



Improving Leader Behaviors By 91 Percent.

Client Story

The Arizona Department of Economic Security

(DES) works with families, community organizations, advocates, and state and federal partners to realize their collective vision that every child, adult, and family in Arizona will be safe and economically secure. The department's 8,800 team members across the state work tirelessly to keep this vision alive, while its Office of Professional Development team strives to provide skills training for all.

The agency realized in order to continually improve engagement, productivity, performance, and retention, they would need to improve their overall leadership capacity and capabilities, especially in today's ever-changing environment. "It's critical that we keep improving the knowledge base of our employees," says Adele Cook, chief learning officer. "I was familiar with SLII® and decided to do a demo with key stakeholders. I knew if they saw value in the program, we would be able to implement it widely. It was important to get their buy-in so people would know this was the kind of leadership we wanted to model at DES. The stakeholders did recognize the power of the program, so I turned the project over to Irfan Choudhery, our administrator over leadership development. He ran with it and got the largest division to pilot the program."

While DES already had an extensive training program in place, there wasn't specific sequencing to the courses. People registered for classes, attended, then went back to work. Choudhery knew DES needed to use a different approach to roll out this program. "We wanted to improve turnover and engagement scores. I knew this program would help us build more effective leaders, which would have a positive influence on those metrics. But to help us with those measures, we needed a clearly defined path for learning. I believed if we could improve leadership skills, we could positively influence job satisfaction. I started the process with the pilot of SLII® to the Division of Benefits and Medical Eligibility (DBME)."

Anna Hunter, deputy assistant director of the division at that time, was a participant in an SLII® class when she realized it was just what her division needed. “I was in the two-day face-to-face class, and at about 10 o’clock the first morning I texted Irfan to say this was the program that would help us change behaviors. We’ve been offering the two-day SLII® class ever since,” says Hunter.

“I also needed a training program for frontline supervisors. About 50 percent of our supervisors who are placed in the role have never managed people before, and the remaining 50 percent have only a little experience.” Hunter knew she could help people in this group be more effective in their roles and improve the turnover rate if she could provide fundamental leadership skills.

The Blanchard team introduced Hunter to the Blanchard Management Essentials® course, which focuses on core skills every manager needs. It introduces four conversations—goal setting, praising, redirecting, and wrapping up—as the framework for communication. Participants are trained to listen to learn, inquire for insight, tell their truth, and express confidence to make those conversations more meaningful. DES decided to pilot the program with 100 team members and measure the business impact of their investment.

They measured three levels of evaluation:

- Did participants like the training?
- Did they learn new skills?
- Did they change behaviors on the job?

Surveys indicated 90 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed the training was beneficial, while 23 percent saw skill improvement. More important, 85 percent said the training had a strong impact on their ability to lead others and the new behaviors had a positive impact on the performance of staff. “Measuring the impact of the training has proved to be invaluable,” says Hunter. “We can see we’re making a good investment in our people—and we know how to enhance the program to gain even greater impact. We found the right program for our specific audience.”

This initial work led to the design of the Advanced Leadership Program, resulting in a learning journey that is a twelve-month experience that focuses on six core Blanchard courses to build the foundational key skills identified by the agency. Initially the agency adopted this as an in-person classroom experience, but the pandemic quickly

changed that. DES and Blanchard needed to pivot to a virtual training option. This modality was completely new to the agency, but through a strong partnership it is now primarily being offered virtually and has reached over 1000 leaders throughout the agency.

“I admit I was skeptical about people embracing the virtual learning environment,” says Michael Wisehart, director of DES, “but people engaged in a meaningful way and stayed on their learning path. Virtual learning has proven to be successful and will be the future of our work.”



More about The Advanced Leadership Program Journey

The journey begins with an introduction session to prepare participants for the experience and to set them up for success. The first learning session presents Blanchard Management Essentials®, which teaches four core conversations to manage people and performance along with four communication essentials to create positive, productive relationships. The second course is Building Trust, where participants learn a simple model for not only building trust with employees and colleagues but also restoring trust when it has been broken. The third part of the learning journey focuses on the Blanchard program called Conversational Capacity®. Participants 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.

The fourth part of the journey introduces SLII®, which trains leaders how to provide the right amount of support and direction to each team member as they navigate certain tasks. SLII® focuses on teaching leaders how to have productive conversations that empower their direct reports to achieve goals. The Coaching Essentials® module is the fifth path of the journey and provides additional coaching skills for leaders to use to guide the development, growth, and performance of their people. The journey concludes with either Leading Virtually or Performance Management, depending on where one falls within the agency. Each learning path includes pre- and post-work, the virtual instructor-led session, and a follow-up session designed to give participants time to practice their skills and apply them to real work situations. A graduation ceremony and celebration mark the end of the course.

“We use the online portal, Blanchard Exchange, to launch pre-work for the training session,” says Choudhery. “Participants complete a variety of activities to become familiar with the program content prior to the class. By giving people information before they attend the class, we prepare them to learn and set them up for success.” After the training, participants can continue to access Blanchard Exchange for tools to help them sustain their learning and put their new skills into practice on the job. The library of information includes videos, articles, and worksheets to use when planning conversations with team members.

Perhaps the strongest part of the learning journey is the extensive amount of communication that takes place throughout the process. “I’ve found that you can’t over-communicate when you are training people. We consistently communicate with the learners as well as the managers of the learners. When the manager is supportive of the learning, it is a richer experience for the participant,” says Choudhery.

Initial Results and Rolling Out the Program to a Wider Audience

DES partnered with Blanchard to measure the effectiveness of the training based on an approach developed by Dr. Paul Leone of MeasureUp Consulting*.

Surveys were conducted with participants and their direct reports. The results follow.

Participants:

- 87% are more engaged in their leadership role
- 68% report they are more committed to their leadership role
- 90% report an improvement of leadership behaviors on the job
- 82% report improvement in their team performance

Direct Reports:

- 78% are more engaged in their role
- 75% are more committed as a result of their leader’s improved skills
- 91% report improvement in their leader’s behaviors
- 71% have improved their own performance as a result of their leader’s improved skills

This data is used to calculate an overall 39% increase in productivity.

“Investing in our leaders by improving their skills is one of the best investments we can make. Helping them improve the frequency and quality of daily conversations has resulted in higher levels of engagement, retention, performance, and customer satisfaction,” says Wisehart. “I’ve observed leaders having more confidence in their supervisory and leadership abilities, especially around problem solving and working together as a team.”

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Continuous Improvement

“The learning process today is far more meaningful than simply taking individual courses without a distinct learning plan. Now people can see we have a goal in mind—and leaders are being trained in the skills they need to build a motivating and engaging work environment,” says Hunter. DES continues to use the process Choudhery put in place that includes online pre-work, classroom training, and follow-up sessions as a best practice.

Cook recognizes this learning journey as the cornerstone for the entire agency. “We have always delivered many, many courses to our team members, but now we have a development plan in place to develop critical skills for each level of management. The key is knowing what you want to accomplish culturally before you start putting the process together, and then getting buy-in from the executive level before rolling it out to a wider audience.”

Choudhery offers a key learning in the process. “Launching a development plan like this takes lots of patience. It can take a while to get everything right, but it is well worth the time spent.”

But Wait—There’s More

In addition to the learning experience created for leaders, DES strives to meet the needs of all employees. At the beginning of the pandemic, they recognized that staff members at all levels could use some help dealing with the sudden changes in their lives. “We worked with Blanchard to develop a 90-minute webinar on resilience. The interactive session provided practical steps to develop the mindset and skillset of resilience. We made the session available to all employees and they received an action plan they could use immediately to build resilience at work and at home,” says Choudhery.

“We’ve created a learning environment where our people can learn to be the best leader they can be,” says Wisehart. “We’re committed to continuously improving that experience, so everyone is engaged and serving our customers faithfully. We have a team that is driven to excel.”

The agency vision to serve everyone in Arizona is supported by the comprehensive development plan offered to the employees. They are learning how to do their jobs more effectively, which makes it easier for them to serve the people of Arizona.

*Dr. Paul Leone created the sixth level of measurement, which won the 2019 Brandon Hall Gold Award for best advance in measuring the impact of leadership training. Level 6 is described in his book *Measuring and Maximizing Training Impact*.

