



IGNITE! CLIENT SPOTLIGHT

Aimco

Aligning Leadership Development to Corporate Culture

"My challenge was summed up in two words: *sonic boom*," says Brian O'Neill, director of learning and organizational development at Aimco. Headquartered in Denver, Colorado, Aimco is one of the largest owners and operators of apartment homes in the United States. The company serves nearly 250,000 residents in 22 states and the District of Columbia.



"Lisa Cohn, our executive vice president and general counsel, manages the human resource crew. She coined the phrase *sonic boom* to describe how she wanted to change our leadership development strategy to extend to all leaders, and to be more aligned with our cultural pillars," says O'Neill.

For several years, leadership development at Aimco was an exclusive classroom experience limited to about 30 participants per year. It was also expensive—\$12,500 per person including travel, hotel, and material costs.

"We realized leadership development was not being perceived as a learning experience, but more as an achievement," explains O'Neill. "People who were already designated as great leaders were the ones selected to attend our leadership program. But we wanted all our leaders to have core leadership skills: coaching, giving feedback, managing difficult discussions, understanding different leadership styles, and all the facets of servant leadership."

The ultimate goal is for everyone in a management role to be transformed from a manager of work to a leader of people. O'Neill also wanted to support and protect the cultural pillars of the company:

1. We Live with Gusto
2. We Own It
3. We Value Relationships
4. We Create Moments That Matter
5. We Drive Innovation and Change

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“We are very good at articulating and living by our cultural pillars,” O’Neill explains. “However, we were in danger of developing a hidden cultural element within the company—that someone gets leadership development only after they are seen as a developed leader. That concept doesn’t align with our other values. Development isn’t only for ‘the best’; it’s for everyone. And we needed to develop 500 or more leaders, which would have taken millions of dollars and decades to complete using the old methods. What we were doing just wasn’t viable long term, and the cost per person was just too high.”

In an environment where leadership development was viewed as a reward, Aimco’s Talent Management team set out to change the perspective. Some executives worried that if the leadership program was changed, it wouldn’t be seen as special anymore. As it turned out, that’s exactly what needed to happen. “Core leadership skills would no longer be available only to already recognized strong leaders. We want everyone to become a performance-based leader, so the leadership development program needs to provide all skills to all leaders. And aspiring leaders too—let’s get leadership skills down into the ranks of up-and-coming future leaders as effectively as possible.”

FROM BEST PRACTICE TO NEXT PRACTICE

O’Neill realized there were several off-the-shelf training programs that offered best-practice skill training, but he wanted to take the best practice to the next practice. “While all the well-known leadership training programs offer valid content, they don’t speak to the nuances of a company’s history, culture, vision, and values. We needed something that married and aligned content from the vendor with our own cultural pillars. And we needed to be able to deliver it virtually to our leaders nationwide.”

After an extensive search, Aimco partnered with The Ken Blanchard Companies to customize an innovative training program called *Leading for Impact*.

In the program, which has a fun mountain climbing theme, participants begin the journey with an interactive webinar known as Base Camp. This is where they learn about the learning platform and the different content areas—called Climbs—they will access during the course of their development. After Base Camp, leaders complete a 360° assessment that drives a conversation with their leader to determine the order and priority of Climbs. Participants spend about 30 minutes a week in online activities, including watching short videos, taking mini-assessments, posting to Yammer groups within Aimco, developing templates for conversations with their teams and their direct supervisors, and completing other work online in the Blanchard Exchange platform.



Initially, five Climbs—based on Aimco’s five cultural pillars—are being offered monthly through the company’s LMS. The structure of Climbs is very similar: Participants attend a Meetup webinar to join their teammates at the beginning of each Climb, and a Summit webinar when they reach the end of the Climb. Each person learns at their own pace and stays in touch with others through separate Yammer groups for each Climb. They have access to support tools, articles, and worksheets through Blanchard Exchange that can be used to refresh and review the content.

“The beauty of this program is how the team at Blanchard helped us put their content into our voice,” says O’Neill. “For example, we introduce SLII®, but people don’t go to an SLII class. They go to an Owning It Climb, where the four handholds on the rock wall metaphor are Leadership Styles, Setting SMART Goals, Diagnosing, and Matching. We teach the concepts of SLII while focusing on our cultural pillars, so much of the content is within the context of owning our decisions, advocating for autonomy, putting decision-making as close to the customer as possible, and so on.”

“The program design is very interactive and engaging. In addition to learning from the online content, we ask participants to describe themselves at each of development levels of SLII, then post pictures to Yammer that depict what they are feeling. The sharing of information keeps people involved so it doesn’t feel like 100 percent self-study.”

Leaders receive a high-end stainless steel engraved water bottle when they complete Base Camp and there are individual custom stickers for completing each Climb, borrowing from the “badging” trends in learning. “As you can imagine,” says O’Neill, “those stickers go directly onto the water bottles. We show our accomplishments on the water bottles, which reinforces the Climb meme and the learning, and helps us sustain the energy created by the training.”

In addition to SLII, Aimco delivers Blanchard training content from Self Leadership, Coaching Essentials®, Building Trust, the Personal Leadership Point of View, and Legendary Service® in the Climbs. “Blanchard allows us to use the content where it fits best with our cultural pillars. It isn’t a cookie-cutter approach. The team at Blanchard understood our issues and what we were trying to do, and they have been wonderfully flexible with their delivery on content so we could reach our goals. Not every leadership training company will do that.”



The results have been stunning. In the first year, 105 people started the *Leading for Impact* program. “Penetration is our first important measurement of success. We are immediately able to get leadership skills to over three times more people than in past years. That has positive implications for our leaders and our culture. Another key success measure, of course, is cost. The cost per person has dropped from \$12,500 to \$650. We are simultaneously reducing cost and increasing learning.”

O'Neill says they will monitor other areas in the future, such as promotion rates and high-potential scores. But for now, the main goal is to get everyone a core set of active leadership skills, which will take about two years.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

Any time an organization launches a new training initiative, it comes with a need for managing the change. "I was surprised to hear some people's concerns about training on a computer. And some people weren't sure that they could find time for training during their regular work week. We were only asking for 30 minutes." The key, says O'Neill, is to remind people that learning and development is as critical as any other element of their job for the end result of performance. Some will embrace concepts faster than others, so it is crucial to meet people where they are in the process and help them move forward. "Changes like this require a shift in thinking for some people, but once they get on board, they become your biggest advocates," he explains.



O'Neill has noticed a very interesting pattern when he delivers webinars. "When I schedule webinars at the top of the hour, people are usually five to ten minutes late. But when I schedule the sessions on the half hour, they are on time. I think people are conditioned to start meetings on the hour, so they get multiple meetings running back-to-back. Scheduling on the half hour may give them a little breathing room in their schedules." He also suggests using different breakout sessions during the webinars to encourage participants to share how they are applying their new skills back on the job. They quickly learn it is just as easy to interact in a webinar as it is in person, and the conversation and networking helps provide a key element from live face-to-face training that participants still crave.

The biggest piece of advice O'Neill offered to organizations implementing a new leadership development initiative is to just get started. "Some people are going to feel uncomfortable, but you can't let that paralyze the entire system. Once people get going, they form communities of support through platforms like Yammer, where they post pictures, comments, recognition, and offers of support along the Climb. As each person finishes, they then act as ambassadors for others going through the program."

O'Neill may have started a sonic boom, but because he and the Talent Management team approached the initiative thoughtfully and methodically, within the context of Aimco's unique culture, tremendous improvements have been made in leadership development.



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