

REIMAGINING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

HOW SMUCKER UNLOCKED LEADERSHIP GROWTH THROUGH ERGs

At The J.M. Smucker Company, Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are far more than affinity communities. They are incubators of leadership. ERG leaders across the organization navigate real, complex leadership challenges every day, motivating peers, influencing without a traditional title that conveys authority, resolving conflict, and driving initiatives forward, all while managing full-time roles. Yet for years, leadership development programs were not intentionally designed around the unique context in which ERG Leaders operate. (e.g. influential leadership vs. formal reporting structure).



Recognizing this gap, Smucker partnered with the Institute for Management Studies (IMS) to design a development experience that was practical, human-centered, and built to evolve, one that met ERG leaders where they were at with supporting resources, tools and practical practice.

The Opportunity: Leadership Without a Roadmap

ERG leaders at Smucker bring genuine passion and meaningful influence to their roles. Many are navigating formal leadership responsibilities for the first time, delegating tasks, giving feedback to peers who are not direct reports, and building coalitions across a matrixed organization. These are the same skills that define effective managers and executives, yet traditional leadership programs rarely address the context in which ERG leaders operate.

The challenge is real: ERG leaders often play a critical role in holding teams together, modeling behavior, and shaping culture, exerting meaningful leadership influence regardless of formal role or structure. The question Smucker set out to answer was straightforward: What would meaningful, sustainable development actually look like for this population?

Listening First: Design Grounded in Reality

Rather than leading with assumptions, Smucker began with a survey. ERG leaders were asked which leadership themes were most relevant to their work and how they preferred to learn and apply new skills. The results informed every design decision that followed.

This approach ensured the program addressed real challenges rather than perceived ones, and it signaled to ERG leaders from the outset that their experience and perspective would shape what came next. That trust became a foundation for everything that followed. Just as important as identifying the right topics was understanding the right learning environment, what would encourage engagement, reflection, and practical application without adding unnecessary burden to already-stretched volunteer leaders.

The Framework: A Three-Part Learning Arc

From the survey insights, a three-part framework emerged, designed to create momentum and continuity rather than a single isolated learning event. Each phase was sequenced intentionally, with participants understanding from the start that they were part of a broader development arc, not a series of disconnected workshops.



Kyle Unangst
Smucker Learning &
Development Leader

1. Shared Learning

Live, one-hour sessions anchored each learning cycle, focused on leadership themes identified directly by ERG leaders. Framing these as part of a connected experience—rather than standalone events—encouraged participants to engage with greater intention and carry insights forward into the next phase.

2. Reflection and Peer Debrief

Following each live session, participants joined structured small group debrief conversations. Knowing these discussions were coming prompted deeper listening during the sessions themselves. Debriefs became powerful forums for peer learning, spaces where ERG leaders shared real challenges, compared approaches, and normalized the complexity of leading without more traditional positional authority.

3. Small-Group Practice

The final phase focused on intentional application. Self-paced, small-group practice activities connected session insights to specific situations participants were navigating in their ERG roles. Early qualitative feedback indicates this phase has helped leaders experiment with new behaviors in low-stakes environments and begin shifting from learning about leadership to actively practicing it.



“IMS’s partnership was built on trust and a shared focus on keeping things practical. Ideas could be explored, refined, or challenged constructively—which helped us move forward without overcomplicating the design.”

— Kyle Unangst, Smucker Learning & Development Leader

Early Signs of Impact

Among the earliest and most meaningful indicators of success has been the quality of conversation in debrief and practice sessions. ERG leaders are speaking openly about real challenges, sharing personal stories, building on one another’s experiences, and engaging in the kind of candid reflection that is often absent from traditional training formats.

Participants have reported that the framework helps them see leadership development not as something separate from their work, but as something embedded within it. Rather than treating learning as an event, they are beginning to experience it as a continuous cycle of exposure, reflection, and practice—a shift that aligns directly with how lasting behavior change actually occurs.

Peer connection has deepened across ERG communities. And leaders who entered the program uncertain about their leadership capabilities are leaving sessions with greater confidence, clearer language for their challenges, and a broader network of peers to learn alongside.

Looking Ahead

This work is still unfolding. As ERG leaders’ needs evolve, so will the approach. The commitment moving forward is to continue listening, refining, and building on what’s working, paying close attention to what leaders need and how they learn best.

For mechanisms asking how to extend the reach of leadership development without adding complexity, the Smucker experience offers a clear lesson: start by listening, design for the actual context, and build in the mechanisms—reflection, practice, peer dialogue—that allow learning to transfer into real behavior. Even modest, intentional additions to an existing learning experience can dramatically increase its impact and longevity.