



DLC

Leadership

Program

Pilot Cohort: Pre-Assessment Findings

The DLC Leadership Team



Rachel Kowert, PhD

Founder & Program Director

Dr. Rachel Kowert is a research psychologist and games scholar whose work focuses on the intersection of gaming, mental health, and online community dynamics. She is the Founder of the DLC Leadership Program and a visiting researcher at the University of Cambridge. Rachel founded the DLC Leadership Program to address a gap she had long observed in her research: that the people most responsible for the health of online communities are almost entirely without formal support or training. She serves as Program Director and leads program development, research, and organizational partnerships.



Kelli Dunlap, PsyD, MA

Assistant Director & Instructional Designer

Dr. Kelli Dunlap is a clinical psychologist, game designer, and mental health advocate whose work sits at the intersection of games, psychology, and community care. She is a Researcher-in-Residence at American University and experienced practitioner of mental health programming for the gaming community. Kelli serves as Assistant Director and Instructional Designer for the DLC Leadership Program, leading the development of the program's curriculum architecture, module design, and the frameworks that structure how content is taught and applied.

Executive Summary

The pilot of the DLC Leadership Program launched May 4th, 2026. The pilot cohort brought together 84 participants from across the globe, including moderators, community managers, trust and safety professionals, researchers, and informal leaders who together represent the full spectrum of digital leadership in games today.

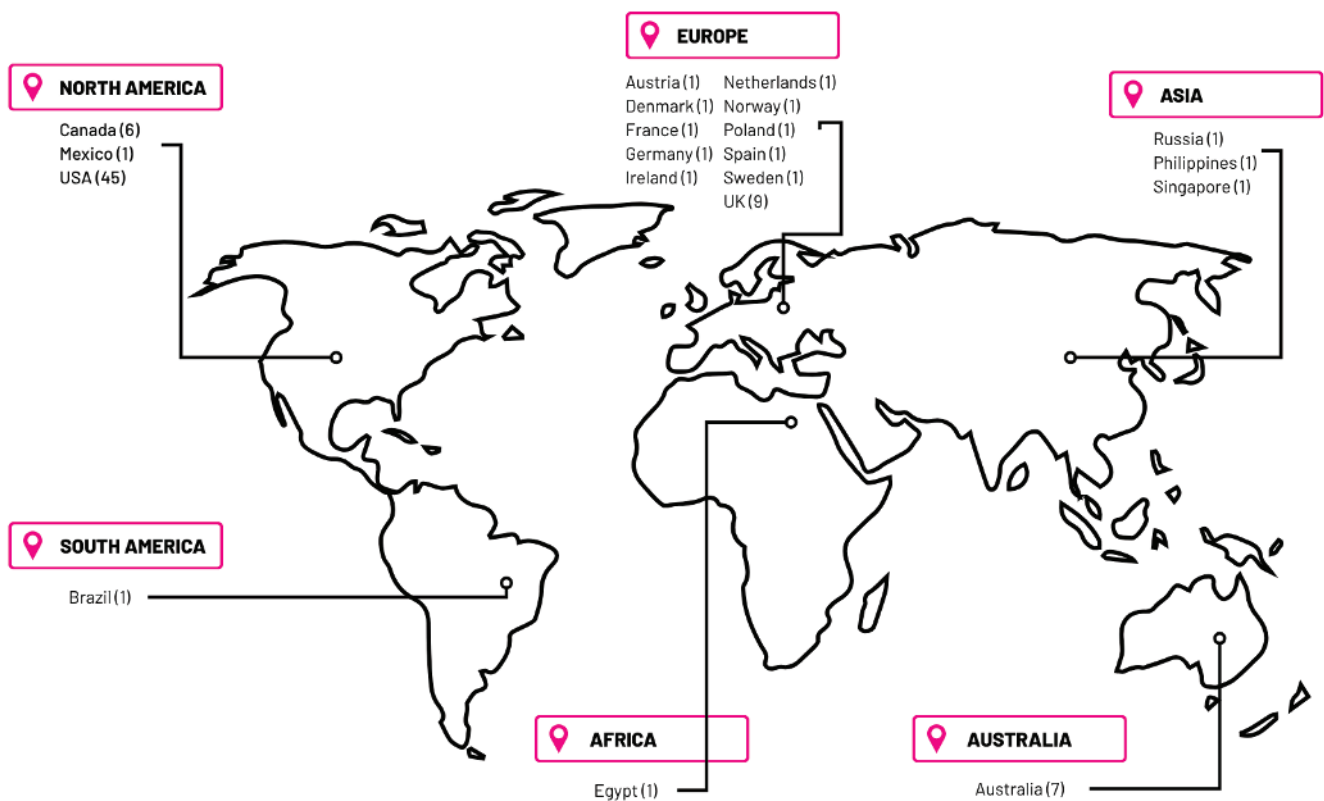
The pre-assessment data from this group of digital leaders tells a clear and compelling story: this cohort is experienced, highly educated, and deeply committed to their communities, yet the vast majority have received little or no formal training for the work they do. They are largely self-taught, operating without institutional support, and navigating increasingly high-stakes environments primarily alone.

For many in this cohort, the DLC Leadership Program is the first structured, evidence-based resource that speaks directly to their work, their values, and their needs.



Pilot Participants: At A Glance

▶ **84 Participants, 20 Countries, 6 Continents**



200,000+

community members collectively reached by pilot participants

Participants come from 20 countries across 6 continents, with North America most represented (63%), followed by Europe (23%) and Oceania (8%). The ages of the participants range from 15 to 59, with an average age of 36 years. The experience of the group ranges from a high schooler running their first digital community to a practitioner with nearly 20 years in the field; however, most are mid-career professionals.

80%

hold at least a bachelor's degree;
16.9% hold doctoral/professional degrees

81%

are active digital leaders,
most leading multiple communities

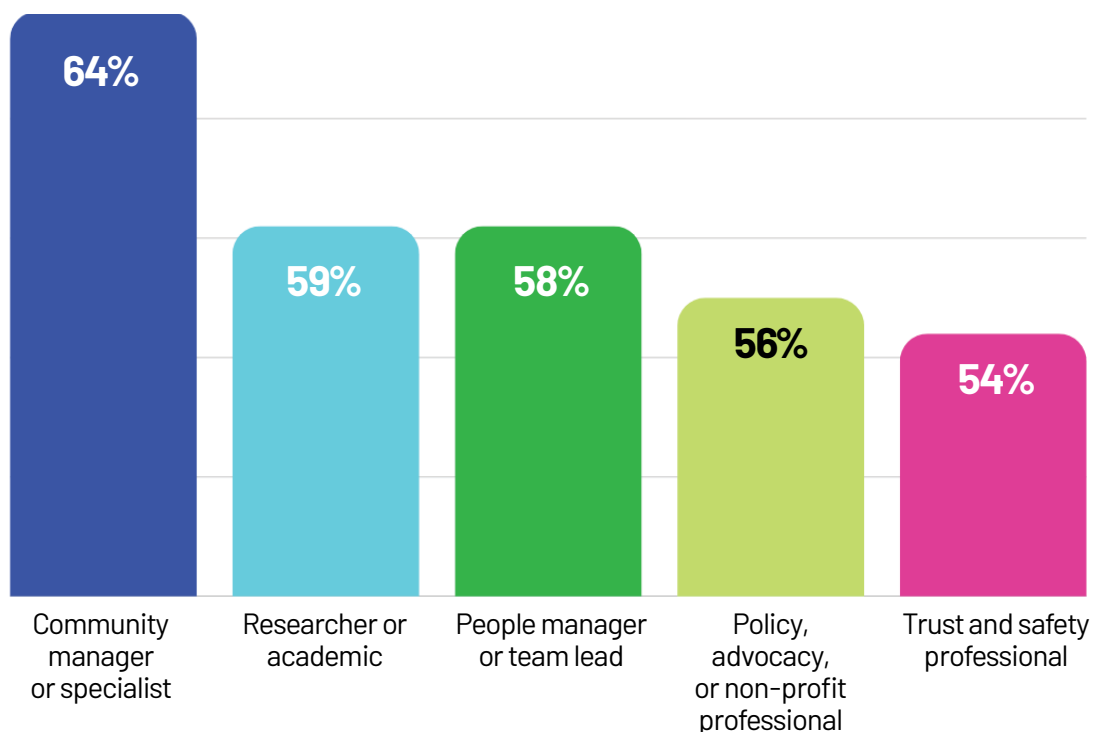
65%

lead communities with more than
250 members

22%

lead communities with more than
10,000 members

The most common roles held by participants:



A Clear Need for the DLC Leadership Program

A highly educated field with almost no purpose-built training

While most pilot participants hold university degrees, nearly half (48%) have received no or very little formal training specifically for their digital leadership work. Even advanced degrees do not cover the skills needed to do this work as no formal pathway exists to teach them. Participants have filled this gap themselves through trial and error, informal networks, and self-directed study.

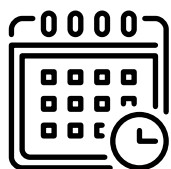
Third-party training exists but does not go far enough

Most (61%) of the participants reported that they accessed some form of third-party professional development to help fill this gap, but when asked about the specific competency areas covered in the DLC pilot curriculum, uptake drops sharply. In no single topic area covered by the pilot curriculum do even half the cohort report prior training. The training market has not met the growing needs of our digital leaders.

The barriers are structural

Participants identified three dominant barriers to accessing training – time and workload constraints (69%), lack of awareness of what is available (58%), and cost (55%). A further 37% cited lack of employer support. The DLC program addresses all of these barriers – it is free, purpose-built, and specifically designed for the realities of this workforce.

Major Barriers to Accessing Training



TIME AND WORKLOAD (69%)



COST (55%)



LACK OF AWARENESS (55%)



LACK OF EMPLOYER SUPPORT (55%)

"These questions made me realize how I've never been a part of a program like this before. As someone thrust into the position of a digital leader with no formal training, I'm looking forward to seeing where my gaps are."

- Pilot Participant

Confidence Without Foundation

Most participants have never received formal training for the work they do every day

In the pre-assessment, the participants were asked to report how much training they have already received across the eight curriculum topics covered in the DLC pilot curriculum. The most common level of formal training reported for these topics was “none.” Notably, participants’ confidence in these same areas was consistently higher, suggesting they have developed self-assurance through experience and practice alone.

Experience builds confidence (but confidence doesn’t equal competence)

However, confidence is a measure of how capable people believe themselves to be, not how capable they are. Research consistently shows that people who learn informally (particularly without structured feedback, standardized benchmarks, or exposure to best practice) may develop confidence that is not fully grounded in skill. Participants may feel they are coping because they have found ways to manage, not because they have been properly equipped.

Operational security stands out as a particular gap in participants’ knowledge and confidence. Many participants (43%) reported no formal training in this area and over half (53%) rated their confidence at 1 or 2 out of 5. It is the topic where neither training nor confidence is well established, which is a meaningful signal about where the greatest risk lies.

Why They Joined: The Demand Is Real

Most leaders joined to build skills they've been learning without formal support

When asked why they were participating in the DLC Leadership Program, eight motivational themes emerged with most responses touching on more than one.

Participants joined the DLC Leadership program because they...

- wanted to learn and develop skills (70%)
- sought peer networking and connection with others who understand the work (51%)
- were motivated by community safety and harm reduction (37%)
- wanted to contribute their own expertise back to the field (30%)
- were drawn by the research-grounded, evidence-based approach (25%)
- sought formal recognition and credentialing for work done informally (21%)

Leaders are seeking recognition for work that has long been taken for granted

The dominant motivational thread is not just skill-building, it is legitimization. Participants described a field that is largely invisible to formal institutions, where knowledge is passed informally, expertise goes unrecognized, and practitioners work without a professional identity to point to. The DLC program offers something the market has not - a structured, evidence-based framework that takes this work seriously.

What Makes a Good Digital Leader?

Clear norms, honest communication, and safety (not hierarchy or technical control)

Participants were asked to describe good digital leadership in their own words. The responses were notably consistent and directly align with what we have built into the pilot for the DLC curriculum.

The five most prominent themes that emerged are:

- Clear rules, norms, and expectations (64%)
- Transparency and communication (59%)
- Safety and harm prevention (58%)
- Listening and responsiveness (56%)
- Empathy, care, and emotional intelligence (54%)

Notably, these are not the traits of a manager, they are the traits of a community steward. Someone who shows up consistently, holds space for conflict, builds trust over time, and keeps the most vulnerable members safe. Participants described digital leadership as fundamentally relational and ethical, not hierarchical or technical.

“Good digital community leadership is really about trust — building it, maintaining it, and knowing what to do when it breaks down.”

– Pilot Participant

“ These are not traits of a manager, they are the traits of a community steward. ”

Leadership is seen as fundamentally relational and ethical

The values that participants identify as “good leadership” map nearly 1:1 onto the DLC pilot curriculum. Creating community guidelines addresses the near-universal emphasis on clear norms. De-escalation techniques operationalize handling conflict calmly and fairly. Preventing online harm and bystander intervention training speak directly to those who framed good leadership as fundamentally safety-oriented. Ethical leadership as a module captures the values-based, relational model that runs through all of these themes.

The self-care gap deserves special attention

Self-care and wellbeing was the most commonly identified training gap across open-ended responses. Yet in participants’ own definitions of good leadership, self-care was rarely named as leaders focused almost entirely on their communities’ wellbeing, not their own. The DLC curriculum’s dedicated self-care module is a strategic acknowledgment that this work takes a real toll, and that sustainable leadership requires practitioners to attend to themselves, not only their members.

“Honestly, I just really want to be in the room with other practitioners who get it.”

– Pilot Participant

How Needed is the Program?

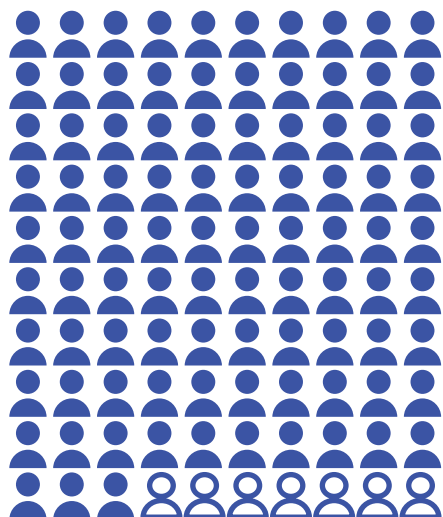
"The lack of standardization and compassion from within the gaming industry has me so excited for this endeavour. I want to lend my experience where I can."

- Pilot Participant

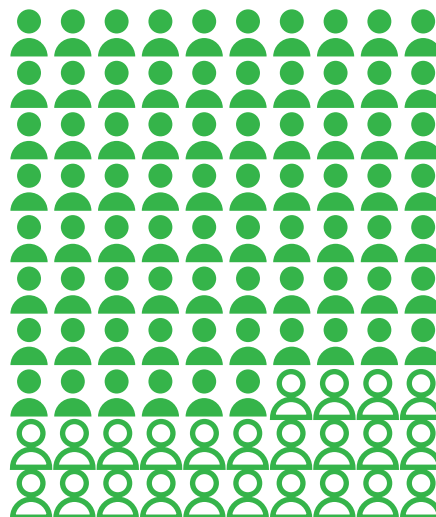
Not a single participant rated the program as unnecessary

Participants were asked to rate how necessary programs like the DLC Leadership Program are for both professional (e.g., community managers, paid moderators) and informal digital leaders (e.g., guild/clan leaders, volunteer moderators) on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very necessary). Not a single participant rated the program as unnecessary.

93% of participants said that training was absolutely essential for professional leaders.



76% of participants said that training was absolutely essential for non-professional leaders.



A Peek into the Pilot Program

Nine modules, three pillars: Development, Leadership, and Community

The DLC Leadership Program is organized around three pillars (Development, Leadership, and Community), each addressing a distinct dimension of what it means to lead digital spaces well. The pilot curriculum includes nine modules across two formats: three Foundational Modules (90 minutes each, structured across three 30-minute sections) and six Masterclass Modules (30 minutes each, focused on immediate application). All modules include a professionally produced video, written materials, and a practical takeaway activity.

Built by and with the practitioners who do this work

Every module in the pilot was developed in collaboration with organizational partners and subject matter experts, including practitioners, researchers, and professionals who bring direct, lived expertise to the content. The curriculum is not built from the outside looking in; it is built by and with the people who do this work.

"Having this program, the information, the support, the camaraderie, is game-changing. It feels like all the hard-won insights, the learned-it-the-hard-way best practices have been captured, organized, and given with gratitude to the community leaders doing the work today and those who will step up in the future."

- Kelli Dunlap, Assistant Director, DLC Leadership Program

A Peek into the Pilot Program

Every module includes video, written materials, and a hands-on activity

Creating Player-Facing Support Resources

Course track **Masterclass**



Course Takeaways

- Players can spot inauthentic, corporate-style content almost instantly. When resources feel misaligned with community norms, they get ignored.
- Every community has both primary and secondary audiences. Designing for one without considering the other can undermine your efforts before they start.
- Effective player-facing resources are built on intentional design: audience awareness, authentic framing, collaboration with community members and subject matter experts, and internal team buy-in.
- Framing sensitive support content through a gameplay or performance lens increases uptake without compromising the message.
- Resources that meet players where they are, in language and tone they recognize, are far more likely to help people actually thrive.



83.33%

Course Content

- | | |
|---|--------|
| ☐ Introduction: Creating Player Facing Support Resources | 1 of 4 |
| ♡ 0 | |
| ☒ Foundations: Creating Player Facing Support Resources | 2 of 4 |
| ♡ 0 | |
| ☒ Application: Creating Player Facing Support Resources | 3 of 4 |
| ♡ 0 | |
| ☒ Activity: Creating Player Facing Support Resources | 4 of 4 |
| ♡ 0 • Has Quiz | |

Additional Content

- | | |
|---|--------|
| ☒ Pilot Feedback | 1 of 2 |
| ♡ 0 • Has Quiz | |
| ☒ Further Reading & Resources | 2 of 2 |
| ♡ 0 | |

The DLC Pilot Cohort Instructors



Rachel Kowert, PhD

University of Cambridge
Crafting Community Codes of
Conduct & Bystander Intervention



Kelli Dunlap, PsyD

American University
Self-Care for Community Leaders,
& De-Escalation



Victoria Tran

InnerSloth
Vibe Setting for Healthy Communities



Matt Soeth

Thriving in Games Group
Creating Player-Facing Resources



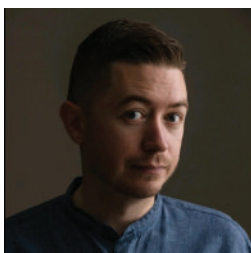
Celia Hodent, PhD

EthicalGames.org
Ethical Leadership in Online Communities



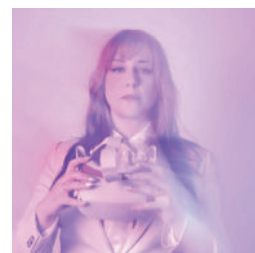
Maria Tamellini

GamerSafer
Protecting Players from Harm



Henry Adams

Resolver
Foundations of Operational Security



Ashley Blake

vrCAVE & ElsewhereNFP
Ethical Leadership in Online Communities

PILLAR 1: DEVELOPMENT

Skills and knowledge to build communities.

De-Escalation

Kelli Dunlap, PsyD | American University

What de-escalation is and why it matters, the practical techniques that work in digital community contexts, and how to respond when a situation crosses into crisis. Participants leave with a working toolkit for managing conflict before it escalates and a framework for knowing when to escalate to outside support.

Crafting Community Codes of Conduct

Rachel Kowert, PhD | University of Cambridge

An introduction to the EFFECT Framework for building community guidelines that are clear, enforceable, and genuinely community-owned. Participants learn how to move beyond generic rulebooks toward norms that reflect their community's specific values and needs.

Operational Security

Henry Adams | Resolver

How to protect yourself and your community online. Covers the fundamentals of digital security hygiene, threat awareness, and the practical steps community leaders can take to reduce risk for themselves and the people they serve. Particularly relevant for leaders managing public-facing communities or navigating adversarial actors.

Self-Care for Community Leaders

Kelli Dunlap, PsyD | American University

Recognizing the signs of burnout, setting sustainable boundaries, and building practices that support long-term wellbeing. This module re-frames self-care not as a personal luxury but as a professional responsibility — one that directly shapes a leader's capacity to show up for their community.

Sample Course Activity

Activity: Creating Your Personal Recharge Plan

Back to: [Self-Care for Community Leaders](#)

♡ 0

Now that we know what self-care is, why it matters, and the different ways we can practice it, it's time to make a plan and put it into action. This first part of the activity is 100% for you – you will not be asked to share anything until after clicking "take quiz" button.

Using a [pre-made PDF template](#), a piece of paper, or a document on your computer, write down at least two examples of self-care activities you enjoy currently or would like to start in the future for each of the types of self-care (i.e. emotional, mental, spiritual, etc).

[Download Personal Recharge Plan PDF](#)

PILLAR 2: LEADERSHIP

Skills and knowledge to lead and guide communities.

Ethical Leadership

Celia Hodent | Ethicalgames.org, Ashley Blake | ElsewhereNFP, Rachel Kowert, PhD | University of Cambridge

Applying cognitive psychology and ethical frameworks to the everyday decisions digital leaders face. This module explores how bias, context, and community dynamics shape leadership choices, and offers practical tools for making decisions that are both values-grounded and community-centered.

PILLAR 3: COMMUNITY

Skills and knowledge to sustain communities.

Community Vibe Setting

Victoria Tran | Innersloth

How to actively shape and sustain community culture using the RENEW framework. Covers the practices that make community feel welcoming, the signals that culture is shifting, and how to intervene before norms erode. Draws on direct experience building one of gaming's most-watched community cultures.

Digital Bystander Intervention

Rachel Kowert, PhD | University of Cambridge

Elizabeth Newbury, PhD | Christchurch Call

The psychology behind why bystanders hesitate — and the practical strategies that activate them. Participants learn how to build communities where members look out for each other, reducing reliance on top-down moderation and distributing safety across the community itself.

Preventing Online and Offline Harm

Maria Tamellini | GamerSafer

Recognizing the early warning signs of escalating harm and responding effectively before situations become crises. Covers the spectrum from low-level toxicity to serious real-world risk, with practical frameworks for knowing when and how to act.

Creating Player-Facing Resources

Matt Soeth | Thriving in Games Group

How to design community resources — guides, FAQs, safety pages, on-boarding materials — that actually work for members, not just for the rulebook. Covers accessibility, clarity, and how to meet community members where they are rather than where you want them to be.

Moving Forward

These gaps are not unique to this cohort – they are the norm across the field

The DLC Leadership Program pilot cohort is not a group of people who need to be convinced that this work matters. They are already doing it – often unpaid, almost always without formal support, and in environments that are becoming more complex and higher-stakes every year. What they need is what the DLC provides: rigorous, evidence-based, purpose-built training that takes their work seriously, connects them with peers who understand it, and gives them a professional identity to stand behind.

The program is reaching the right people with the right content at the right moment

The pre-assessment data shows that the program is reaching exactly the right people with exactly the right content at exactly the right moment. But reaching them is only the beginning.

The question is no longer whether this work is necessary, it is how this program can grow

The gaps this cohort has named are not small. They are the daily realities of tens of thousands of digital leaders worldwide who are, right now, figuring it out alone. The question is no longer whether this work is necessary. The data answers that definitively. The question now is how far and how fast the program can grow to meet the scale of the need.

Phase 2 Curriculum Development

The DLC Leadership Program exists because of the people who built it with us. Every module in the pilot curriculum was shaped by organizational partners and subject matter experts who brought their expertise, their networks, and their trust to something that did not yet exist. That collaborative foundation is not incidental to what the DLC is, it is what the DLC is.

We are now beginning to develop the second round of curriculum, and we are looking for partners who want to be part of building it. What that looks like is entirely up to you. Participation can mean:

- Adapting an existing training or resource you've already developed for the DLC format
- Co-producing a new module in collaboration with the DLC team
- Building something entirely new around a topic area you know is underserved
- Contributing subject matter expertise to a module being led by another partner

There is no single model. The program is designed to be flexible enough to meet partners at their preferred level of involvement, whether that means lending your expertise for a single session or co-owning a module from the ground up.

Filming for round two is tentatively scheduled for July 2025 in New York City, timed around the Games for Change Festival (July 21–22, 2026). If you are planning to be in New York for G4C or in the area that summer, we would love to find a way to bring you into this.

This program only works because it is a community of practice. The people who build it are the same kind of people it is built for – practitioners who believe this field deserves better infrastructure, and who are willing to help create it.

Round 2: A Call for Partners

Interested in becoming a Program Partner?

As an organizational supporter of the DLC Leadership Program, you already share our belief that digital leaders deserve better. If you'd like to deepen that commitment, we hope that you will consider taking it further as a Program Partner.

Becoming a Program Partner is a commitment to the health of our digital ecosystems by ensuring that the people who build, protect, and support online communities have a dedicated space to learn, grow, and care for themselves in that work. Better supported leaders build more sustainable, resilient communities, and more sustainable communities mean more engaged, community members. For organizations depending on those communities to succeed, this is not just mission-driven but it makes good business sense. As the data in this report reflects, digital leaders themselves recognize this kind of structured support as critical. Program Partners help make that possible for everyone. The strongest digital cultures aren't built by any one studio, platform, or community, but are built together in a community of practice. The DLC Leadership Program has already built the infrastructure that makes this possible. Program Partners help ensure it stays strong, grows, and remains free for every digital leader who needs it.

Program Partners are organizations that contribute annually to help sustain and grow the program, keeping it free and accessible for digital leaders everywhere. In return, partners receive:

- Priority cohort placement, with guaranteed seats reserved in each intake for members of your organization or community
- Priority opportunities to contribute to the curriculum, including masterclass content and other program development opportunities
- Recognition on the DLC website and in program materials as an organization investing in the future of online leadership

"The DLC Leadership Program did not arrive too early or too late. It arrived when the field was ready to receive it, and when the people doing this work were ready to ask for more."

- Rachel Kowert, PhD, Founder, DLC Leadership Program

**If you are interested
in discussing what
partnership could look
like for your organization,
please reach out directly.
We would love to hear
from you.**

THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS & SUPPORTERS

FOUNDING
PARTNER

