Case Study of Social Distancing on Mentorship Programs

CLEAR Program Introduction

A Technical Paper prepared for SCTE•ISBE by

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1. Introduction

CLEAR is a mentorship program that was started in Denver by engineers, for engineers. The Mentors, Mentees, and Committee Members are all volunteers giving their time back to each new year's cohort. CLEAR stands for Comcast Leadership Engineering Achievements and Relationships.

2. CLEAR Program Introduction

2.1. Acknowledgements

Simply stated, the only way that the CLEAR Program could have been created and sustained was because of the environment, culture, and leadership. There are several instances in this paper where this is presented as pretext for creating the conditions enabling the operation of this program. The author would like to acknowledge his role and experience shaping the program over the past four years to bring this perspective to the industry at large, but not without mentioning the countless others who have founded and created the initial vision of the program in 2011. Literally hundreds of people who have given their time, energy, and dedication to pursuing the craft of mentorship and giving back to their fellow coworkers. Without their output, the CLEAR Program would have died a long time ago- the reason this program has sustained itself is by listening to feedback from Mentees, Mentors, and Committee Members about how to create a more meaningful experience and curriculum. Denice Loud has effectively been the Program Lead in Denver for the past six years, and without her dedication and execution, the sessions would not be nearly as polished and professionally presented. Her attention to detail has set the bar for expectations in how our program is run. Leslie Chapman has been the Engineering Lead in Philadelphia for the past two years and has been instrumental to launching the Philly chapter in 2019. Leslie's natural abilities have suited her ideally for making leadership accessible to her cohorts and her excellence and accomplishments in her engineering background give her the perfect experience to lead and share with each year's class. The author would like to acknowledge Denice and Leslie's contributions, not just to the CLEAR Program, but also for their contributions to this paper.

2.2. About the CLEAR Program

The CLEAR program pairs junior engineers with more experienced engineers on a year-long mentorship experience. The Mentee has a series of classes they will take over the course of the year that focus on professional development: Intellectual Property, DiSC, EI, Presentation Skills, Personal Branding, Leadership, and Cross Functional Relationships are the foundational topics to the program, and each year the focus for special topics changes based on executive leadership direction. The format of the program through 2019 was to meet every month for in-person sessions for a day of focused learning, and inevitably when lunch and breakfast are provided, networking. When each cohort is formed, the Mentee will propose a capstone project that will be the technical focus for the year and will serve as a vehicle to incorporate all the professional development topics together. Deliberately, CLEAR requires that all projects must not be part of the Mentee's day job- they must be cross functional in nature. This opens the door to creating a web of relationships across the organizations that don't typically happen on their own. It teaches the Mentees that the world is what they can create of it, and it empowers them to put pencil to paper, to make their vision a reality.

As the cohort moves to graduation and completing the program, the Mentee will have a demonstrable project to present and show off to their colleagues and to senior leadership at a project fair. The project fair is *THE* opportunity for the Mentees to demonstrate all the soft skills they have learned throughout the year as they showcase their technical projects as they communicate across all levels of engineering peers, management, and executives in the same conversation!

Over the past seven years, the program has been growing and one of the keys to that success has been to keep evolving the curriculum and be willing to throw things out that aren't working or are no longer relevant. The CLEAR Committee has a strong culture of adaptation and evolving with the times and is probably a key trait that has helped to carry them through the jarring transition of COVID-19. Another testament of the program's success is the launch of the Philadelphia chapter in 2019. Despite having two vastly different working environments, cultures, and locations, the core tenants of the program have been the binding agent that has kept the chapters together. CLEAR has an interesting history of how it began and how it grew to be what it is today, but that would be the subject for another discussion.

2.3. Supported Relationships

CLEAR deliberately mixes oil and water together as often as possible- the Mentee project selection must be cross functional, and the partnering on projects must also be a new relationship. When the Committee pairs Mentors and Mentees together, one of the key pieces of data that's used is if either party knows each other. If there is a previous relationship there, we avoid making those matches to try and maximize the exposure of these relationships across the organization- it's a deliberate and concerted effort to force people into these relationships. One of the things that has surfaced over the years is that this works well on paper but growing these relationships doesn't just happen without some additional magic. This is where the CLEAR Committee members add that spark and give these relationships the extra push and support they need. Sometimes this pairing of "odd couples" has style conflicts, or maybe communication weaknesses that can impede this Mentor and Mentee relationship. The Committee Member forms what is known as the Triad. The Triad Committee Member (TCM) is embedded in the relationship and they are invested in making sure that the relationship between Mentee and Mentor is going well. They are also there to help provide advice, input, and guidance for any questions that come up.

One of the amazing features of the program is how much the Mentees are motivated to give back to the program and come back and serve on the Committee, or if they end up promoted to a requisite title, back as Mentors in the program! This feedback loop channels the experiences of the previous year forward into the next cohort and gives each Committee a chance to improve the program. Ideas and change are democratized as they pass through each chapter's Committee and are ultimately approved by chapter leaders in unison for the year. It's important that each chapter holds each other accountable and is supportive of moving together as a team – after all, each chapter has benefitted from the new relationships created on both ends. The hope is that each Mentee's journey in CLEAR will be unique to the individual, but the overall experience in the program will be the common bond that will be the common ground to unify Mentees, Mentors, and Committee Members from different generations of the program.

2.4. Living in the Moment

Prior to the year 2020, CLEAR was an entirely in-person experience. The monthly sessions, the lunches, the project fairs- these are all designed specifically to maximize and to deliberately focus energy and resources on networking and professional relationships. The ground rules and tone that the Committee sets for the year is that the expectation is to have all electronic distractions closed and away, and to be solely focused on being in the moment to fully experience the topic and learning for the day. The expectation is that if you're in class, you have delegated your responsibilities for the day, and you are provided operational cover and support from your direct manager to be absent for the day. The goal is to create an environment and atmosphere where all the road blocks are out of the way to eliminate distractions. With this kind of environment created it was important to curate this culture and exemplify it at all levels. We created the conditions where we could maximize the time we spent together, and with all these people in the room on the same frequency it naturally brings its own energy. Running a session was no picnic, but the energy quickly overflows once we get into breaks and have lunches together. It

was a symphony of managing and releasing energy in a deliberate setting. These sessions were as much about the social growth of the Mentees and Mentors and Committee- the class and learning for the day is a convenient means to package some truly important content into a setting which promotes relationship building. A few years ago the logo was redesigned, and the Committees chose a design that emphasized the "R" being represented in a different color. The reason behind this choice is because the Relationships are the most important product from the program. It became apparent over the years that the projects, ideas, and technology ebb and flow, but the people seem to be the biggest constant in a healthy organization. The relationships are what seemed to outlast any idea in a digital world and are what brought many Mentees future opportunities after graduating from the program.

2.5. Social Capital

The emerging theme here is that for this kind of mentorship program to be successful, it had to invest heavily in social capital. Long before this pandemic, Comcast has been investing in social capital and empowering their employees to do the same. Mentees who graduate the CLEAR Program return to their teams and get a chance to flex their new skills and experiment with what they have been learning. Alumni know how to network and aren't afraid to reach across organizational boundaries, and their experience empowers them to communicate with leadership when they have an important idea. It can take a few years to build this kind of cohesion and camaraderie between the Mentors and Committee members, but once this trust is built, the group can go far and fast together. Maggie Heffernan says it best in her TED talk,

> *"When the going gets tough, and it always gets tough if you are doing breakthrough work that really matters. What people need is social support, and they need to know who to ask for help. Companies don't have ideas; only people do. And what motivates people are the bonds and loyalty and trust they develop between each other. What matters is the mortar, not just the bricks."*

Mentorship programs like CLEAR are essential for companies to have as part of their DNA- these programs are what gives companies the ability to weather the storms like COVID and come out the other side moving in a positive direction. CLEAR focuses on the strength of the organization, not solely on the individual. Back to Maggie:

> *"And when I talked to producers of hit albums, they said, "Oh sure, we have lots of superstars in music. It's just they don't last very long. It's the outstanding collaborators who enjoy the long careers, because bringing out the best in others is how they found the best in themselves."*

CLEAR has grown to the point where their social capital compounds, even as it's being spent. Every year there are new individuals coming back to the program to help as Mentors or as Committee Members. The main reason these groups can survive is because they find other like-minded people who enjoy giving their time to others.

3. The COVID-19 Disruption

3.1. Situation Report

The events that unfolded going into 2020 may not happen again within our lifetimes, but it is important to reflect on the state we were in and how it was disturbed by a global pandemic.

The awareness of the pandemic was not beginning to be realized in the USA until the end of the first quarter of the year, and it was largely something that caught businesses off guard. Companies had work from home policies and plenty of employees contributing in this manner, but what the world wasn't prepared for was the tectonic shift to moving most of their employees to the safety of their homes. It's important to note that this transformation had to be created at rapid speeds across massive organizations, which is about the equivalent of power sliding a battleship into a parking space. The CLEAR program was on the receiving end of the information pipeline which meant the Committee had precious little time to react and pivot.

3.2. Novelty of Information

In the early stages of the pandemic, there wasn't a unified sense of purpose or mission about how our lives were going to change. It's important to note that there were voices across the spectrum which had varying degrees of opinions about what the next few months held, and how temporary or permanent these changes would be. CLEAR is a volunteer organization and it was important for the group to reach consensus quickly about coming to terms with the situation and how to best move forward.

The truth of the matter is, nobody knew exactly what was going to happen in the short or long term, so we're dealing with the novelty of information mixed in with human emotions. The plans that were made "yesterday" were thrown out the following day. Responses ranged from denial to panic depending on personal situations and how close to home the virus was hitting. Executive leadership was key in these early stages to setting the tone and direction for how we were going to respond to these changes to our business. Within the company, the response from leadership has been amazing. Experts had been consulted and leadership began providing more frequent updates, coupled with meaningful plans about how our business is going to change and walking us through this transition. This is important to mention because it was absolutely critical for our volunteer organization to have an example to follow and emulate. Leadership being comprehensive, direct, and focused allowed the message to penetrate to the core of the organization and offered a path forward. This new path was not a like-for-like replacement. It was a new landscape to navigate, fraught with a unique set of opportunities and challenges. Had the guidance from above been delayed or not effectively communicated with timely updates, the CLEAR Program would have had a difficult time trying to execute their program in 2020.

3.3. Turning on a Dime

The 2020 CLEAR program began its year as it has for the past several years by collecting our feedback from 2019, digesting it as a committee, and then having committee leads parlay that into a conversation with the other chapter and represent how we want to move the program forward for the year. Nobody in either chapter could have identified the potential threat resulting from the virus and planned the necessary changes. We got so far as to have one of the first kickoffs (the Mentor kickoff) in person in Denver. The plan for Denver was to push forward and try to host our Mentee kickoff on schedule the following week. COVID's disruption had the Philadelphia's chapter decide to inject a delay in the start of the program to allow them time to recover their footing and figure out how they were going to proceed. Bear in mind that the East Coast of the USA was starting off in a vastly different situation than the Midwest was which

influenced the different paths forward chosen by each CLEAR chapter. It turned into a favorable formula for the setup of the 2020 year, as this placed the Denver chapter in the hot seat to be the experimental group who got to trial the virtualization changes to the program first and passed along the learnings to Philadelphia so they could minimize the novel challenges we were uncovering along the way and host a better experience. This offered yet another iteration to which the formula can be evaluated and tweaked without having to wait another year to try something different. It allowed us to iterate quickly and early, and when we found something that worked, we brought those learnings forward for each chapter's benefit.

When the pandemic was hitting home, both chapters put forward discussions about what it meant to continue forward. Honestly, we entertained the idea of not hosting the program in 2020. We also entertained delaying the start of the program for a few months. At the end of the day, both chapters decided that it was best to figure out a path forward and seize the opportunity. The mindset was that we needed to choose a conservative route forward, and the most conservative path showed that this virus would possibly be impacting our lives in 2021 and beyond. If 2021 was going to be a repeat of 2020, we needed to take our lumps sooner rather than later and be leaders in this space. The Committee should be applauded for their hard work keeping the program together and staying the course in the face of such adversity!

4. Silver Linings

4.1. The Technology Leap

Being a technology company and having a strong culture of innovation was essential to transforming the workplace overnight. This created the spirit of challenge and curiosity to explore the question of this mentorship program's ability to survive this conversion. We explored this question in good faith and inevitably the tool that brings us all together isn't a great tool for making us feel connected. The same online environment we create for learning and sharing information in a top-down approach inevitably leaves a gap for people to socialize and interact. Bringing large groups of people together is a powerful top-down way to distribute information- this inevitably creates a fast ingestion of information but leaves no time for the social aspects of working on a team. Collectively as a society, this online format should be considered a new venue, and will influence different personality types in new ways. We're naturally not going to get a lot of lateral networking opportunities in this top-down format. To with; we must find ways to synthesize effective team building in a virtual environment. Each of the CLEAR Committees has found different ways to cope that are meaningful to them. Philadelphia, for example, gives a five-minute break before starting their calls. Denver dedicates this time for small talk and surface level conversations about how we are doing in our personal lives. It's important to start a practice now of taking some time to have this relaxed conversation in order to build a strong team that will be able to respond to new challenges.

It's tough to say, ultimately, how the cohorts for the class of 2020 will feel at the end of the year and how satisfied they will be having undertaken this experience of Mentorship in a new format. By the time of publication, the ending of the story will not be known and could be covered in a future update to this paper if there is enough interest. The concept previously discussed about creating time for networking didn't occur to the Committees until feedback from the Mentees started to come in through surveys and our monthly check-ins. In hindsight, it feels like an obvious miss that we didn't seize on this opportunity sooner in the year. For next year, the Committees are considering changing the curriculum to build the socialization events into the third month in the program after the teams are formed and capstone proposals are due. The conclusion CLEAR arrived at is that it's important to lean in early and spend time strengthening the team and interpersonal dynamics early and often. Not taking time up front when

forming the new cohort probably held Mentees back from feeling connected to the rest of the Mentors and Committee Members who have already got previous experience with the program. Another piece of feedback CLEAR has found to work for these socialization opportunities is to create small groups for these interactions. The online format doesn't necessarily scale well beyond more than a few people in a conversation at once- the upper limit is probably around five or six individuals. After a certain point, large groups are going to be counterproductive to the networking experience.

4.2. Changing Spaces

Technology has opened new doors for us, but it would be worth mentioning that working from home shouldn't mean that we always feel obligated to be working from the same desk. There are some obvious limits to what's acceptable on camera – that said, it's possible to both work and be in an enjoyable space at the same time. After all, why shouldn't we make lemonade when life has handed us lemons? This doesn't work for everyone – someone must be facilitating and running the agenda. The result should be a relaxed group setting where the team can take a call in a fresh space and recharge themselves mentally. Take turns leading on different occasions so everyone can get the benefits from this practice.

Having a home office should be a consideration for every professional person or family when they acquire a new residence, post COVID. Working from the kitchen or the dining room may be effective for a few weeks or months, but it's not sustainable in the long term. These statements are made with consideration and understanding that it's not that easy for everyone to just do. But if professionals are finding themselves with a move coming up, having dedicated office space will be the equivalent of having a guest room in your home. It's probably something new owners are going to be actively looking for going forward, and reflecting on the pandemic, it's probably a good thing to have in general. COVID isn't the first or the last disease to transform the world – in the spirit of using this tragedy as a learning experience and a preparation exercise, it would benefit us all to have dedicated workspaces at home that we can fall back to should there again be conditions to keep us from socially collecting in an office together in the future.

It may be helpful for leaders to set some expectations for what a productive home office should be comprised of as employees are looking to make changes to their homes. Some things that should be standard in a home office for a technology professional would be a dedicated desk or workspace, at least one external monitor, and a door that can be closed. Ensure that the natural and artificial lighting can be controlled. Employees should have their own dedicated Internet connection with reliable Wi-Fi or direct hard line connections to their cable modem – not borrowing Wi-Fi from a neighbor. Should you have a family working and learning from home, consider upgrading your service if that's an option to support the needs of the family unit.

Most families and individuals renting or buying domiciles in 2019 didn't consider additional rooms in the off-chance that they'd be working from this space long-term. The reason is simple – homes and real estate are expensive, and it would have been cost prohibitive to try and plan for that pre-COVID. Professionals who are changing spaces in the COVID market should actively seek out situations where they can create a workspace that will suit their needs for the next few years – possibly even for the long term. Employers are also going to have to be flexible and compromise, here, too. If employees are going to be moving a little farther away from their jobs to be able to reasonably afford this extra space without assistance, we need to remain flexible with working from home policies as the situation (hopefully) changes in the future for a more traditional in-person experience. It's not convenient to buy/rent/sell homes and move families on a whim, so we should be mindful about permanently allowing work from home flexibility in the future for everyone as the commute times may become a new factor as employees move to areas that fit their new needs.

4.3. The Work/Life Balance

One skill that can be sharpened like a sword during COVID is patience. Things are probably not going to go back to normal for quite some time − possibly years − possibly never. We all need to have a survivor's mentality, and it's important to keep this in mind to maintain a healthy work and personal life balance. This new normal has finally removed the burden of valuable time spent idling in traffic and instead gives us the opportunity to become stronger families. It's exciting to think that this is a chance to break out of the mindset of forcing ourselves into the office every day. Just as a general note, not even specific to the CLEAR program, everyone should be practicing strong mental health routines and habits now and be prepared to settle in to this new normal. We have seen varying degrees of success with our CLEAR Mentees retaining this balance. Unfortunately, our impressions would have us say that most of the Mentees struggle with breaking away from their desks and getting outside for fresh air and exercise. This is a dangerous trend that has long-term health implications. It takes energy and active polling to reach into this level of concern for our coworkers as human beings. Those of us who are taking care of ourselves are doing their best to help break the barrier down and remind our colleagues that if we are to emerge from this situation, it's going to take a lot more effort than usual to stay healthy and strong when so much has been taken from us.

Non-traditional meetings can be a fun way to change up the scenery and find a way to interact in a small group. All government advisories should be strictly adhered to, but within that framework there may be a comfort zone that people can live with to maybe go for a walk in a park, a hike, or on a bike ride. This is a great opportunity to refresh yourself outside and build a relationship with someone in a safe manner. This may be more difficult in urban settings but look for creative ways to use your lunch hour or set a 7:00 a.m. meeting and go for a hike before work. COVID has created a mentality that it's OK or expected that you're working from home constantly. Most employees surveyed during this pandemic feel like they are trying to outcompete their peers and that they are literally competing to keep their jobs. Especially for newcomers to this landscape, it's important to hear that within reason, you are empowered to spend time in other meaningful ways.

It's important to remember not to burn out. We all must find ways to stay sane, and in case it wasn't clear before, COVID has given us all a fresh start on creating new routines and changing how we spend time in our lives. Start now, not in year three of the pandemic. Protect your physical and mental health – without these assets, it will be impossible for us to sustain our families, teams, and companies through this change. Use this as a chance to examine how you are managing your energy. Ask questions of yourself about if you're being stretched too thin, or if you don't have enough on your plate. Be honest − COVID has changed our home family dynamic and upended our lives. If your home life is drawing more of your time and attention, ask yourself what you do in your professional life that you can give up and get some of the time back. There will always be new ways for you to contribute and step up into new roles – we must remember to take care of ourselves first before we can share our best with others.

4.4. Bringing It Home

Some of the blessings of being forced to work from home is being able to see leadership in their home setting. Comcast leadership has opened themselves up and brought their employees into their homes and provided us with meaningful and timely conversations about how we're moving forward as a company. It's been a connective experience to be in such an intimate setting and it shows great leadership to be vulnerable. It's effective within the Comcast culture, and it's working. In a post-COVID world, we should leave the door open for these settings to continue to be experienced by our employees. In the meantime, it continues to motivate and set the tone for how we move forward. It's humanizing to see that your favorite executive has a dog that can also interrupt meetings when the Amazon delivery driver shows

up, or that another leader is into restoring an old VW bus. These are truly memorable distractions that help bring us closer together and feel like a family.

5. Key Conclusions

5.1. No Substitutions for the Real Deal

One of the hard realities that must be acknowledged is that trying to create this kind of mentorship program during a pandemic may be impossible or may be an exercise of diminishing returns. CLEAR had the benefit of growing in popularity over the past seven years and was able to build this culture of creating meaningful relationships and embed it into the Committee and Mentors. The CLEAR Program has concluded that there are no real substitutions for building that social capital in the electronic space, or perhaps the working culture is not yet there. The broad population is burning out from being on camera all the time. Over time this disruption may become more accepted and ingrained into our experience, but many people are struggling with the new challenges present in their everyday lives, plus this new work environment. When this pandemic does finally end, it's an important reminder for leadership at all levels to remember that we need to actively create time to value each other and have meaningful social experiences that bring us together. Programs like CLEAR will likely sustain themselves over the next few years because they have a strong culture built around their nucleus and can probably weather the storm. When society finds a way to safely come back to the workplace together, we need to embrace active team building and make this a priority for business. In the meantime, this will be the next challenge at every leader's feet. For existing teams, this problem may be diminished because of time spent together. But the next pandemic may be more deadly, and it's important that we embrace this opportunity to prepare our companies to survive greater threats to our businesses. Even if within our lifetimes we never have to be forced to work from home for a long duration again, we'll still have a stronger workforce that doesn't feel as constrained by virtual walls – it also opens the door to more diverse future employees who no longer have to be embedded in metropolitan centers. These teams are going to be central to creating and maintaining the technologies that run our businesses, and we owe it to them to invest heavily in their success. Virtualization challenges are not going to go away, and the longer we operate in these conditions, the more exposed we become to the challenges of starting new projects and forming new teams. The author feels like there's a lot more work to do in this space, and we may have to change our perceptions about how we're evaluated at doing our jobs and what performance measures are weighted towards.

5.2. The Investment of Time

We have probably all felt this experience in 2020 that time is simultaneously going by faster and slower. The Groundhog Day cycle of getting up and being on camera day-in and day-out has created an emotional and mental crash where some have adapted, and others continue to struggle. This means that what we did before, now costs us more. There has been a big shift in the investment of our time, and ultimately, our energy. It takes significantly more energy to focus on listening and watching at the same time, plus incorporating our natural social anxieties about being on camera means that it takes a lot more energy and time to do everything with video.

Consider going 20th Century – especially if it's a meaningful relationship. A phone call can feel like something we used to do a lifetime ago. It is a bit more impersonal, but focused listening and engagement on a meaningful level in a one-on-one situation can create the same meaningful connections. The great thing about phones is that we can walk around and be free – watch a nice sunset, watch a child

play – passive viewing experiences allow us to have a little room for our minds to naturally wander while still allowing fully focused out-of-band engagement.

With this oversaturation of communications taking place in both the visual and audio formats, we should be honest and consider that not even a year ago, most of our meetings that took place remotely were done over the phone. Taking time to call someone instead of setting up a video conference can be a nice break for both parties. It's much easier to move yourself outside to get some fresh air, or take a small walk, rather than being tied to a desk or reliable Wi-Fi to hold that face-to-face conversation.

Being on camera all day at work is exhausting and creates an even more energy draining experience than we've been used to for our working lives. We should consider trying to remove some of this extra energy and go camera off with intention. Can you move non-critical meetings to audio only? Is it possible to save our camera energy for the important meetings? Leaders should be encouraged to set some intentional boundaries, so we avoid burning each other out. Maybe a "No Camera Friday" or something easy to show that it's OK to turn our cameras off, and not have to be a TV anchor for the day. It's impossible given the current working climate to assume that everyone is always going to have a perfect hair day while dealing with family and children and working from home for the 200th consecutive day in a row. Even the most consummate professionals will find that the energy must come from somewhere, and productivity is probably the first to fall to the wayside.

Another mindset we should all look at making a shift towards in this pandemic is to trim our calls down to 30 minutes at a time, 60 max for critical content. Time is a commodity in a pandemic, and there are only so many hours in a workday. It may become necessary for corporate cultures to shift away from so many meetings and allow employees half or more of their work week to dedicate towards productivity. In the always-on environment in the pandemic where we're all trying to save our jobs, it's important to reserve our energy for things we can actually produce and create. It helps us feel fulfilled in our roles and creating output for most people is a fulfilling experience. At the end of the day, it's all about carefully balancing collaboration with productivity. Perhaps the impact of COVID has shifted us into a modality where we're trying to maximize or overcorrect for collaboration in favor of productivity. It may be helpful to trim out unneeded calls from our calendars and pull back on commitments so we can self-manage this balancing act on our own accords.

CLEAR struggled with this a lot this year. Early on we took a poll to see if our cohort wanted to keep our sessions into one single day, or if we split them up over two days in the month. Denver and Philly both voted to keep their schedules into a single day, but for 2021 this decision will be revisited. CLEAR has such a dense agenda during a non-COVID year that we often found ourselves underbudgeted for time and our sessions ran long. Even when we had our sessions fully prepared and time boxed to our expectations, we found it difficult to keep the group together electronically over the course of the day. A continued theme was that everything seemed to take a bit longer when we were asking groups to collaborate. When the CLEAR Program sets their schedule for 2021, we're going to be pulling back on the content to try and consciously open up any group work to deliberately have more socialization time included. Next year's practice should embody more robust group time to allow not just focus on the learning topic, but also for the social interactions within the group.

Another learning point was not scheduling more time up-front in the year. We learned as time went on from our monthly check-ins and surveys that the networking wasn't happening well. For next year, we're going to build more time in the program for this socialization early on after the teams have been formed.

5.3. Making Time to Take Time

It bears repeating again, as this is a central thesis of this paper, that time is a commodity in this pandemic. With the experiences we've seen running the CLEAR program, we've noticed that it takes a lot more energy to do the same things we used to do pre-COVID. It's hard to imagine that technology would be the barrier, but in a way, we're mismanaging ourselves into this modality. It's easy to see why, because the desire to socialize and have a more interpersonal experience will always be there. The old expression says if you're going to do something, you might as well do it right. This mindset extends to mentoring and networking – if you aren't making time to get to know someone better, what are your expectations for the relationship to grow and develop? If time is considered valuable and sacred, it places more meaning on those moments that are spent together.

5.4. Recalibrating Expectations

Once committed down the path of hosting a 2020 CLEAR cohort, it was important to begin managing our expectations for the year. As a Committee, we discussed our threshold for success this year wasn't the typical 100% graduation rate we normally target, but if we got 66% of our Mentees across the finish line, we'd have done a decent job of holding the program together. As time passes and without knowing the future, both chapters are likely going to approach a 100% graduation rate during the pandemic, which is a testament to the leadership of both chapters, and the networks of professionals that are being created and sustained by this program. As chapter leaders, we felt it was important to not let our Committee get singularly focused on repeating the past seven year's performances. It was more important to move forward and make mistakes than to be distracted by metrics we would normally hold ourselves accountable to during a non-pandemic year. It was important to give ourselves that break, mentally, and lower our expectations and the measurement of success. That action relieved the pressure, allowing the committee to focus on the larger issues of restructuring the program in the virtual setting and solving for those problems. We didn't expect to get it all right this year, but it was important for us to get in the batter's box and start taking swings. There will still be several months of the program that transpire after this paper is presented – there are no guarantees that the current trajectory will hold. But we are hopeful that as an entity, we've learned enough from this year to reimagine the 2021 structure, and simultaneously having the experience for running the program virtually.

5.5. Attrition

It's important to note that CLEAR wasn't immune from attrition due to the pandemic. There was a pair of Mentees who withdrew from the program in 2020 that was a direct result of the pressures placed on their personal and professional lives. As a Committee, we mentally prepared ourselves of the possibility of sustaining major losses as we transitioned to the virtual environment.

5.6. Moving Forward

When the pandemic was breaking in the USA, the CLEAR program had to make a decision. The syllabus takes place over the course of the calendar year, with each cohort graduating after Thanksgiving in early December. What were we to do? 2019 was the most successful year of the program – with an eye for founding two additional chapters in 2020. We had varying perspectives about the duration and intensity of this change in work styles, and nobody had the crystal ball to give us a prediction where we'd be in four weeks, let alone four months. The Philly and Denver Committees had to discuss this and quickly reach an answer about how to move forward. Should we pause for a few months and try to start late? Or do we cancel 2020 altogether and hold out that 2021 will be back to normal? The Committee had a lot of doubts about the effectiveness of taking a 100% physical program and transforming it overnight into a

virtual one, especially without any prior thought or preparation. Most of the foundational concepts and principals for the constructs of the program centered around being there in person, distraction free, and deliberately creating time for these horizontal networks to grow. The projects are a great vehicle for the Mentees to drive on this journey, but as was discussed previously, the strong relationships were truly the key outcomes from the program. It has taken and will continue to take a lot of time, good ideas, and bad ideas to figure out what works to make up for the ground that COVID has taken from us.

The author would consider the decision to move forward under complete uncertainty to have been particularly wise choice in hindsight. One prominent theme that has emerged during COVID is that scientific and medical information keeps evolving and our company is also changing the dynamics and conditions on which we could engage each other in person. Moving CLEAR to a virtual space allowed us to move forward and face the challenges of this space head on. The author is the Engineering Lead for the Denver chapter and on the inter-chapter panel, allowing visibility to how two geographic locations within the company tackled challenges in similar spaces, how effective those problem-solving strategies played out, and the unique challenges that were surfaced from each location. Being able to have a larger sample size effectively doubled the interactions and outcomes and provided a meaningful backdrop of experiences to base the advice, guidance, and observations that are foundational to this paper. The goal of this paper was to provide a deeper view inside the CLEAR Mentorship Program, and to serve as a mirror and a reminder that even a prestigious institution like CLEAR is not immune to the challenges presenting themselves during a pandemic.

This paper has discussed the sustainment of an existing mentorship program with a historic context and rich culture. What this paper does not address is the fact that life must continue forward outside of CLEAR. Leadership will be forced to contend with company reorgs and creating new products as we have done in the past, but with new challenges and barriers. How will leaders look to solve the issues of creating new teams and build those horizontal relationships as we found new teams, or create new organizations? On paper, the exercise is simple, but the author believes that this will be a large question that's on CLEAR's horizon for years to come, as well as the leaders within a given business. The crux of the problem isn't how to move forward when we've built an amazing ship, we're navigating to a destination, and have the winds at our backs. What do we do about the boats that haven't been built, and the teams who haven't yet set to sea? CLEAR's issue of adaptation may be an opportunity and a challenge at the same time – on one hand, CLEAR had to change directions, not create something from new. It's the author's hope that many of the challenges presented with virtualization in 2020 would be points of interest for anyone starting a new team or for moving an organization forward and is hopeful that the lessons learned here will be a useful analog for how we each have to move forward.

In conclusion, the author will go out on a limb and put a prediction into print about how long it will take most of us to adjust to these conditions – barring a vaccine or other breakthrough. 2020 will feel like the year that didn't exist for most people – we're in the denial stage, still, especially in the USA. 2021 will dawn, and there will be a realization at some point where people will observe that we've been under these conditions for a year, and the reality will start to sink in – acceptance. By the time 2022 arrives, the Groundhog Day novelty has faded, and we'll be in the new normal. 2021 will see some oscillations as we struggle to cling to the past and the reality of coping and dealing with the new normal – in this year do we finally start to achieve group awareness that this problem is not temperamental and employee cultures will become more accepting to this change? We probably won't have the full focus of problem solving in this space achieved until sometime in 2021, with 2022 becoming the foundation for the new normal.

Stay healthy and safe.

Abbreviations

CLEAR	Comcast Leadership Engineering Achievements and Relationships
EI	Emotional Intelligence
TCM	Triad Committee Member

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David Eng – CLEAR Mentor

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