990; Eva et al., 2019). TFD advances a mixed- indicator evaluation that includes cognitive (e.g. decision-quality indices), affective (e.g. coded empathic-listening markers; brief team psychological-safety pulses), and behavioral transfer (e.g. documented habit enactment and action-learning milestones), complemented where feasible by project-level KPIs. These indicators are collected across a defined cadence (baseline, mid-cycle, end-cycle and 90-day follow-up) to assess both immediate effects and durability, aligning with best practice in training transfer research (Alliger, Tannenbaum, Bennett, Traver, & Shotland, 1997; Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume et al., 2010).

Directions for future research to evaluate/test the superiority of the proposed framework over other leadership models

The interdisciplinary focus of our conceptual paper offers new perspectives and opportunities for future research and practice. Future empirical studies can validate and broaden the interdisciplinary integration of the TFD framework by considering the following concise set of theoretical propositions, derived from our critical discussion Table 1.

Firstly, longitudinal experimental and quasi-experimental designs should be employed to assess the framework's impact on leadership outcomes across various organizational contexts and stakeholder groups. Therefore, future studies could explore whether sector- specific adjustments can be applied to the framework, potentially advancing the interdisciplinary integration between marketing and leadership domains. Such studies could examine the degree to which cognitive engagement ("Think"), emotional investment ("Feel"), and behavioral change ("Do") correlate with measurable leadership competencies, performance outcomes, and team effectiveness. For example, future research could compare participant cohorts exposed to the TFD framework against control groups utilizing traditional or contemporary leadership models, such as the Transformational Leadership framework or the COM-B (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation–Behavior) model (Botke et al., 2018; Day & Dragoni, 2015). Key performance indicators might include leadership self-efficacy, follower engagement, innovation levels, and post-program behavioral transfer to enable leadership development professionals to develop more effective strategies for positioning and measuring the effectiveness of their programs within organizations.

Secondly, mixed-methods research incorporating surveys, 360-degree feedback, and qualitative interviews could deepen understanding of how each component of the TFD

Table 1. Theoretical propositions for future research to validate and broaden the interdisciplinary integration of the TFD framework

Theoretical proposition	Conceptual logic
Cognitive engagement foregoes emotional and behavioral change	Leadership development effectiveness increases when programs first cultivate diagnostic clarity and decision-making quality before emotional and behavioral interventions
Emotional investment amplifies cognitive insights	Leaders who experience empathic and motivational engagement are more likely to translate cognitive understanding into sustained behavioral change
Behavioral reinforcement centralize leadership identity	Observable leadership behaviors become durable when supported by structured practice, feedback loops, and organizational alignment
Iterative sequencing enhances transfer	Repeated cycles of Think-Feel-Do outperform episodic interventions by embedding leadership habits into real work contexts
Organizational support moderates impact	The presence of cultural and managerial support strengthens the relationship between individual engagement and long-term leadership outcomes

Source(s): Derived from the authors' critical discussion/recommendations

Table 1. Theoretical propositions for future research to validate and broaden the interdisciplinary integration of the TFD framework

framework functions in real-world leadership development programs. For instance, cognitive dimensions could be assessed through critical thinking and decision-making tasks (Phillips & Phillips, 2025), emotional engagement through empathy and motivation inventories (Bakker, 2022), and behavioral application via field-based stretch assignments or action learning projects (Loumpourdi, 2024). Data triangulation would enable researchers to explore not only the individual effects of each TFD component but also their interactive and iterative dynamics across time, all of which support the superiority of the proposed framework over other leadership models.

Additionally, comparative case studies involving diverse organizational sectors (e.g. public, private, and non-profit) would provide critical insights into the framework's adaptability and scalability. These studies could explore how sector-specific contexts influence the salience and sequencing of the TFD stages, particularly in complex or hybrid work environments where emotional and behavioral dynamics differ markedly (Hieker & Pringle, 2021). Research should also investigate demographic and cultural moderating variables, such as age, gender, national culture, and leadership experience, that may affect participants' receptivity to cognitive-emotive-behavioral learning strategies (Galperin et al., 2024).

Furthermore, future studies could integrate digital tools such as AI-driven feedback platforms (Jenkins & Khanna, 2025) into leadership development delivery to test how technology can enhance each component of the TFD pathway. For instance, AI can support the "Think" phase through personalized learning analytics, enrich the "Feel" phase through affective computing that monitors emotional engagement, and strengthen the "Do" phase by providing just-in-time behavioral feedback. Measuring the efficacy of such technological augmentation would further support the framework's innovation and applicability in digital learning environments.

Finally, meta-analytic comparisons synthesizing findings from studies applying TFD and competing models would establish empirical support for the framework's relative effectiveness. This would enhance the framework's conceptual legitimacy and practical value in the field of leadership development.

Ultimately, through robust empirical validation, cross-contextual testing, and technological integration, future research can substantiate the TFD framework's claim to offering a more holistic, sustainable, and impactful pathway to leadership development than current alternatives.

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