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Carlie Mueller, Director,
People Strategy & Operations

Client Story

Creating a Shared Leadership Language at Riley Children’s Foundation

Riley Children’s Foundation is the fundraising arm for Riley Children’s Health—a 100-year-old healthcare institution with a long history of service to children and their families in Indiana.

“Everything we do supports children’s health in the state and beyond. We have close to 80 staff members dedicated to that mission,” says Carlie Mueller, Director, People Strategy & Operations.

Every year, the team at Riley Children’s Foundation has ambitious fundraising goals—and the year ahead was no exception. In fact, the new fundraising target would be the largest in the organization’s history. It would require the best out of everyone.

The good news was that Mueller had a leadership team that recognized the need to be strategic in how they approached the development of their people.

The Challenge

“In order to meet the ambitious fundraising goals that had been set for the organization, we had to determine where we needed to be and how we were going to get there. Part of that process was a needs assessment, where we identified skill gaps at all different levels and positions in our organization,” says Mueller.



Carlie Mueller

A Top-Down and Bottom-Up Leadership Development Strategy

“One theme that came out of the assessment was that we needed our staff members to take more ownership within their roles.”

Mueller knew that increased ownership and initiative came with a need for leaders to make sure they were empowering their staff. For Mueller, it was about connecting the dots.

“To learn how all of these things impact each other, we incorporated SLII® and Self Leadership content from Blanchard. It was a top-down and bottom-up approach that allowed us to hit all positions, all levels, and everyone in the organization. In this way, we could help drive that ownership and initiative while empowering our staff.

“This dual focus helped identify opportunities where people needed more or less direction or support, which ultimately helps with capacity. We could spend more time where it was needed and less time where it wasn’t.

“Identifying those needs and taking this approach was how our partnership with Blanchard came to be.”

Three Leadership Development Tracks

The rollout included three different leadership development tracks, explains Mueller.

“One track was for our leadership team—senior leaders in the organization, VP and above. Then we have a track for our people leaders—managers or directors that lead people and teams. And one for our functional leaders—managers and directors who lead functions, not people.

“In addition to these tracks, we offer what we call open learning sessions for those at the individual contributor level. The content is oftentimes the same or complementary to what is being facilitated at the leadership level.”



Creating a Common Leadership Language

As someone who teaches the content, Mueller has had a front-row seat to the impact the course material has with participants.

She especially enjoys sharing the benefits of a common leadership language that is focused on diagnosing development level and providing a matching leadership style.

The Blanchard model teaches that there are four stages of development:

- D1 – Enthusiastic Beginner
- D2 – Disillusioned Learner
- D3 – Capable, But Cautious, Contributor
- D4 – Self-Reliant Achiever

“It’s been interesting to facilitate SLII® and Self Leadership at different levels. I just love seeing the light bulbs go on, especially when we start talking about the learning process and how we all are somewhere between D1 and D4 on different goals, projects, and tasks.

“Another thing these models create is a shared leadership language. It’s been so cool to hear people talking about it and using it with their teams.

“What differentiates this model from others is its practicality. It’s not overly complicated—people can learn it and start it using right away.”

Building Psychological Safety

Mueller shares that in addition to creating a shared language, the SLII® Model also creates psychological safety in the sense that it's okay to seek more direction or more support when necessary.

"Prior to learning SLII®, many leaders felt there was a stigma around being more directive. But when they learned about diagnosing, they realized that when someone on the team needs more direction and support, it's okay to offer more direction. It just needs to be a match.

"A senior leader, for example, said, 'I'm realizing now that I've been handing off a lot of my D4 tasks to a team member of mine who's probably at D1 on these things. I need to think about what things just come naturally to me but might be more difficult for others.

"Another team shared when they meet now, they're comfortable saying to their leader, 'We appreciate everything you're telling us, but what we need is more direction. We need you to tell us exactly what to do. We've never done this before.'

"The leader welcomed that language so that she could spend more time where it was needed and less time where it wasn't needed. Using a shared language saved everyone time and helped them be more productive."

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Success Requires Both Leaders and Individual Contributors

Reflecting on the success of the program and key strategies that have contributed to the initiative's success, Mueller points to a couple of factors.

"One of my biggest learnings from this, and something I was hoping would happen, was the success of a bottom-up and top-down approach.

"The Self Leadership content, which focuses on helping individuals identify and seek the direction and support that they need, as well as SLII®, which helps leaders apply the right leadership style at the right time, are both big parts of our success.

"Having an inclusive leadership development strategy and focusing on everyone in the organization is important. You could have stellar leaders, but things may get difficult if your individual contributors don't know how to identify their development level or seek the right support."

Continuing to Build on the Foundation

Mueller is pleased with the success that has been achieved but is also looking forward to continued impact.

"We're just starting to see the benefit from this approach. My goal now is to continue to help our staff integrate this language and build on it. And that's where my focus will be going forward: how to build on this, keep it fresh, and benefit from the experience.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg. There's a lot more to come."