



“Liberty Utilities is growing quickly on a global level and is proud to have SLII® as the foundation of its leadership culture.”

Client Story

Building Leaders at all Levels

Liberty Utilities, a subsidiary of Algonquin Power and Utilities Corporation, provides water, electricity, and gas services to 750,000 customers across the United States. They have a dedicated commitment to the community, conservation, and customer service, and they meet that commitment by developing leaders at all levels of their organization.

“We wanted to create a culture where everyone is a leader, so we created a list of competencies for our leaders and our employees,” explains Dainna Datchko, director, learning and development. “Once competencies were defined, we looked for a training program that aligned. Blanchard Management Essentials® and SLII® from Blanchard® were a natural fit and have become the foundation of our leadership training.”

Liberty’s approach to rolling out SLII® was to provide senior leaders (director level and above) with an overview of the training and content. It was important for leaders to understand and believe in the program to support it and promote participation. Liberty introduced the program during their annual Leadership Summit. “The session was so engaging and well received,” says Datchko. “We achieved the support from senior leaders and moved to the next step, which was to create a schedule for delivering the training across the organization. Since then, Liberty Utilities has trained 337 of its 490 leaders.”



Dainna Datchko



Erica Wright

Liberty Utilities rolled out the training in a classroom setting with an aggressive schedule of classes being delivered in multiple cities across the enterprise consecutively throughout 2018, 2019, and early 2020. Then the COVID pandemic impacted training across the enterprise. “We were fortunate that Blanchard was able to pivot so quickly to a virtual learning environment,” says Erica Wright, manager, training operations. “They presented several options and worked with us to deliver the best option for Liberty employees. The online version is well designed and invites activity, so participants are continually engaged.” Some unexpected benefits were found through offering this program virtually, as Datchko shares: “It is great to have participants from all over the country come together in one setting. Having exposure to colleagues outside the normal working group has added to the richness of the learning. Another benefit to the virtual class is that the learning is broken into short two-hour sessions. This gives people a chance to hear new concepts and process the information before moving to the next concept. Also, when people are away from their offices in a classroom setting for one or two days, their work piles up. Going back to the office can be stressful and sometimes they can’t take time to process what they have just learned in order to put their skills into practice. But the virtual sessions help with this challenge.” Although one day Liberty hopes to be able to offer the option of classroom and virtual sessions, they will deliver the training virtually for the foreseeable future.

The Learning Journey

Liberty’s Performance Management mantra is It’s all about the conversation. Blanchard Management Essentials and SLII® focus heavily on the importance of conversations and provide an excellent foundation for new managers as they begin their leadership journey. When a Liberty employee is promoted into a leadership role, they are trained in Blanchard Management Essentials. This course teaches how to conduct four core conversations for setting goals, praising progress, redirecting work, and wrapping up a project in an honorable manner. Participants also are taught communication techniques for listening to learn, inquiring for insight, telling their truth, and expressing confidence. These skills help leaders have purposeful conversations that create positive, productive relationships.

Around six months later, the new leader takes the SLII® course. “We offer the Blanchard Management Essentials course first because it teaches leaders the importance of having effective conversations with direct reports. It provides the perfect foundation for helping leaders understand how to talk with employees. Then after they’ve been in the role for a while, they attend the SLII® class. That’s when we see the participants have the aha moments and they are able to grasp the core concepts quickly with real world examples in mind.” Wright says she hears people saying things like “Oh that’s what’s happening—my direct report is at level 1 and I’m using a leadership style for someone at level 4. That’s a mismatch.” SLII® teaches how to provide the right amount of direction and support to each individual as they work on different tasks. When leaders put SLII® skills to work, they can offer the right leadership style at the right time.



Participants also have access to Blanchard Exchange, an online platform that contains tools to sustain learning and expand their use of SLII® skills. The platform includes worksheets to help with goal setting, conversation starters for planning one-on-one meetings, and checklists for measuring the effectiveness of communications. The site also includes articles and videos leaders can share with their team to deepen the understanding of SLII®. Liberty also offers a 90-minute refresher course to past participants. The next plan is to send learning boosters through email to keep the content top of mind, which will strategically align to the Performance Management lifecycle.



Liberty's leadership philosophy is that everyone is a leader. To support this philosophy, Liberty will begin offering Self Leadership training for individual contributors. This course teaches employees how to ask for the level of direction and support they need to accomplish their goals. It also empowers them to take charge of their own development to drive business results. By using SLII® and Self Leadership together, leaders and direct reports will be able to use a common leadership language, which will improve communication as well as engagement.

"In our annual engagement survey, we ask people if they've had a conversation with their manager about career development. We find that the people who answer yes to this question are about 20 percent more engaged than those who answer no. This ties directly to the importance of managers being able to have constructive conversations with their employees," says Wright. "By offering Self Leadership, we add to the strength of our leadership programs and we build trust and engagement."

Wright and Datchko have plans for the future. "We will be training our HR group in Coaching Essentials® so they will be able to serve their internal clients more effectively," says Wright. "It makes sense to have everyone using the same leadership language. We are also conducting an ROI study to measure the impact this training has on our business. The bottom line is that we know these programs are research based and proven. But it will be nice to have real numbers to show the influence on corporate results."

Doing the Right Thing

Recently, Liberty Utilities offered the Student Self Leadership virtual program to the children of employees. "The skills we are teaching our leaders can be applied to all aspects of life, so when we had the chance to share this program with family members, we knew it was the right thing to do. The feedback from the children has been very positive, and the response from employees was overwhelming. They felt completely supported, which is especially important during this challenging time," says Wright.

Wright and Datchko realized early on that Liberty employees wanted to learn to be better leaders and perform at higher levels. "My recommendation is to get senior leaders to support a training initiative up front," says Datchko. "That level of buy-in indicates the program's importance to all employees. Also, start with the end state in mind, so you are clear about what you are trying to achieve. We were building a culture of leadership, so we defined competencies and then trained to develop those traits."

Liberty Utilities is growing quickly on a global level and is proud to have SLII® as the foundation of its leadership culture. "SLII® is universal. There are no language or cultural barriers—leaders everywhere will benefit from this program. We are a purpose-driven company and the leadership culture we have built helps us create the employee experience that drives our customer experience."

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