

CASEBOOK OF IDG IMPLEMENTATION INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

Inner Development Goals: Experience in Leadership Training in Higher Education

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Abstract

This chapter summarizes the effects of working with the dimensions of the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) and their intervention tools among technical, administrative, and service (TAS) staff members who mostly hold positions of responsibility at Universidad de la República (Udelar), de Uruguay – University of Uruguay. The instrument implemented was a workshop-format course offered by the authors through the Continuing Education Program of the School of Government (EDG) of this higher education institution (HEI). Over a two-month period, eight participants—six leaders and two students deprived of liberty—took part in eight virtual sessions of ninety minutes each, aimed at exploring the five dimensions of the IDGs. The six staff members in leadership positions confirmed the need to strengthen their inner capacities to better support their work teams. Although the sample size was small and the results cannot be generalized, participants in leadership roles agreed on the importance of acquiring tools that would enable them to empower their teams, manage conflicts, and improve the work climate. Participants reported feeling better prepared and equipped with more practical tools to design interventions aimed at enhancing interpersonal relationships and fostering collaborative work. Among the most significant outcomes, they highlighted that the continuous implementation of workshops on the IDGs and their toolbox strengthened the understanding and internalization of key leadership competencies within the HEI. Moreover, active participation and the exchange of experiences were identified as fundamental elements for acquiring practical tools, which directly contributed to improved team management and workplace climate.

Keywords/key phrases: leadership, capacity development, Inner Development Goals/Guide, higher education

1. Introduction

Organizations and their members are immersed in VUCA environments (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous), in which the common denominator is disconnection (Scharmer, 2025). The rise of the digital world has amplified each of the VUCA dimensions, making changes faster, more unpredictable, and increasingly difficult to manage (Schwab, 2017; Hinterhuber et al., 2021). This scenario calls for comprehensive approaches that cultivate the collective intelligence of the actors and sectors involved, with the aim of generating inclusive, creative, collaborative, and evolutionary responses.

Educational settings are not exempt from this reality. They face unprecedented challenges that demand a profound transformation of management models, learning environments, and pedagogical practices (Albers et al., 2023). The acceleration of change, the unpredictability of events, the multiplicity of interrelated factors, and the lack of unequivocal responses compel educational institutions to move away from rigid and hierarchical models toward more flexible, collaborative, and adaptive approaches (Ellyat, 2022). Within this framework, the development of transversal competencies such as creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and courage becomes a priority, as these foster autonomy and self-management within work teams. Internally, this requires the ability to navigate complexity, remain open to continuous learning, deeply value others, and regulate and manage the self, among other capacities (Ayers et al., 2022).

Moreover, it is essential to foster spaces for reflection and action, where research practice and the integration of diverse perspectives enable a deeper engagement with the complexity of contemporary challenges. In this sense, management in VUCA contexts not only responds to the need for constant adaptation but also drives innovation and the development of individuals capable of leading in uncertain and dynamic environments (Diefenbach & Deelman, 2016).

How can we overcome traditional paradigms when addressing structural problems? Scharmer (2025) refers to the *triple divide*—individual, social, and environmental—to describe the state in which we are collectively immersed. As a society, we are producing results that no one individually desires. Those who lead organizations must constantly contend with the conditions generated by this disconnection: a rapid increase in mental health issues, absenteeism, and a lack of spaces for deep listening and reflection.

This global scenario is even more critical within Latin American universities. Public universities face the urgent need for a profound reform that enables them to overcome their current global lag and to assume a leading role in the education of critical citizens, capable of analyzing and understanding the complex flow of information in contemporary reality (Altbach & Salmi, 2024). However, they often operate with diminished teams facing high workloads and low levels of remuneration (García & Adrogué, 2021). In addition, there is a general lack of training in soft skills—both intra- and interpersonal—which are essential for improving collaboration and achieving effective management within academic environments. In this context, prioritizing the development of such competencies becomes a fundamental pillar of educational transformation.

The higher education institution (HEI) referenced here, like many of its regional counterparts, has doubled its student population to date (163,288; DGPlan, 2024) without a proportional increase in staff numbers. This situation has led to a context of massification, disciplinary

diversification, and an expansion of evaluation and control modalities, exposing administrative personnel to high levels of stress and burnout. Their leaders have expressed the need to create training spaces that strengthen their competencies for managing teams under adverse working conditions (Tabarez-Díaz et al., 2021).

Programs focused on inner development have demonstrated positive impacts on participants' ability to creatively challenge unsustainable ways of working. Moreover, within the field of sustainability leadership education, both personal and collective connection are regarded as fundamental for addressing current societal crises (Wamsler et al., 2023), as deep personal transformation requires the cultivation of socio-emotional skills and self-management (Tenschert et al., 2024).

This paper contributes evidence in this regard. The Inner Development Goals (IDGs) training course was offered to stakeholders: technical, administrative, and service (TAS) staff at the University of the Republic (Udelar). It was attended primarily by individuals in positions of responsibility (Heads and Division Directors), confirming leaders' need to strengthen their inner capacities in order to create and sustain work environments characterized by positive organizational climate, mutual respect, and the conditions necessary for innovation and continuous improvement to unfold.

2. Theoretical Framework

The present theoretical framework focuses on the importance of leaders developing and strengthening their competencies to create and sustain work environments characterized by a positive organizational climate. Practices that contribute to fostering such a climate promote innovation and continuous improvement (Barbeito & Bianchi, 2016), both of which are essential for organizational well-being and the achievement of collective goals.

This study seeks to demonstrate that IDG-based training for leaders within the HEI can strengthen their competencies to create and sustain work environments with a positive climate. It is proposed that these practices influence the development of a favourable work atmosphere and, consequently, organizational well-being—key elements for achieving collective objectives.

Recent scientific evidence shows that human beings possess an innate ability to connect with one another; however, this potential requires the provision of dedicated spaces and time within the workday to be realized (Lieberman, 2013). Research on the effects of mindfulness within organizations points in the same direction, emphasizing that inner transformation and intrapersonal capacities are necessary to meet the challenges of complex contexts.

The literature highlights self-awareness, alignment with personal values, and connection with others and with nature as profound leverage points for transforming collective ways of working (Woiwode et al., 2021). It further underlines the need to address the ontological, epistemological, and practical dimensions of inner and outer transformation to empower individuals to question unsustainable social paradigms (Wamsler et al., 2023).

In this context, the IDGs represent a key framework, as they constitute an integrative model of soft skills that identifies and promotes the inner abilities and qualities essential for improving the quality of life in relation to others and to the planet (Shtaltovna et al., 2024). Developed, promoted, and disseminated as a non-profit and open-source initiative by diverse public,

private, and civil society organizations, the IDG framework provides clear methodologies for enhancing the adoption and practice of soft skills. Inner development is thus fundamental for achieving external sustainability, particularly in contexts where institutional cultures hinder the application of learning at collective and systemic levels.

The aforementioned framework is structured around five key dimensions—Being, Thinking, Relating, Collaborating, and Acting—each encompassing various aspects of personal and professional growth. Its design was informed by global studies and surveys that have identified specific intrapersonal capacities relevant to sustainability work, including the ability to manage complexity and foster a learning mindset (Jordan, 2021; Ayers et al., 2023). The framework emphasizes the importance of promoting interconnectedness and the self-observation of emotions, thoughts, and beliefs as part of the process of transforming oneself and, consequently, the surrounding context (Ives et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2021).

These are key intrapersonal attributes for leaders who act as agents of change in their daily work, as they facilitate the effective implementation of sustainable initiatives despite ongoing challenges (Ayers et al., 2023). This perspective highlights that individual values, beliefs, and attitudes are not merely secondary factors but are, in fact, fundamental drivers of both personal and systemic transformation in complex contexts.

The intrapersonal approach is further supported by research indicating that the identification and cultivation of inner qualities—such as the capacity to navigate complexity and sustain a learning mindset—are essential for individuals engaged in sustainability-related work (Ayers et al., 2023). This paradigm calls for explicit consideration of both internal and external transformation processes, which require working with conscious interrelation and intrarelation through introspection and reflexivity (Böhme et al., 2024).

Based on these foundations, the present study explores the effects of participating in an IDG training course offered to six organizational leaders of the Uruguayan HEI. This course drew on a diverse body of knowledge developed worldwide, offering an educational experience designed to support leaders in addressing contemporary challenges.

3. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative approach, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives without seeking to generalize the findings to broader populations. This methodological design allows for a detailed investigation of complex phenomena, prioritizing interpretive richness over the quantification of variables (Fasio, 2002).

The study is cross-sectional and exploratory, as it seeks to investigate a problem that has been little addressed in the local context while simultaneously describing its characteristics in detail.

A case study design is employed, focusing on the design and implementation of a workshop conducted for students, faculty, and TAS staff at the University of the Republic (UdelaR). This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the experience within the context in which it occurred. As described in the case presentation, the study focuses specifically on participants with leadership responsibilities. Two students deprived of liberty, who had enrolled in the open-format course available to students, faculty, and TAS staff, are excluded from this analysis. The exclusion is justified by the fact that these students could only attend the last half-hour of the course due to prison restrictions and because the study aims to focus on organizational leaders.

Grounded theory was chosen as the methodological framework due to its emphasis on the inductive construction of knowledge, which allows for a deep understanding of participants' experiences and the effects of the course based on emergent data. Unlike phenomenology, which seeks to explore the essence of a lived experience, or action research, which aims to transform practice through collective intervention, grounded theory is more suitable here because its objective is to generate theory or concepts that explain how participants perceive and interpret the impact of the course on their competencies and organizational practices. Open coding was applied to the materials produced. According to Charmaz (2014), initial coding enables the extraction of data that facilitates analysis. The results presented are based on submitted work, transcriptions of the sessions, and observations made by the teaching team throughout the course.

4. Case: Inner Development Goals Course at UdelaR

Recruitment and Participation: The training program was delivered in May 2025 through the Continuing Education courses of the School of Government (EDG) at UdelaR, in a virtual and synchronous format. The EDG annually conducts closed calls for the entire university population (189,000 individuals, including students, faculty, and TAS staff). The authors made a proposal that was peer-reviewed and approved for the first cohort. Then we designed and delivered the course. Eight participants enrolled, including two students deprived of liberty. This study focuses on the experiences of the six participants holding supervisory positions within the organization. The sample consisted of five women and one man, aged between 30 and 60 years, with two residing outside the capital and four living in Montevideo.

Curricular design: The course consisted of weekly 90-minute sessions over four weeks, complemented by a final evaluation session delivered in a hybrid format. The curriculum was designed to include activities centered on experiential learning, the use of methodological tools associated with the IDG dimensions, guided personal reflection (journaling), small-group work, and the exploration of concrete cases contributed by the participants themselves.

The dynamics employed included techniques derived from Theory U, deep listening exercises, perspective-taking activities, relational archetypes, Non-Violent Communication and creative proposals aimed at fostering collaboration and action. These global practices were contextualized, and, choosing for each dimension the competence or ability more significant for the UdelaR participants. E.g. in the *being dimension*, they worked on Openness and Learning Mindset using the U Theory four levels of listening. In the *relating dimension*, they worked on relatedness, empathy and compassion using the relational archetypes.

Multimedia resources in both Spanish and English were used, and asynchronous forums were offered as spaces to deepen personal and organizational reflection. Additionally, apart from the authors, another teacher facilitated meditation at the beginning and at the end, focusing on body grounding and synchronicity connected to nature. Furthermore, scribing was utilized during the presentation of final cases. The flexible design of the course allowed adjustments based on participant numbers and connection conditions.

Evaluation: The proposed evaluation required participants to select an intervention within their sphere of possible action, using the tools provided in the course through practice or the suggested materials. This open-ended approach allowed for a high degree of flexibility and

enabled participants to design intervention proposals in their workplaces that were meaningful for their professional activities. The group reflections, completed assignments, and scribing records from the evaluation session constitute the primary material that served as the basis for the analysis presented below.

5. Results

The analysis was initially aimed at identifying the inner development competency needs of those working at Udelar, a large-scale university facing high demands due to massification, recent decentralization, and disciplinary diversity. The next objective was to understand how participants experienced the designed teaching–learning process and to collect data that could inform improvements to the approved training program. Finally, the study sought to gather narratives that could be shared among communities promoting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Achieving external sustainability is closely linked to individuals and collectives who believe in their potential to act and alter behaviors to make the planet habitable for future generations.

The depth of participants’ reflections on their challenges as leaders in an organization that does not formally address intra- and interpersonal competency development was particularly revealing. Of special interest is understanding how, during the process, participants were able to integrate cognitive knowledge with introspection, creativity, and spirituality within a virtual format.

The following paragraphs describe the changes reported by participants in their final reports related to self-awareness, including both their self-understanding and their interpersonal relationships, as well as their modes of collaboration toward organizational sustainability. The course expanded the range of possible actions for addressing the various challenges raised. The findings are presented according to the IDG dimensions most frequently mentioned by the participants.

Being:

Regarding intrapersonal capacities such as self-awareness, internal compass, and emotion regulation to face challenges in the work environment, participants agreed that these skills are essential for effective team leadership. Stress and burnout management were also highlighted, suggesting that inner development contributes to the prevention of these issues and to the enhancement of overall well-being in the workplace.

This course has made me realize the importance of self-critique and of knowing my own being as a dimension. In some cases, this is particularly important for a collective in which many are observing. The responsibility and challenges we face daily in large institutions, especially when holding leadership positions, are immense. (Participant 1)

Collaborating:

Four assignments highlighted the need to improve communication as a fundamental skill for teamwork and organizational development. Effective and nonviolent communication was seen as key to growth and development in complex work environments.

In this dimension, one participant chose a self-dialogue format:

What could we improve to make collaborative work even more creative and constructive? And the answered he provided: (co-creation skills) (Participant 2)

Relating:

This dimension is frequent in the testimonies, emphasizing the importance of caring for others and fostering healthy interpersonal relationships to create a positive work climate. Empathy and compassion were highlighted as fundamental tools for eliminating microaggressions in the workplace.

Other skills and behaviours were also emphasized:

Strengthen and encourage recognition and gratitude for the work and dedication of other group members. Appreciation is essential for reinforcing group cohesion. Recognizing and valuing each member's contributions motivates and ensures active participation. Demonstrating appreciation fosters a positive environment where individuals feel valued and respected, increasing commitment and sense of belonging. (Participant 3)

Thinking:

The most frequently mentioned cognitive skills were those that contribute to better relationships: critical thinking, perspective-taking, sense-making, guidance and long-term vision, and awareness of complexity. These capacities enable individuals to consider different points of view, evaluate information, and understand the world as an interconnected system, thereby facilitating sound decision-making.

In this regard, one participant summarized how they began to change the work environment:

We created opportunities for discussion, and in the end, we reached agreement. Even if they are not fully convinced, they know it is something they must do. (Participant 1)

Action

Driving change: courage, creativity, optimism, perseverance. This dimension was not as frequently selected as a change enabler. It was mentioned primarily from a spiritual perspective:

Every human being has the possibility to improve. From this standpoint, having optimism to drive change, acting accordingly, and aligning oneself to promote the avoidance of microaggressions in the workplace is a challenge, but setting a medium-term goal would be the most appropriate and conducive way to generate change. (Participant 4)

The conclusion of one participant summarizes their experience during the training:

Assuming transformation as a continuous and conscious process, with clear guidance and active leadership, while seeking to involve people in change management. In this sense, I understand that the Inner Development Goals provide substantial elements; they help us reflect and, above all, to conceptualize and plan approaches more clearly and also to facilitate their implementation. (Participant 2)

FIGURE 1. NOTETAKING OF THE EVALUATION



Source: Fernandez, Andrea: evaluation note taking, 2025

Regarding the use of the Toolbox for designing projects as a minimum viable change, substantial differences were observed among participants, with the differentiating factor being the highest level of education attained. Those with professional training demonstrated a greater degree of integration of the tools into their transformation projects. Additionally, they showed a clearer design regarding the role they were to assume. Despite these varying levels of integration, with the exception of one of the eight students who took the course, all participants were able to design an intervention project within their sphere of action. Leaders in higher hierarchical positions displayed greater concern for the long-term sustainability of the organization compared to those holding responsibility positions with lower hierarchy.

Finally, as reflected in the following opinion, there was consensus that the Toolbox is clear and provides alternatives previously unknown to participants for intervening in their organizations:

The use of this 'Toolbox' allows connecting theory with practice, promoting deep reflection and genuine self-knowledge. This not only improves communication but also strengthens team effectiveness. (Participant 5)

6. Discussion

This systematization may encourage the replication of the training program designed for the use of the IDGs with leaders and individuals in positions of responsibility. The results are reported because leaders recognized the need to provide evidence that facilitates the expansion of the experience both upward and downward within the organizational hierarchy, and it is considered relevant to share with other stakeholders these effects. However, several limitations of the study are acknowledged. The group size was small, and its process may not reflect the interests or concerns of other employees in similar positions of responsibility. Although

participation in the course was voluntary, it is likely that those who ultimately applied the learnings in workplace projects were motivated by reasons external to the program itself.

Nonetheless, and in agreement with the findings of Woiwode et al. (2012), all assignments submitted by participants reflect a deep understanding of how inner development and intrapersonal capacities are important for addressing organizational challenges. Participants concurred that improving communication, managing stress, and fostering interpersonal relationships are essential for creating a positive and sustainable work environment.

Although further iterations are needed, this study demonstrates that the Relating and Collaborating dimensions play a key role in organizational change toward sustainability. Leaders expressed the need for training spaces with guided interaction, such as those experienced in this course, to strengthen their soft skills and team management competencies—an essential need in contexts of high demand and limited remuneration.

Mindfulness was also mentioned as a tool for creating intra- and interpersonal connection spaces necessary to cultivate a healthier and more productive work environment. While consistent with Rooney et al. (2019) in recognizing that programs developing mindfulness provide leaders with accessible wisdom to empower their management, cultural restrictions in Latin America still significantly limit widespread adoption. This cultural sensitivity must be explicitly considered when designing and implementing meditative practices. Mindfulness, although increasingly applied in diverse work environments, originated as a spiritual practice, and its successful integration often depends on how it is articulated within the overall program, the time allocated, and opportunities for reflection on inner experience. The challenge lies in ensuring that any adaptations preserve the fundamental principles of mindfulness while resonating with the diverse cultural values and organizational dynamics present in each society (Sutton, 2023).

Another methodology that was well received was the framework of conversations promoted by Rosenberg (1999) through Non-Violent Communication (NVC). This is a robust tool for fostering empathy and interpersonal connection, which are crucial elements for inner development (Williams et al., 2021). It facilitates deep transformation by integrating emotional and rational aspects within the communication process. Through simple, structured steps, NVC promotes the expression of observations without judgment, the recognition of feelings and needs, and the formulation of clear requests (Rosenberg, 1999). NVC equips individuals to navigate difficult conversations and build relationships based on mutual respect (Williams et al., 2021). This approach is particularly relevant in academic settings, where the ability to establish empathetic communication can mitigate conflicts and enhance overall well-being. Participants expressed the need to connect with others through a different kind of dialogue—one characterized by deep, assertive, empathetic listening free from judgments or criticism that could harm others—thus fostering healthier and more peaceful relationships.

In addition to the topics mentioned, several challenges arose during the implementation of training programs like the one described. Regarding curricular design, although scheduled times were met, an area for improvement identified was the need to extend session duration, ideally to two hours per session, or to include an additional intensive day for the final project. In practice, resources were provided in both Spanish and English, although the group showed a

clear preference for materials in Spanish. This observation highlights the importance of carefully selecting linguistic and cultural resources according to the group's profile.

Asynchronous forums were also offered as spaces for deepening personal and organizational reflection, though they were not fully utilized in this iteration. Additionally, closing elements such as meditation and body resonance exercises were incorporated and valued by participants as necessary for integrating the learnings. The flexible design of the course allowed for adjustments based on participant numbers and connection conditions.

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze the implementation of the Inner Development Goals through a workshop directed at technical, administrative, and service (TAS) staff in leadership roles at the Universidad de la República, a large public university in Uruguay. The training program, delivered virtually and synchronously, sought to strengthen intra- and interpersonal competencies—such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, communication, and stress management—to respond to the complex and rapidly changing challenges of higher education administration in Latin America.

The results indicate that participants recognized the importance of these skills in fulfilling their roles as leaders. Although progress was uneven, they reported concrete improvements in their ability to manage conflicts, promote positive work climates, and support their teams. Changes were also observed in the ways participants connect with others, reflecting greater awareness of others' perspectives.

Factors influencing the speed with which participants assimilated the tools provided include the context in which they perform their work, their educational level, their capacity for self-observation and self-recording, and their ability to link course content to real situations in their personal and professional environments.

The inclusion of patience as a fundamental skill toward oneself and others suggests a potential expansion of the theoretical model. While there is a recognized need to create spaces of this nature and to implement practices that foster healthier relationship management and collaboration, a sense of urgency in other work activities often results in these practices being postponed. It becomes evident that dedicating time to inner development is necessary; yet, contrary to expectations, it is often the first practice to be sacrificed in order to “complete” tasks demanded by the system. The accelerated pace of life leaves little or no time for regular personal internal practice. At present the systemic approaches to organizations - such as example U Theory, mindfulness and Trauma Informed Leadership - are emphasising the need to find spaces where leaders can strengthen their inner conditions.

Practical Implications

The findings highlight the importance of offering training opportunities focused on inner development for individuals in leadership positions, particularly in contexts of high demand and limited resources, a situation that affects higher education globally (Altbach & Salmi, 2024). The authors shared the design and this first experience in higher education global forums to encourage co-creation of similar experiences. The continuous implementation of workshops

based on the IDGs can enhance team resilience, collaboration, and adaptability, contributing to the reduction of burnout and the improvement of interpersonal relationships.

For institutional leaders and policymakers, investing in such programs may translate into more innovative, healthy, and sustainable organizations. Moreover, the experiential and reflective methodology employed in the workshop can be adapted to other sectors facing VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) conditions, thereby broadening the social impact of the initiative.

Reflexivity

The instructors who designed and evaluated the learning process believe in the transformative value of inner development for organizational change toward sustainability. The interplay between extensive training in organizational transformation, social change, and personal change, along with more recent theoretical frameworks—some still exploratory—facilitates the questioning and revision of our own beliefs. Participants who actively engaged in the workshop drew our attention to the needs of leaders in higher education institutions. This casebook contributes to efforts to develop more ethical and human-centered theoretical frameworks for higher education, a need increasingly recognized in organizational theory given the outcomes produced by traditional forms of training.

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Conflict of Interest

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Data Availability

Data supporting the conclusions of this study can be made available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Ethical Statement

The authors confirm that they have obtained the necessary permissions from their respective universities to publish the case studies included in this manuscript.

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