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Client Story

Developing Leaders, One Conversation at a Time: How SLII® Is Powering Leadership Growth at Darden

The Darden family of restaurants features some of the most recognizable and successful brands in full-service dining. The company operates more than 2000 restaurants, employs 195,000 team members, and serves 420 million guests annually across North America. When they identified a gap in coaching fundamentals among new restaurant managers as well as newly promoted general managers, they decided to address that gap with leadership training.

“We wanted leaders to understand that coaching isn’t a one-size-fits-all approach,” says Brian Kingsbury, manager, training, and development for the Darden Restaurant Support Center. “Leaders have to treat people as individuals and meet them where they are. That’s why we selected SLII® from Blanchard for fundamental leadership training in our Manager in Training (MIT) and General Manager/Managing Partner (GM/MP) programs.” SLII® teaches 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.

The MIT training is a three-day program, while GM/MP is a four-day design. Both of the Darden programs are delivered in-person to provide training on general business issues, compliance topics, and brand priorities of their restaurants. SLII® serves as the foundational leadership development component to improve the managers’ coaching skills.



Brian Kingsbury

"We worked with Blanchard to customize restaurant-specific scenarios to help participants apply the SLII® model to real-life situations they face in their roles. We base the scenarios on examples that have actually happened so that participants can relate to them right away. This gives them a deeper understanding of how they can apply their new skills back on the job. Plus, the sessions are very interactive. We keep people energized and engaged with the content, so the learning is fun and easy for them to understand," says Kingsbury.

Participants in the MIT program learn how to use SLII® skills and receive a copy of *Leadership and the One Minute Manager*, by Ken Blanchard, Patricia Zigarmi, and Drea Zigarmi.

Participants in the GM/MP program use the LBAII® (Leadership Behavior Analysis II), a self-assessment tool that helps them understand their leadership style by measuring their flexibility and effectiveness and providing real-time feedback for continuous improvement. They also learn how to use conversation starters, which are worksheets to plan coaching conversations with direct reports based on each of the four leadership styles in the SLII® model. "The conversation starters are a valuable tool," says Kingsbury. "When a manager can take five minutes to think through what needs to take place in a conversation, it ends up saving time and the conversations are more successful. We call this next-level learning for the GM/MP group." Participants also receive access to the SLII® Overview, an online, self-paced course to help sustain the learning. It includes micro-learning activities, videos, games, and worksheets they can use as a refresher or to deepen skills.

Understanding the Individual: A Coaching Philosophy

"The hospitality industry is such a people-oriented culture—anything we can do to develop our talent is an advantage to everyone. I see a lot of our managers come into this training thinking they can just coach everyone the same way. You can see the light bulb go on when they realize they need to coach each person based on the task they are doing. SLII® has given them a new mindset of understanding the importance of coaching each person as a unique individual and staying focused on the task instead of the person. Every person will have various levels of competence and commitment on each task, and that is what the manager needs to consider to become a more effective coach," says Kingsbury.

"When a manager can give people what they need in the moment, engagement and success will follow. We get messages from managers when they are back at work using the skills, telling us of the success they are having. That's how I know this is a valuable program and we are making a worthwhile investment in our people."

Scaling a Culture of Coaching

Kingsbury and his team facilitate approximately 25 MIT classes and 8 GM/MP sessions per year, training over 1,800 new managers and 300 general managers annually. "I think it's important to have a core group of facilitators who have gone through the Training-for-Trainer process for SLII®," he says. "The Blanchard experts not only taught us how to facilitate the training course, they explained the research behind it. It gave us the confidence to deliver the content in way that makes it meaningful to the learners."

And the impact is measurable. Course evaluations consistently return scores in the high 80s and mid-90s. "These numbers affirm what we see anecdotally—more confident leaders and stronger team dynamics across restaurant locations."

Beyond immediate training outcomes, SLII® plays a vital role in the company's broader talent strategy. In a high-turnover industry, the ability to nurture talent and provide a career path is crucial. "It's not just a job, it's a growth pipeline," Kingsbury emphasizes. "And the skills we're teaching are transferable beyond the restaurant industry."

Kingsbury is candid in his advice to other companies considering SLII®: "Don't just show the model. Dive into the full experience—certify your facilitators, customize the content, and invest in meaningful conversations. When you do, you'll see leaders grow not just in competence, but also in confidence."



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