**March 2015 ATD Dallas Chapter Meeting - VHA**

As the winners of the 2014 Best Place to Learn - VHA had the opportunity to go into detail with the ATD Dallas Chapter at the March 2015 meeting.

Michael Luttkus, Director, Organizational Development took attendees on a "tour" of the leadership program created from scratch.

Dating back to 2011, senior leaders of VHA recognized potentially significant changes in the healthcare industry. This vision moved the company in a new direction. The driving idea was that leadership needed to play a bigger role and that leaders needed to be ready for changes and the "future state." Leaders in general are often identified as the derailer of change efforts, while leadership is also noted as a significant cultural lever.

The company had a well-established purpose/mission, strategic aspirations, goals, and values; however, what needed work were competencies that guided people behaviorally to deliver exceptional performance.

**The Beginning**

The leadership program development journey began with bringing in objective voices - a steering committee of 15-20 leaders from all levels and corners of the organization. The committee not only looked at the behaviors that made leaders in the company successful in its current state, but those that would be needed in the company’s future state as well.

The first four steps identified by the committee were:

1. Engage senior leaders
2. Analyze what matters
3. Align critical skills
4. Design competencies

These four steps took approximately 4-5 months to develop.

**Creating Competencies**

Later, 28 senior leaders were brought together in a highly interactive day-long session with the goal of refining 5-6 competencies that leaders at any level need to demonstrate. Notes from this session were distilled with the steering committee.

The committee landed on the following competencies:

* driving performance excellence
* leading change
* championing the strategy and values
* unleashing talent

A visual identity was also created to match each competency.

Each competency was further refined by leadership level based on criteria such as complexity of work, breadth of control, strategic focus, and span of influence. Created from these levels were unique competency profiles for each leadership role in the organization. These competencies and resulting profiles serve as the “DNA” for all leadership related activities: leadership development, talent management / succession planning, performance management, and talent acquisition.

**Thoughts on Creating a Leadership Program**

An organizational assessment across the enterprise revealed the following leadership development program attitudes:

* Leaders want development opportunities, but have little capacity
* The organization had a history of event-based leadership training (one-off programs)
* Significant leadership "knowing-doing" gaps were present despite many advanced degrees. A "check-the-box" mentality existed leading to no behavior change.
* Lastly, senior leaders saw the value in a holistic leadership program

These data points, combined with others, were used to craft an initial holistic roadmap for the design of leadership development initiatives. Leaders were fit into 3 levels (front line, operational, senior). Strategy and programming needs were determined based on talent development, and foundational leadership skills needed in all leaders. The roadmap allowed the team to see from a holistic view what knowledge, skills and abilities needed to be imparted to all of the organization's leaders, but also enabled the team to address these needs in a smaller, but impactful chunk.

**The Approach**

The team agreed upon a two-pronged approach to introduce the leadership development structure. First, there would be a highly selective, hands-on, intense engagement with a small number of leaders at all levels. Secondly, foundational-level training would be offered for all other leaders.

The team created training design principles and activities that the leaders should be engaged in during the intensive group sessions. Learning was determined to be done in context, by doing and reflecting, over time, with others, by teaching and through engagement. At the center of this idea was "mind-set/skill-set/tool-set" and helping learners adjust his/her mindset with a new skill set and tool set.

The previously mentioned first pronged approach--the highly selective and intensive learning cohort, now in its 3rd year—involved a highly-vetted selection process complete with succession and talent data. The program is anchored on four 2-day content sessions that are scheduled once a quarter with monthly coaching conversations supporting application back on-the-job. There are three parallel tracks to the program, each focused on a specific level of: Vice President, Senior Director, and Director levels. The content is rooted in the previously determined leadership competencies.

**Training Design**

Leaders were taken on an 'intentional' journey to understand where they are now, but also where they want to be in the future. Based on the McCall survey published in[The Career Architect Development Planner](http://www.amazon.com/Architect-Development-Planner-Lombardo-Eichinger/dp/B00BUWHBTA/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1427246165&sr=8-1&keywords=The+Career+Architect+Development+Planner), the team determined that the best practice formula for the program was to focus on 70% on-the-job experience, 20% informal learning, and 10% formal learning.

*On-the-job*experience is said to be:

* Volunteering for stretch assignments
* Working on cross-functional teams
* Managing new projects
* Representing your leader (or others) at meetings or functions
* Improving a process or procedure that is inefficient or out-of-date

*Informal Learning*is made up of:

* Practice, reflection, feedback
* Mentoring, coaching
* Shadowing, observing
* Networking, building relationships
* Conducting research

The smallest percentage of effort went to*formal learning*, which is described as:

* Training
* Books
* Self-study
* Seminars
* Degrees

**The Role of Informal Learning**

To facilitate the growth of informal learning, leaders were provided connection points both vertically and horizontally with other leaders. The *Leadership Forum (for VPs)*provided members the opportunity to have 90-minute sessions with the company CEO, as well as 60-minute sessions with rotating EVPs. The *Pillars of Leadership (for Senior Directors)*granted members 60 minutes with rotating SVPs, and 60 minutes with rotating VPs. Lastly, the *Foundations of Leadership*group met with rotating VPs and Senior Directors for 30 minutes respectively.  Each group includes an underlying networking objective with peer coaching, group work, and networking dinners.

It was found that coaching, more than anything else, helped to drive behaviors. The coaches follow-up with participants and provide a level of accountability for utilizing information learned during the in-depth sessions.

**The Results**

The VHA team has surveyed participants for feedback and room to improve with a goal to achieve Level 3 evaluation in the near future. The items that are evaluated are content, coaching, leader networking, learning transfer, and the willingness and ability to be an active program alumnus. The team is happy to report that all but one past participant (due to capacity reasons) has agreed to be a program alum--in fact, they WANT to be one.

Looking forward, the team is looking to start an alumni program with annual events and continual communication based on interest from previous in-depth group members. The leadership development 2.0 will see a refresh of the leadership foundations course offerings and are planning a tentative forum and pillars refresh for 2016/2017. A first-time leadership program would be focused on internal promotions and developed content based on the competencies and coaching.