Next Level
Program Evaluation
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FORA
NETWORK FOR CHANGE

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AND implementation inc.

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taking you from so what to now what

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Executive Summary

Fora is a centre of excellence for young women's leadership development. Through signature upskilling programs, like Next Level, Fora makes strategic investments in young women to place them in positions of leadership and change-making. Next Level was Fora's response to the disruption to career advancement for young women caused by COVID-19. The pilot program launched online in November 2021 and concluded it first cohort at the end of February 2022 with 14 participants. Through workshops and parallel coaching sessions, the program aimed to provide young women and gender diverse youth with leadership and social entrepreneurship training to help them pivot or advance in their careers.

To support Fora's efforts, an evaluation was designed and commissioned in early 2022. Blending formative and summative approaches, this evaluation followed up on priority outcomes indicated by the Future Skills program and supported organizational learning for Fora. Findings demonstrate that Next Level was a positive experience overall for those involved. Much like any innovation, there were some bumps in the road to developing and piloting Next Level. It took more time and effort than anticipated to finesse the structure and content of the program to meet young women where they were at amid a global pandemic. Nevertheless, participants and coaches alike found the program to be impactful. Participants enjoyed and benefitted from a focus on social-emotional learning, which helped them to boost their confidence at work and with passion projects or side hustles. Coaches appreciated the opportunity to give back to their professional communities and support the next generation of young women.

Lessons from the pilot stage suggest that a future iteration of the program would benefit from:
- Establishing and communicating clear learning goals and session content ahead of the program to help set and maintain reasonable learning expectations
- Developing or acquiring curriculum wherein Fora owns the copyright to promote sustainability and adaptability of intellectual property
- Improving communication between a Next Level coordinator and the coaches to ensure that coaches are informed of progress, content covered, and learning targets and better able to anticipate mentees' questions and accordingly keep them on track
- Balancing confidence and skill-building curricula by adding hands-on activities, case studies, and group problem-solving elements that (a) invite participants to apply content to real-world examples, and (b) offer facilitators and Fora staff insights into participants' learning
- Facilitating peer networking opportunities (ideally in-person) for the cohort to bond, share resources, and build lasting professional relationships

Introduction to Next Level

Next Level was Fora's response to the disruption to career advancement for young women and gender diverse youth employed in the hospitality sector caused by COVID-19. The pilot program launched online in November 2021 and concluded it first cohort with a total of 14 participants at the end of February 2022. All participants identified as women. Upon enrolling, 53% of participants had completed an undergraduate degree (n=6) or higher (n=2), 13% of participants had completed college or CEGEP (n=2), and 27% of participants had completed high school (n=4). One participant finished university during the program.

Just under half of participants worked part-time (n=7) while 40% worked full-time (n=6), a few were not employed (n=2). Just under half of participants were employed in hospitality (n=5) and retail (n=2) while the remaining participants were employed elsewhere.
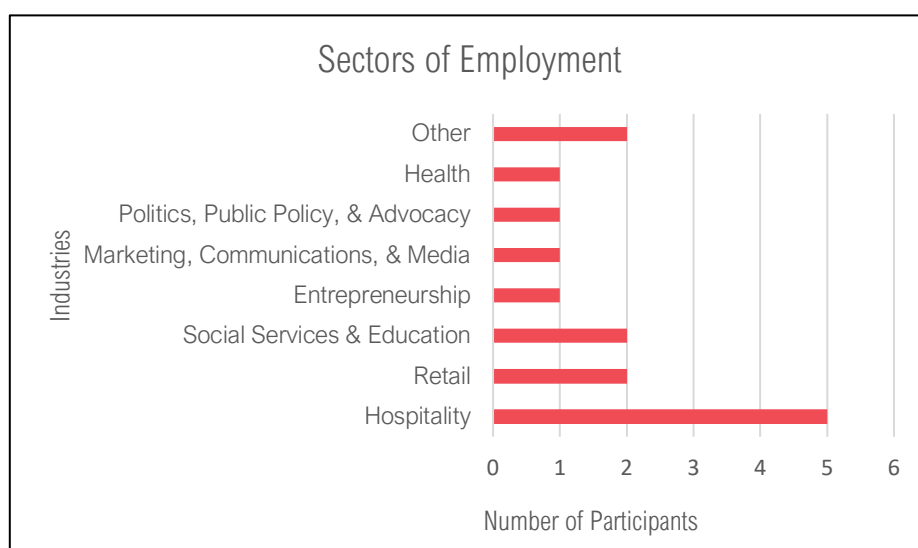
Across four months, the program delivered weekly online workshops aimed at providing young women with leadership and social entrepreneurship training. Monthly coaching from either a professional coach or an experienced entrepreneur offered participants meaningful mentorship and access to industry connections and insights. Content to help participants navigate a changing economy and new professional opportunities focused on:

- Leadership & confidence
- Communications
- Business literacy
- Job interviewing
- Networking

To develop the program content and focus, Fora staff consulted with young women advisors – three of whom were part of the Fora community and who have experience working in hospitality. Early

discussions contributed to the decision to blend business skills with social-emotional learning. As the pandemic surged on, it became clear that the initial vision of supporting young women to transition out of hospitality and into social entrepreneurship was ambitious. As a leadership-focused organization and not a business incubator, Fora staff were concerned about their ability to help young people build a business in a volatile economy. Borrowing from the wisdom of Fora's flagship Girls on Boards program, staff pivoted the program towards leadership skill-building with the hope of supporting participants to develop transferrable skills that could be helpful in advancing within their current workplaces or exploring new business opportunities.

Evaluation Overview & Methodology

Working collaboratively with the Fora team, the evaluation was designed around the following aims:

1. Identify the short-term outcomes and/or impacts of the Next Level program for staff, facilitators/coaches, and participants

2. Understand participants' experiences of the program relative to: (a) satisfaction/enjoyment of program content and structure, (b) learning goals, (c) career benefits

3. Identify unique benefits and strengths of Next Level with respect to (a) program development (iterative shifts, adaptation, decision-making processes), and (b) content and structure (curriculum, activities, format)

4. Capture lessons learned in developing/delivering Next Level and identify opportunities to: (a) improve internal processes, (b) enhance content/structure, (c) address barriers preventing meaningful engagement, (d) advocate for economic inclusion of young women and gender diverse people in the post-covid recovery plan

5. Capture participants' lived experiences with COVID-19 as it relates to professional or personal challenges (or opportunities)

With these goals in mind, the evaluators sought to answer the following questions put forth by the Future Skills program:

1. How did Next Level change during delivery?

2. What are key successes and opportunities to improve Next Level program design and delivery?

3. Which outcomes from the FSC Common Outcomes Framework, or network project indicators are most relevant to Next Level?

4. Which aspects of Next Level are core and which ones are adaptable?

5. What type of organizations and resources or features are key to delivering Next Level successfully?

6. How has COVID affected their overall experience of the program?

Based on the evaluation aims, the following methods were selected to answer evaluation evaluations and promote credibility:

Pre (n=15) and post (n=11) surveys for Next Level participants (designed and implemented by Fora)

Qualitative interviews with interested Next Level participants (n= 4), including a unique photo elicitation activity to solicit deeper reflections on program impacts

Qualitative interviews with a subset of coaches (n= 3)

Qualitative interviews with Next Level staff (n=1)

Insights gleaned from data were then used to reflect on expected program outcomes and draft relevant, feasible, and actionable recommendations for future Next Level programming.

Findings

Changes & Adaptations

Social Entrepreneurship vs. Leadership & Confidence

The most significant change to the proposed program was Fora's pivot from social entrepreneurship training to leadership training and confidence-building. Prior to starting the program, staff decided to narrow the scope and focus less on business incubation. As the workshops rolled out, staff further narrowed the scope to better meet participants where they were at in terms of capacity to make career changes. A focus on combatting imposter syndrome and boosting communication and self-advocacy skills was prioritized.

This change was well-received by participants. The initial social entrepreneurship/business incubator idea, though aspirational, felt out-of-reach for the participants. Early in their professional lives, young women interviewed commonly felt that the commitment to becoming an entrepreneur was

overwhelming. The focus on building transferrable professional skills, with the option to create a side-hustle felt more appropriate for their age and career stage. When reflecting on where they would be in the next six months, participants discussed making decisions about going back to school, applying for internships, travelling, making the decision to stay at or leave their current job, assessing their interests or ambitions, and figuring out who they are as young adults. No one interviewed felt emotionally, professionally, or financially ready to start a business – especially when the landscape of work changed so drastically for them during the pandemic.

> With a sustained focus on elevating the voices and self-advocacy skills of young people, Next Level could be refined as guiding young professionals to take the *next step*.

One interviewee explained that Next Level could embrace this direction even further. In a future iteration, workshops centred on transferrable skills could invite young women and gender diverse youth to "sample" different career options. Applying skills in different case studies or career contexts could help young people understand where they could go or how they could imagine a more flexible and creative career trajectory. As many interviewees explained, people don't commit to one career path anymore. Youth use their skills to iteratively reinvent themselves in-tune with the ebbs and flows of industry and their own budding interests. With a sustained focus on elevating the voices and self-advocacy skills of young people, **Next Level could be refined as guiding young professionals to take the** *next step*.

COVID-19

The pandemic left much to be desired for participants, staff, and coaches alike. Consensus across all groups was that face-to-face relationship-building with peers, facilitators, and mentors would have been preferred to the online version. The looming fatigue and anxiety about the future brought-on by the pandemic negatively impacted participants' ability to focus and prioritize learning. While flexibility that staff offered participants with self-paced learning using recorded sessions was appreciated, many participants struggled to prioritize attendance. Accordingly, coaches and staff felt that they needed to consistently reassess their expectations for participation. Nevertheless, the online platform proved useful in many cases. Participants with busy schedules and competing responsibilities found that the online workshops with recordings made it easy to tuck in a recording on breaks between shifts, other classes, or at-home responsibilities. This allowed for participants to access content that they could not have been able should in-person or real-time participation be a requirement. These options felt fair to participants who, despite longing for more meaningful connections, felt that **Fora lived up to its promise of accessibility and flexibility**.

Across interviews with participants, coaches, and staff, Fora's commitment to elevating diverse young women was felt. Participants commented on how meaningful it was to see other young women, just like them, as learners, facilitators, and mentors. Reflecting on the challenges of tokenism and seeing diversity as a buzzword in other spaces, participants described Fora's approach to representation as genuine and impactful. Participants also unanimously described an interest in staying in-touch with Fora through other avenues. Coaches interviewed expressed interested in staying on as coaches for other

> Participants described Fora's approach to representation as genuine and impactful.

programs or a future iteration of Next Level. All participants interviewed and 100% of survey respondents expressed interest in staying connected with the Fora community. Many also described wanting to apply for one of Fora's flagship programs (e.g., Summit or Girls on Boards). For young women who had previously and unsuccessfully applied to Fora programming, Next Level was seen as an opportunity to get involved with Fora as a steppingstone to more programming.

Key Outcomes

Learning Outcomes

Enhanced social-emotional skills related to effective communication, leadership, team-work, and self-advocacy were the key outcomes for Next Level participants. Similarly, participants indicated increased confidence in speaking up, navigating career options, and making decisions. For example, 91% of survey respondents (10 out of 11) indicated feeling knowledgeable about:

Professional communication

Negotiation strategies

Steps needed to transition careers

Different career paths available

All survey respondents indicated feeling at confident about making decisions regarding their careers and 82% (9 out of 11 respondents) indicated feeling confident about transitioning industries.

> "The second picture I was running a cocktail party for 75 people. I divided the tasks and trust people and let them do whatever they want as long as they do their job right. I think that's the huge difference. Now, I can trust people more in my team I can let them to speak…[I] know how to talk I'm not a try not to be rude. I know like even how I should talk with different people at workplace. I know I cannot have the same language for everyone. I think that's a huge change that I see after working with Fora." – Interview participant

For example, Tara (who invited the evaluators to use her name and photos) explained that she was not a confident manager before enrolling in Next Level. She took on too much, felt overwhelmed with the pressure to perform, and ended up making herself sick from exhaustion. Communication and leadership training from Next Level taught her to trust her team. She learned that by delegating tasks and communicating her expectations appropriately, she could let her team be more creative and take on more responsibility. Understanding how to accept help allowed her to blossom as a manager.

The negotiation workshop proved to be impactful for many participants who benefitted from new skills to advocate for themselves. One participant explained the importance of both talking about systemic injustice and practicing skills to break patterns of silence.

Artist Statement: The two photos represent leadership and communication. The first photo is colourful and shows me with a good smile. But, I'm not happy. I'm tired and was under a lot of pressure. I was focused on doing everything instead of letting people help me. The second photo in black and white is where I'm at now. Since finishing the Next Level program, I learned a better way to communicate with my team. This is me after I trusted them to take responsibility for their tasks, be creative, and let them do what makes them

> "A lot of reasons women don't get their salaries up to the standards of men is underlining systematic issues. A lot of it is just that society believes that women just have more on their plates when it comes to their families. Women feel uncomfortable having a voice and voicing out concerns about their salary. For me, [negotiating] was something I'm still scared to do. But, once I was in the session I got a lot of tips and techniques and more of a formula. The whole idea of like, no I have to speak up is definitely more on my radar. It's one big highlight for me." – Interview participant

Another participant surprised herself in her ability to confront her boss about a working culture that was negatively impacting her colleagues. As she explained,

"The negotiation workshop was a great workshop that I had so I can remember. This happened two days after the workshop…A couple of days after this workshop, the people who I was supervised had problem with [restaurant] owner. I'm assistant manager. I'm not in charge of bringing up this topic to the owner. The general manager doesn't want to talk about this issue with anyone. I could see people got kind of frustrated 'cause it happened constantly. And, I was like okay maybe I should go and negotiate. I go to the owner's office I was like, 'you know like I appreciate all the things that you are doing you're doing best, I totally realize that you are under pressure. But, that shouldn't let you treat like people not properly.' At the beginning I was scared. Then I was like, yeah, I should do it for my team. You cannot deliver a happy service once your team are not happy! It was a really good that conversation went perfectly. Once I back and I close the door I was like I'm proud of myself." – Interview participant

Combatting imposter syndrome was another key learning outcome identified by participants. 91% of survey respondents (10 out of 11 respondents) indicated both feeling knowledgeable about tools to navigate imposter syndrome and confident speaking up. Similarly, interviewees easily identified how to integrate communication and negotiation skills as well as enhanced confidence into their existing work. More technical skills regarding financial literacy, leadership, side hustles, and business readiness were seen as aspirational rather than directly applicable in their current contexts. While the content was well-received by participants, few indicated a readiness, time, or motivation to apply professional skills in real-life. For example, when asked how she had used content or skills from workshops in her professional life, one participant explained that the content was illuminating, but she was not ready to act on it yet. She described the content like candles – it helped her to see different professional paths, but she was not on the path or holding the candle.

Artist Statement: The light is there waiting to be discovered. I didn't know what it was inside of me until I realized it. Topics in the workshops and conversations with my mentor illuminated things that I might not otherwise have a chance to see.

Professional Outcomes

While professional outcomes varied between participants, most explained that they are too early in their careers to see a difference. The common outcome shared between participants was having a better sense of options and possibilities for their professional lives. Indeed, 100% of survey respondents indicated feeling confident navigating different types of jobs in their lifetime and 91% (10 out of 11 respondents) indicated feeling confident identifying professional passions and interests. For example, one participant tried out a side-hustle during the Next Level program and proved to herself that she could pursue the idea. Another explained that being part of workshops and getting into the rhythm of learning again inspired her to pursue

Artist Statement: The quesadilla represents someone who is full of opportunity and willing and excited to explore, learn and take up space. They are a little messy, but vibrant and complex with a lot of layers to unpack.

higher education. She is now in the process of applying to university to pursue a business management-related degree. Similarly, one participant finishing an internship explained that skills learned through Next Level would help her to either negotiate a new contract at the end of her placement or decide on a new direction for work.

One participant eloquently illustrated that the Next Level program helped her to clarify where she is at now in her professional life and celebrate what she has been able to accomplish. She was also better able to articulate professional aspirations for her future. In unpacking the layers of the quesadilla, the participant beamed,

"This is who I am now and who I'm going to be in the short term. You look at the photo and see there's just so much colour and I think that's going to become like someone with voice, someone who wants. For me, that was like representing a voice from the colours like the confidence to speak up and do things... I don't have to like figure it all out I have so many opportunities and so many things I can do…If you think about all the flavors inside of a quesadilla, thinking that the layers could potentially symbolize the different personality like different factors that have changed and developed." – Interview participant

When thinking about other aspects of the photo, she reflected on the fullness of the plate and the importance of taking up space saying,

> "I'm getting to walk into the room that people don't know who I am and people are going to respect that I'm equal and I'm going to advocate for myself and advocate for just my peers. That's what I wanted to be as a professional. I definitely feel like that's in my short term, I definitely feel like my own in a room with professionals and I'm not as timid." – Interview participant

The same participant when on to explain her professional aspirations for the future.

> "I've always pictured myself working in a corporate office dressed up to the nines. Super stylish, clean sophisticated, I see someone who's polished - they got everything figured out. That's what I want. I'm hoping when I get into my 30s I kinda figured out who I am. Maybe that's just like the single colour on the donut. Just solidifies that there's all these roots and all these doors open. I already tried the doors and I'm ready. This is where I want to be as a person and this is where I want to go with my career and I'm kind of streamlined and have a path already defined for myself. That's what the doughnut represents. I think the filling represents being fulfilled - with my desires, of who I am, and what I want to do…and emotionally fulfilled like I have really good like mental health." – Interview participant

Artist Statement: The doughnut represents someone who is sophisticated, structured, and beautiful. They are fancy and fulfilled. Because of their confidence, they have the freedom to just explore honestly and without worry

Another participant explained wanting to emanate, "girl boss energy" through financial stability, an independent lifestyle, and a career that is meaningful and impactful. When asked how Next Level may have helped to plant seeds that could blossom towards her career ambitions, the participant explained that she wasn't sure what tangible skills she gained to help her achieve her vision. Rather, she described that Next Level helped her make space for personal reflection and helped her to think about her values, professional goals, and what she wants in life. For young women and gender diverse youth entering their professional lives in a volatile economy, **the importance of having a space to dream and put language**

Artist Statement: One day, I will be in full bloom. It's reassuring to know that I'll be ready, and my time will come.

around and skills towards aspirations cannot be understated. For Next Level participants, the program gave them to chance to imagine life beyond a pandemic or cookie-cutter career paths. In preparing for the future of work, whatever that will look like, the confidence to try new skills out and see where they lead is key for young professionals.

Program Successes

The most significant successes of the Next Level programs were related to mentorship, community-building, and confidence-building. Most participants enrolled in the Next Level program because they wanted to access career coaching and a network of supportive peers as well as work on professional confidence-building. Results from the survey and interviews suggest that participants' expectations were met. All the participants were matched

"I would 100% do this program again. I got to meet different people from all backgrounds and it was a very eye opening experience for me. I would recommend it to anyone who want to see what amazing things they are able to accomplish with such a great group of women." – Survey participant.

with a mentor, and many went on to explain that they were impressed with the match in terms of alignment in professional interests and personality traits. All survey respondents identified a clear intention to stay in touch with their coach after the program. Whereas only 27% of participants (4 out of 15 respondents) indicated having a mentor at the start of the program, this increased to 82% (9 out of 11 respondents) by the end. Similarly, most participants found the community-building aspects of the program to be helpful. Almost all participants indicated intentions to

"Overall, I genuinely enjoyed this program and I'm happy I got to participate in it! Prior to joining the program, I was hoping to gain new skills in communication, leadership and confidence, which I believe I was able to achieve to an extent. I've seen growth in myself as I have noticed that I am more proactive and motivated than before, and I hope that I'll continuously grow myself using the skills I gained in the Next Level program." – Survey participant

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stay in touch with their peers following the program, and all participants wanted to continue engaging with the Fora community more broadly. All participants expressed enjoying the workshop content, and felt that exposure to new topics, skills, and techniques helped them to feel more confident as young professionals.

Similarly, coaches enjoyed being a part of the Fora community and having an outlet to give back to a professional community of young women. With a blend of professional coaches and social-purpose business leaders and entrepreneurs, coaches offered a wide range of skills and expertise that fell within their "sweet spot" as one coach explained. Many of the coaches signed up to be a coach because of a deep desire to share their wisdom, expertise, and support with the next generation of young women and gender diverse professionals. Motivated by both altruism and feelings of professional obligation to share knowledge, coaches felt that their expectations were mostly met, and all coaches interviewed indicated a desire to return as a coach should Next Level run again. Some coaches also commented on unexpected, but nevertheless positive, impacts of coaching. Connecting with young professionals and learning about the current professional landscape that the next generation is navigating was helpful for those who both offer professional coaching to, and employ, youth. Insights into youth's experiences was seen as a helpful way of staying up-to-date on the future of work.

> "The most impactful thing for me was exposure to the to my mentee and realizing how challenging it is for certain individuals today to catch a break but also how entrepreneurship is perceived by certain people." - Coach

Opportunities for Growth

Coaching

One of the key features of the Next Level program was individualized coaching with experts. Despite offering expertise to the program, the coaching element was more siloed than coaches expected. With little communication from program staff, **coaches relied on Next Level participants to let them know where they were at in their learning**. This structure was not a barrier to meaningful mentorship for coaches whose participants had concrete business goals and ample time dedicated to the program. But, for coaches of participants with less confidence, capacity to participate, and concrete career goals, the lack of communication from the program made it difficult to effectively coach participants towards clear

learning goals. One participant similarly explained that she felt that the onus was placed on her to explain what she wanted out of the coaching session. This responsibility was intimidating because she didn't know how to ask for help – especially regarding topics she didn't know were going to be part of the program. Instead, she asked for support on things she already knew how to articulate, which did not serve her broader learning goals.

> "I don't have any idea what they did each week or month to month. So having a bit of that would be constructive. I'm not saying it has to be incredibly detailed, like all the slides, it doesn't have to be that much. But some understanding at basic level of what was transpiring I think we go a long way." - Coach

As content shifted towards social/emotional learning related to confidence and leadership, there were some differing interpretations among coaches as to the purpose of coaching sessions. Two coaches explained that the shift in the program's direction was not clearly communicated. Based on program advertising and early communication, they expected to connect with a mentee who was in the retail/hospitality sector, ready to transition careers and at least somewhat familiar with basic business and entrepreneurship concepts. But, in practice, mentees were neither in the same sector nor ready to engage with business strategies/ concepts. One coach explained that many of the ideas that the mentee brought to coaching sessions were out-of-scope for the program (e.g., wanting to become a YouTube influencer), and another coach reflected that the mentee struggled to bring any relevant questions or goals to the session at all. These challenges raised questions for the coach about how (a) participants were recruited and screened, (b) facilitators helped participants to navigate realistic goal-setting and strategizing in session content, and (c) participants were able to apply learning in real-world circumstances.

Some coaches were unphased by the shift and pivoted towards providing mentorship more narrowly focused on confidence-building. While coaches agreed that building confidence among young women is important, some felt that this role became more like a "guidance counsellor" and less like a professional mentor aimed at improving the career prospects and business aspirations of young professionals. This led coaches to establish their own goals and structure for working together with their mentees – independent from the coaching framework and script provided to the coaches. This made it difficult to evaluate the outcomes of coaching because each relationship was unique and not necessarily aligned with the vision of the Next Level program or the content provided in the Coaching Handbook.

Another confusing aspect of the coaching was the orientation. Other than creating a clear expectation and streamlined definition of coaching, coaches did not see much value in the orientation.

Some of the activities felt misplaced. For example, role-playing exercises to build skills in coaching were perceived as awkward and uncomfortable. Additionally, the tone of the orientation did not sit well. The "plea" for professionals to see the value in coaching was seen as unnecessary since everyone had already agreed to become a coach. The evaluators also observed some issues in interviews with coaches that were perhaps not covered during the orientation. Specifically, some coaches had narrow definitions of professionalism, success, and learning that they applied to their mentees without a solid understanding of (or compassion for) institutional/educational barriers, white supremacy working culture norms, and neurodiversity/diversity in learning styles. Better screening of coaches with experience working with diverse youth and supports to help coaches mentor towards more inclusive and meaningful indicators of success may be advantageous. To enhance the orientation, coaches agreed that a kick-off event to set clear expectations would be welcome. Additionally, a parallel event or "meet 'n greet" with Next Level participants to clearly communicate the purpose of coaching and how to best engage with one another would be ideal.

Workshop Content & Structure

Participants were overall satisfied with the content and had few ideas about what else they would want to see covered or what topics were missing. A few participants wanted to see more content related to business and financial literacy to help strengthen the business focus of the program. Participants also explained the importance of having an outlet for the confidence-building aspects of the program. Specifically, they wanted hands-on, problem-solving, and case-study activities grounded in tangible business content. Because the sessions were advertised as workshops, rather than lectures, participants felt that content alone without the opportunity to practice made it challenging to engage with content. Similarly, small group exercises were seen as ideal to both support the application of learning and foster meaningful connections between peers.

Some participants also explained that more facilitated networking or community-building elements would have helped them to connect with peers. Because the sessions were recorded and participants had the option to watch recordings on their own time, attendance was low and opportunities to connect with peers during workshops was inconsistent. This meant that socially motivated learners had to work harder to connect with peers independently of the program, on their own time, and through alterative channels (e.g., social media). Participants also wanted to see a more structured series in future with clear and pre-set learning goals, sessions, times, and expectations around participation. As one participant explained, having a more structured program would help combat feelings of uncertainty in her life related to being young, at a professional crossroads, and with endless opportunities to choose from.

While participants were satisfied with aspects of the program that simulated a "taste" of entrepreneurship, some coaches were concerned about the importance of maintaining clear expectations and skills around what entrepreneurship is and takes. For example, some concerns surfaced about unintentionally perpetuating side-hustle and/or influencer culture as entrepreneurship. While some coaches and participants alike agreed that it can be advantageous for young people to explore a side-hustle or smaller endeavour to get a feel for starting a business before jumping in, some were worried about negative implications. Specifically, concerns surfaced that working off the side of one's desk is not sustainable and may be more harmful for some groups who feel pressured to monetize all creative interests, rather than just foster areas of passion for enjoyment and self-fulfillment.

Conclusion

Next Level was a positive experience overall for participants, coaches, and staff. As a pilot program, many of the early goals were ambitious. The focus on leaving the hospitality/retail sectors to become an entrepreneur did not align with (a) what participants wanted from the program and (b) where they were at in terms of their age and career stage. Accordingly, **the decision to narrow the program focus to social-emotional learning resonated with participants** who were drawn to the program because of the promise of mentorship and community. The increased focus on confidence-building and exploring transferrable professional skills was a better fit for this cohort. Therefore, the pivot worked well.

Fora staff expressed hesitations about running the Next Level program again during the evaluation planning stages and wanted to know if they were the right organization for this kind of program. While the evaluators cannot definitively answer this question on their behalf, Fora will be interested to know that **all of the participants and coaches interviewed hoped to see Fora offer Next Level again**. Additionally, many of the coaches and participants wanted to explicitly engage in professional development programming because of Fora's reputation and community. For participants, the potential to connect with other Fora programming (i.e., Girls on Boards and Global Summit) was part of the motivation to enrol in Next Level rather than an incubator program elsewhere. While significant effort will be required to adapt and run Next Level again and/or include it in Fora's suite of programs, there is appetite in the community for an introductory business skills program for young women and gender diverse youth. **Fora's focus on meaningful and diverse representation, community-building and mentorship, and positive reputation of its staff were all seen as reasons to engage in professional development at Fora.**

Limitations

This evaluation would have benefitted for enhanced engagement of Next Level participants and coaches. Interest in the evaluation was low. Reflections from participants suggested that their insights were solicited on numerous occasions throughout the program and the baseline/endline surveys were \ overwhelming. While all participants who engaged in interviews loved the photography component and enjoyed reflecting on their professional aspirations and experiences, it is likely that participation fatigue played a role in low response rate. Some challenges with the baseline and endline surveys (e.g., language discrepancies between questions and indicators, repeating and overlapping survey questions, and questions with more than one indicator) made it difficult to establish reliability of data. Because the indicators and baseline survey were set prior to finalizing workshop content, it is likely that participants' experiences of the program did not neatly correspond with the survey questions.

Recommendations

Workshop Content & Structure

1. Decide whether to narrowly focus on retail and hospitality sectors moving forward.
    a. If retail and hospitality is the desired focus, recruit explicitly from these sectors to ensure that peer networking, curriculum, and applied examples are all relevant.
    b. If retail and hospitality is not the desired focus, make it clear that the career-stage (i.e., young people starting their careers) is the priority and recruit accordingly.
2. Establish and communicate clear learning goals, session topics, and timing for workshops ahead of the program to help set and maintain reasonable learning expectations.
    a. If in-person, set a clear expectation for participation and attendance so that young people understand what their options are if they are (un)able to attend. It may also be helpful to provide supports for young people in advocating for time off work (e.g., a letter describing the benefits of the program to a potential boss)
    b. If online, set a clear expectation for participation and attendance in live-session workshops (when possible) to maximize opportunities for peer-based learning and networking. Expectations around participation will help young people to prioritize attendance and their commitment to completing work between sessions.
3. Confirm that Fora owns the intellectual property and copyright of the Next Level program to ensure sustainability of the program. Rather than hiring facilitators to present one-off sessions based on their own content, Fora can:

a. Invest in hiring a facilitator and curriculum developer who can design the program on behalf of Fora with (a) lesson plans, (b) original content, (c) activities/exercises, (d) ways to assess learning during each session that can be adapted overtime

b. License reoccurring sessions from facilitators with a clear expectation that (a) content must be customized to address learning goals of the cohort and (b) Fora retains the right to adapt content. In this case, Fora may want to consider a non-compete clause that would prevent the facilitator from offering Next Level content elsewhere (depending on the nature of the session)

4. Balance the lecture and content portion of the workshops with more hands-on activities, case studies, and group problem-solving elements that (a) invite participants to apply content to real-world examples, and (b) offer facilitators and Fora staff insights into participants' learning.

Coaching & Community

5. Improve communication between a Next Level coordinator and the coaches to ensure that coaches are informed of progress, content covered, and learning targets so they are better able to anticipate mentees' questions and keep them on track. Fora may want to consider:
    a. Sending monthly updates to coaches with a summary of the topics and learning goals of each session covered that month (2-3 sentences).
    b. Supporting coaches to take an inclusive and anti-oppressive approach in their coaching to support learners of all backgrounds and with diverse learning needs/styles.
    c. Revising the Coach Handbook to streamline content, minimize repetition and redundancies between similar topics, and include clearer goals for each session (or the program overall) OR
    d. Removing the Coach Handbook altogether since it was underutilized.

6. Facilitating peer networking opportunities for the cohort to bond, share resources, and build lasting professional relationships outside of the workshops (e.g., social events).

7. (If it is safe to do so) Facilitating in-person coach and participant social events where mentors and mentees can practice their networking skills and foster connections beyond the original pair.

8. Consider if/how Next Level fits within the Fora suite of programming. Because some participants applied to Next Level after being rejected from other Fora programs and/or indicated interest in applying to more Fora programs in the future, there is interest for Next Level to potentially feed into other programs and the broader Fora community.

Iterative Program Evaluation (Just for Fora Internally)

Should Next Level run again, consider building small and feasible evaluation elements into the program. Measuring progress towards learning goals along the way will help to inform decision-making and iterative improvements. More intentional asks for feedback will also help to mitigate risk for participation fatigue that is caused when people are asked for too much information and in inconvenient ways. The following strategies could be helpful.

1. Assigning participants an ID at registration that can be used to match pre and post survey responses anonymously.

   a. This will allow for Fora staff to track changes in knowledge and confidence more accurately. Rather than average Likert scales from baseline and endline surveys, matching pairs will help show how many people become more knowledgeable or more confident by the end of the program.

   b. This will also allow Fora to ask demographic questions **only once** and at the beginning of the program. Understanding that some aspects of identity are fluid, it is unlikely that participants will experience a significant-enough change in identity during the 4-month program that will result in Fora staff making decisions about Next Level differently.

   c. Finally, participant IDs will also help Fora staff to ensure anonymity in surveys. Using an ID, rather than a participants' email address, staff can distinguish between respondents without identifying anyone. Regardless of if Fora chooses to adopt the ID system in future, we strongly urge staff to avoid keeping email addresses attached to raw data as this raises concerns about data privacy and security. We also urge Fora not to promise participants anonymity in surveys when email addresses are collected as this is identifiable, which can breach trust with participants and compromise integrity of data (e.g., people will not be candid in their reflections if they are identifiable).

2. Prioritizing only a few demographic questions in the registration form to avoid fatigue and frustration in surveys. Evaluators recommend removing questions that do not impact program planning and are not required by the funder (i.e., marital status, income level, care of either adult or child dependents, when they started their current job, additional jobs on top of primary job, social assistance).

3. Designing baseline and endline surveys around what Fora staff (i) must know to make decisions, (ii) will use, and (iii) in accordance with the program KPIs outlined in the evaluation framework. If there is no way to use the data, there is no need to collect it.

   a. For aligning survey questions with indicators (either Fora KPIs or indicators of success outline by a funder):

i. Make sure indicators are explicitly reflected in the survey(s) with clear and consistent language. For example, one current indicator outlined is "increased knowledge of different pathways to success." Because no questions in the survey explicitly ask about success, it is not possible to speak to any change in knowledge related to pathways to success.

ii. Make sure that questions can clearly speak to different components of an indicator. For example, a current indicator for Next Level is "Increased knowledge of professional interests, strengths, and areas of improvement." But, the survey only included a question about professional interests, and was framed as "I know how to align my passions and interests with my professional goals." Because only 1 of the 3 variables was reflected in the survey and the context for the variable is different in the survey question than the indicator, it is not possible to use data from the survey to speak to this indicator.

4. Minimizing how much work is needed to participate in the survey. To maximize engagement and integrity of data, consider:

   a. Ensuring that surveys take fewer than 10 minutes to complete

   b. Having a mix of question types (multiple choice, Likert scale, yes/no, short answer)

   c. Avoiding redundant or similar questions that may create confusion, frustration, and/or skipped questions (e.g., the current survey asks 10 different questions about networking)

   d. Simplifying questions to enhance understanding. Likert scales can be reduced from a 7-point scale to a 5-point or 3-point scale. Too many options (i.e., slightly agree, mostly agree, agree) will neither show a meaningful change over time nor help Fora staff understand where participants are in their thinking. Additionally, each question should only ask about one thing (hint: beware of "and" and "or"). This will help (i) participants feel certain what they are speaking to and (ii) Fora staff know how to use the answer.

   e. Testing surveys with Fora staff ahead of sending to participants to double-check how long it takes to complete the survey, if there are any confusing questions, and if any language needs to be tweaked.

Appendix A: Indicators

	Indicator	Baseline	Endline	Anticipated Outcome	Data Source
1	Number of young women attending social entrepreneurship trainings	15	15 finished (11 of whom participated in the survey)	50 young women	Enrollment
2	Increased knowledge of their professional interests, strengths, and areas of improvement * This was a pivot from the original plan to assess economic mobility				Baseline/endline data
2a	➢ Professional Interests	27% of participants indicated at least slightly **unknowledgeable** 60% of participants indicated at least slightly **knowledgeable**	18% of participants indicated at least slightly **unknowledgeable** 82% of participants indicated at least slightly **knowledgeable**		Question from survey: I know how to align my passions and interests with my professional goals
2b	➢ Professional Strengths	No questions asked in the survey		75% reporting high knowledge levels	N/A
2c	➢ Areas of Improvement				
	Not perfectly mapped to Indicator 2, but speaks to increase in professional knowledge and may be helpful:				
2d	➢ Professional Communication	23% of participants indicated at least slight **unknowledgeable** 77% of participants indicated at least slightly **knowledgeable**	91% of participants indicated at least slightly **knowledgeable** at end		**Question from survey:** Please rate your knowledge level in Basics of professional communication (e.g. sending emails, tone, following-up, meeting deadlines)
2e	➢ Negotiation	No source	91% of participants indicated at least slightly **knowledgeable** at end		**Question from survey:** Please rate your knowledge level in negotiation skills
2f	➢ Financial Literacy	No source	82% of participants indicated at least slightly **knowledgeable** at end		**Question from survey:** Please rate your knowledge level in financial literacy (e.g., budgeting, investing, financing, balance sheets)
3	Increased knowledge of different pathways to success			75% reporting high knowledge levels	
3a	➢ Knowledge of transition career	40% of participants indicated at least slightly **unknowledgeable**	91% responded at least slightly **knowledgeable**		**Questions from survey:** I know what steps I take to transition into a new career

	Indicator	Baseline	Endline	Anticipated Outcome	Data Source
3b	➢ Knowledge of different career paths	53% of participants indicated at least slightly **unknowledgeable**	91% responded at least at least slightly **knowledgeable**		Questions from survey: **I kno**w about different career pathways that are available to me
3c	➢ Knowledge of success	No question in the survey			N/A
4	Increased confidence in making professional decisions in a new or existing sector				Baseline/endline data
4a	➢ Making decisions about career	27% of participants indicated at least slightly **not confident** 53% of participants indicated at least slightly **confident**	100% at least of participants indicated at least slightly **confident**	80% reporting high confidence levels	**Survey Question:** I am confident in making difficult decisions about my career plan
4b	➢ Transitioning	33% of participants indicated at least slightly **not confident** 53% of participants indicated at least slightly **confident**	1% of participants indicated at least slightly **not confident** 82% of participants indicated at least slightly **confident**		**Survey Question:** I am confident in knowing how to transition to a new industry if I need to
5	Increased confidence in applying technical and social-emotional skills	* No questions in the survey asked about confidence in applying skills gained from workshop. Below are suggestions of what is known.			Baseline/endline data
5a	➢ Tools to navigate imposter syndrome	53% of participants indicated at least slightly **not knowledgeable** 20% of participants indicated at least **slightly knowledgeable**	91% of participants indicated at least **slightly knowledgeable**	80% reporting high confidence levels	**Survey question:** Please rate your knowledge levels in: Tools to navigate imposter syndrome
5b	➢ Confident speaking up when my voice is heard	27% of participants indicated at least slightly **not confident** 60% of participants indicated at least slightly **confident**	91% of participants indicated at least slightly **confident**		**Survey question:** I am confident speaking up when my voice is needed
6	Increased confidence in identifying professional interests, strengths, and areas of improvement			80% reporting high confidence levels	Baseline/endline data
6a	➢ Confident identifying passions and interests	27% of participants indicated at least slightly **not confident**	91% of participants indicated at least slightly **confident**		**Survey question:** I am confident in identifying what my passions and interests are

Indicator		Baseline	Endline	Anticipated Outcome	Data Source
7	Increased confidence in navigating a non-linear career path	60% of participants indicated at least slightly **confident** 27% of participants indicated at least slightly **not confident** 53% of participants indicated at least slightly **confident**	100% of participants indicated at least slightly **confident**	80% reporting high confidence levels	Survey question: I am confident of navigating different types of jobs in my lifetime
8	Number of young women matched to a mentor	All participants (n = 15) matched		50 young women	Program data
9	Percentage of young women who intend to connect with their mentor upon completion of the program			75% reporting intention to connect with their mentor	Endline data
9a	➤ Confident building relationships with mentors	47% of participants indicated at least slightly **not confident** 33% of participants indicated at least slightly **confident**	100% of participants indicated at least slightly **confident**		Survey question: I am confident building relationships with prospective mentors
9b	➤ I have a mentor	73% of participants indicated least **slightly disagree** 13% of participants indicated at least **slightly agree**	1% of participants indicated least **slightly disagree** 82% of participants indicated at least **slightly agree**		Survey question: I have a mentor to rely on for career advice
9c	➤ Intention to keep in touch		100% of participants indicated at least **slightly agree**		Survey question: After the program is complete I will keep in touch with: my coach
10	Percentage of young women who intend to connect with their peers upon completion of the program			75% reporting intention to connect with their peers	Endline data
10a	➤ Network of peers to rely on for career advice	20% of participants indicated least **slightly disagree** 53% of participants indicated at least **slightly agree**	18% of participants indicated least **slightly disagree** 73% of participants indicated at least **slightly agree**		Survey question: I have a network of peers to rely on for career advice and support
10b	➤ Next Level Leaders		91% of participants indicated at least **slightly agree**		Survey question: After the program is complete I will keep in touch with: my fellow Next level leaders

	Indicator	Baseline	Endline	Anticipated Outcome	Data Source
10c	➢ Fora community broadly		100% of participants indicated at least **slightly agree**		Survey question: After the program is complete I will keep in touch with: Fora community
11	Number of LinkedIn connections created upon completion of the program	Unknown (not asked in survey)		Average of 50 LinkedIn connections per participant	Endline data
12	Relevance and usefulness of technical and social-emotional trainings	Unknown (feedback on relevance, usefulness, or application of program content not included in the surveys sent to evaluators). Questions in survey asked about length of sessions and the relative rank of program components (e.g., live workshops vs. coaching handbook).		We are using this project as a pilot to determine the relevancy and usefulness of the training provided	Program data
13	Knowledge of barriers, solutions, and new ideas for designing upskilling programs for young women	N/A Explored qualitatively		We are using this project as a pilot to better understand young women's needs as they re-enter the economy	AND Implementation
14	Disaggregated demographic data of program participants	- 100% of participants identified as women (n = 15) - 93% of participants are not the primary caregiver for an adult (n= 14) - 100% of participants are not the primary caregiver for a child - in terms of education 27% of participants have a high school diploma, 13% have college or CEGEP, 40% have university degree, 13% have a higher degree than undergraduate (at baseline) - 40% work full-time, 47% work part time, 13% are not working (at baseline) - regarding industry, 33% work in hospitality and 66% were divided between retail, education, health, social services, marketing and communications, and entrepreneurship - 87% of participants made 40,000 or less per year - 83% do not receive social services benefits		We are using this project to collect demographic data of all program participants	Program data