



“We want our leaders to be lifelong learners—and they now have the learning platform and content to do just that.”

Client Story

Developing an Award-Winning Leadership Development Program at Western Digital

Western Digital and Blanchard recently received a Brandon Hall Group excellence award for best advance in leadership development for The Leader Essentials Program. This flagship formal development program prioritized people as the central element of supporting their business strategy. “We are a growth and innovation company,” says Marci Paino, director of enterprise talent strategy and solutions. “We know learning and leadership drives the transformation we need to keep us competitive—so learning and leadership development became our complete focus. We wanted the content to be modern, curated from expert sources, and experiential so people would be engaged at a high level.”

Western Digital had defined competencies for vice president-level leadership and above as well as attributes for other leadership roles. But without a consistent leadership philosophy or a strategy for how to use the competencies to measure and develop people, things weren’t syncing up. Additionally, the classroom-based leadership training was inconsistent in both content and delivery.

“The first step was to identify our enterprise vision and leader capability framework,” says Paino. “We set expectations for assessing, developing, measuring, rewarding, and recognizing our leaders, with the intent of embedding those expectations into the DNA of our company culture.” It was also important to introduce the concept of a modern learning mindset. “We believe learning happens through experiences, exposure, and education, in an environment that supports those things,” says Paino.

With all of these foundational elements in place, Western Digital was ready to create the learning journey for their leaders. They partnered with Blanchard for leadership skills training and with Degreed for the learning platform and additional curated content.



Marci Paino

The first learning journey was created for frontline leaders, for two reasons: (1) they have the most interaction with employees on a daily basis, and (2) they are the future generation of executives. “We wanted to invest in the development of our frontline leaders early in their careers and offer them bite-sized digital learning content on a highly interactive platform,” says Paino.

Creating the Learning Journey

The Western Digital and Blanchard team used a design thinking approach to thoroughly understand the personas of their leaders. They wanted to create an experience that met the learners where they were while focusing on the needs of the enterprise. As the program for frontline leaders was being piloted, Paino and her team collected data and built a business case to scale the program to leaders at all levels across the company. The result: the Leader Essentials Program—a 14-week learning journey with seven learning plans for building various leadership skills.

Learning plans are presented in two-week intervals. During the first week, participants use a digitally interactive learning journal to complete prework consisting of self-directed digital elements that present specific concepts and models. The second week features an interactive webinar to review content, breakouts to highlight case studies, and a debrief. Participants then complete practice and reflection activities and have access to “Ask the Expert” coaching sessions where they can request specific advice from Blanchard coaches.

“In order for us to embed the modern learning mindset and get leaders to practice becoming lifelong learners, we curated additional learning resources they can tap into via the Degreed platform. The platform contains podcasts, articles, white papers, videos, and much more. This way, people who are passionate about learning will have endless content at their fingertips,” explains Paino.

To familiarize people at all levels of leadership with the skills and philosophies being taught, leaders receive a condensed version of the Leader Essentials Program curriculum their people are going through. They are also provided with conversation starters to use during one-on-one meetings to reinforce and sustain the learning. All executives receive an “at-a-glance” version of the program content.

“It was critical to get content in the hands of all leaders because this initiative wasn’t about creating a new learning program. It was about us defining and setting up expectations of what it means to be a leader at Western Digital,” says Paino. “What’s really unique and different about the design of our program is that we’ve actually created an experience for every level of leadership so we can all learn that common language.



Middle management and executive leadership positions can support frontline leaders going through the program while really embracing their own role as a coach in the process. The core program, which is targeted to those frontline leaders, is a 30-hour time commitment that is spread out over 14 weeks. The condensed version for senior leaders takes about 15 hours and the executive program requires just two hours.”

The Seven Learning Plans

Western Digital had an aggressive goal of putting 1,800 leaders through the journey in 18 months. “We created large cohorts of 75 to 125 people and offered the program in three time zones to a global audience,” says Paino. “Because we developed these online communities, leaders created new relationships with colleagues whom they might never have met otherwise. That does a lot to build camaraderie within a company.

“The first learning plan serves as an introduction to the experience. We explain the essentials of leadership, show people how to navigate the platform, and then share how we will give them a new set of leadership tools. We want to make this program so compelling that everyone ultimately becomes a lifelong learner.”

The remaining six learning plans focus on being a trusted partner, communicating effectively, investing in your team, encouraging collaboration, creating a respectful environment, and bringing it all together.

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The Results

Western Digital measures several aspects of the learning journey they have created. Overall metrics indicate an outstanding 95 percent approval rating from participants, and pulse surveys offered at the end of each pathway currently measure 4.3 on a 5-point scale. “We are seeing definite positive trends. Our pulse survey results are showing steady increases and in the last wave we saw a 20-point jump in our net promoter score, which now stands at 54,” says Paino.

“Our partnerships with Blanchard for the content, and Degreed for the platform to curate additional content, meet our needs perfectly. We want our leaders to be lifelong learners—and they now have the learning platform and content to do just that. We will continue to evolve our offering as we navigate business and economic dynamics, and having the Leader Capability Framework and the foundational skills developed through the program will help us adapt and thrive into the future.”

Content from Blanchard to support these learning tenets includes:

- **Building Trust:** This simple model teaches leaders how to build trust with employees and colleagues and restore trust when it has been broken.
- **Coaching Essentials®:** A coaching process model, along with four coaching skills, that helps leaders coach employees for increased productivity and improved relationships.
- **SLII®:** A time-tested model that trains leaders how to provide the right amount of support and direction to each team member as they navigate certain tasks. SLII® also focuses on teaching leaders how to have productive conversations that empower their direct reports to achieve goals.
- **Team Leadership:** This program teaches specific skills leaders can use to improve collaboration and innovation while directing and supporting the work of teams or project groups.
- **Conversational Capacity®:** Here, leaders learn how to engage in constructive, learning-focused dialogue when challenging topics or conflicts arise so they can make informed decisions and find the best solutions, even when they are under pressure.
- **Courageous Inclusion™:** Leaders learn a mindset that promotes diversity and inclusion, and a proven process to help them become more knowledgeable and active proponents of inclusion in their workplace.