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Client Story

Creating Leaders for Life at CAL FIRE

Personnel of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) are very familiar with the Incident Command System (ICS) because it saves lives and property. During a crisis, a command is delivered and everyone knows how to respond. However, that same method of communication isn't necessary when fire fighters are preparing and eating dinner, cleaning a fire engine, or spending time together during a shift. “We wanted our staff to have a way to communicate and interact with each other during the times between calls,” explains Monte Manson, deputy director, professional standards program. “The command method of communication doesn't always apply when staff members are trying to have regular conversations.”

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Although training is a major focus for CAL FIRE, leadership training wasn't a part of the curriculum until recently. Manson knew they needed to look outside the department for help, and a colleague mentioned Blanchard® as a possible starting point. “When I connected with Jackie Campbell at Blanchard, I knew I'd found the answer. We spent two hours on that first phone call discussing our challenges and her



Monte Manson

suggestions for meeting them.”

The initial two-day program was delivered in person to the CAL FIRE executive team by Blanchard facilitators. It included SLII®, Building Trust, and a video message from Ken Blanchard. “The personalized message from Ken Blanchard thanking us for our partnership was just amazing,” says Manson. “The executive team was floored that Ken was speaking directly to us.” After the next level of leaders went through a similar program, Blanchard facilitated chartering sessions with the two levels of leaders to determine roles, goals, and norms, then aligned the charters of each team and the department strategic plan.

The next step was developing a week-long curriculum for all leaders based on the competencies they wanted everyone to exemplify. In addition to SLII® and Building Trust, they added Leadership Point of View™ to the curriculum. “We used Blanchard content and customized it for the CAL FIRE environment,” says Manson. “We offer SLII® to all employees, which has created a common language between leaders and their teams. Everyone is learning the language of SLII® so they know what they need to do at each stage of development. People know how to ask for help, and leaders can determine how much direction or support they need to give to direct reports.”

Just as they were launching the week-long program, COVID hit. “We didn’t want to stop the momentum we had going, so when the pandemic eliminated our option for in-person training, we worked with Blanchard to shift to a virtual experience,” says Manson. “We started with a two-day virtual option that focused on the highlights of the training programs, but we were able to roll out the entire week-long curriculum quickly. And later, we shifted back to classroom learning quickly, too. You can’t learn to fight a fire virtually so the learning facility didn’t close for very long. It remained open with precautions, which allowed us to pivot back to in-person learning sooner than most other organizations could. The main thing is that we didn’t stop. We recognized the importance of bringing these tools to our people. So we delivered virtually until we could get together in person again.

The Learning Experience

SLII® is a learning experience that teaches leaders how to set goals, provide the right amount of support and direction to each team member as they navigate certain tasks, and give feedback effectively. It focuses on helping leaders have productive conversations using a common language that helps empower direct reports to achieve their goals.

Building Trust teaches how to build trust with team members and colleagues and how to repair it when it is broken. Participants learn how their behaviors either build or erode trust and identify those aspects that need attention to develop and maintain trusting relationships. The program focuses on specific behaviors that can increase engagement, creativity, and commitment.

Blanchard’s Leadership Point of View™ is an immersive experience that helps leaders uncover their values, write their leadership story, and create deep, trusting relationships with their people. When leaders are clear on their leadership values and principles, they lead their people with more intentionality and authenticity.



"The Leadership Point of View™ exercise is a powerful experience for our leaders. It's hard work that requires thoughtful introspection. And it changes lives. We ask people who have been through the process to go into classes to share their leadership point of view as exemplars of what a good job looks like. It is always a moving experience," says Manson.

Changing a Culture

Manson and his team offer advice to others embarking on a learning journey.

"Changing

a culture is more difficult than I thought it would be. We were introducing a new kind of leadership skill to the command style that is still in place when fighting a fire. Our people are so adept at following orders, I thought we could just roll this out and everyone would fall in. The reality is that our leaders were already leading and they didn't see the immediate need to learn new leadership skills. The fire fighters have been trained to fight fires and then we asked them to learn leader skills. They were a bit leery, so I asked them to try it and if they didn't see value, we would discuss next steps. The result—they did see the value in what they learned. We were giving them life skills, not just leadership skills. The ability to have more effective conversations with people positively impacts every aspect of life—at work and at home."

Additionally, Manson now opens each class with a segment that provides the background of why they are delivering the training. By having the need for different leadership skills explained to them up front, participants have and are more open to the experience.

Manson encourages senior leaders to take stock of how their organization functions and identify the areas that need improvement. "Find out where trust is being broken and where leaders are not representing what the organization needs and address it. Even if you think you are doing it all right, there is always room for improvement. Really understand what you need to improve, then get the right partner to help. Above all, remember that this isn't a quick solution. Offering one class doesn't change everything. This kind of initiative takes long-term involvement and constant sustainment. Don't just teach the new skills, help your people learn them and live them. That's how you make a difference."

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