In 2010, Southland Industries contacted Dr. Charles Tweedly, a professor at Pine Manor College, to design a leadership development program for their company. Dr. Tweedly proposed an action learning based approach that combined learning labs, assessments and individual coaching over a one year period to assure real-world, sustainable results. The collaboration between Dr. Tweedly and Southland generated a new program called AL²: Agile Leadership through Action Learning. This case study describes the program and its impact on the participants and the company. Contact the Center for Innovative Professional Development at Pine Manor College to inquire about this program and others that we have available.

HISTORY

In ten years, Southland Industries, one of the top mechanical engineering firms in the United States, more than doubled their annual revenues from roughly $220 million in 2002 to close to $450 million in 2012. With a net worth of $65 million, they were the engineering contractor of choice for noteworthy projects such as the post 9/11 Pentagon Renovation Wedge 2-5, the new Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, and the new M Resort Spa Casino in Las Vegas, along with many other nationally recognized hospital, university and entertainment facilities.

Southland employs approximately 1500 employees operating out of four office hubs, and they bid on and direct projects in major markets and industries across the country. They have won awards in every industry-related category and developed an impressive track record in the areas of safety, craftsmanship and “green” innovation.

THE CHALLENGE

The only thing Southland had not yet achieved was a consistent means of identifying potential leaders and of helping those employees make the transition into a leadership role -- a situation complicated not only by the company’s rapid growth, but also by a characteristic somewhat unique to its employ profile:

As a leading mechanical engineering company, most of its high performing employees had attained their success by doing what they did best as engineers: independent problem solving.

However, the type of talent the company desperately needed to support its growth while maintaining its quality...
edge were leaders who were not just technically savvy, but who also understood the nuances of managing a collective—of enabling the members of a team to bring their aggregate talent to bear on a problem.

ENGINEERING A SOLUTION

Several years ago, Southland’s Director of Human Resources, Michelle Peters, and Director of Training, George Benoit, recognized the need for an employee leadership development program. Specifically, they sought a program which would transform Southland’s scientifically-minded, task-oriented engineers into corporate leaders who could bring about the type of corporate change needed to support the company’s growth, expand into new markets, and continue to offer a quality product.

In 2010, they mapped out a leadership training program that would include several key components:

1. Individual assessment—Utilize assessment tools that would enable participants to gain insights into their own communication, problem-solving and leadership styles.

2. A “stretch” problem or project for the participants to work on which would have a positive impact on the company’s profits and growth while providing significant opportunities for learning.

3. Exposure to Southland’s executive management team and board of directors.

4. Outside coaching and a general leadership curriculum.

They knew their Board was hungry for this type of program, so once the general parameters were in focus, it became a matter of finding a facilitator who had the skills necessary to pioneer this new program for Southland.

When they approached PDA Associates, they discovered that President and Lead Facilitator, Dr. Charles Tweedly, not only was familiar with the challenges presented, but realized that the key components Michelle and George had mapped out actually contained all the elements of accepted best practice in leadership development.

Best practice suggests that to get the desired results from the experiential component of the process it is essential to also take steps to enhance both participant readiness for the experiences and their capacity to reflect afterwards to internalize the lessons learned. The relationship between the three elements is illustrated in the above figure.

Readiness would be achieved through the use of various personal assessment tools, including 360 degree feedback instruments, which shine a light on their current leadership strengths and development needs. The use of a coach and access to the executive management team would provide both support and a means of continual reflection during the program. The unanswered questions, however, were:

1. How do we manage the “stretch” experience in a way that we produce both a meaningful learning experience and productive result for the company?
2. How do we organize this into a sustainable process for leadership development?

Dr. Tweedly suggested that Action Learning, a powerful workplace learning tool which had been used successfully in major corporations for many years was the ideal answer to the first question. It had been used to solve corporate problems, build teams, expand corporate capabilities, and develop leaders for many major corporations, and, according to Dr. Tweedly, the skills developed were sustainable and lasting for the long run. In the short run, Action Learning enabled the organizations who used it to gain important resolution to a problem, project, issue or task which often had a quantifiable impact on profitability, efficiency or expansion. In short, action learning represents real people resolving and taking action on real problems in real time and learning while doing so.

To address the need for a coherent process Tweedly augmented the Action Learning tool by adding the elements of coaching and learning labs spun together into a repeatable process of action and reflection.

The learning labs would provide focused, modularized content targeted at the initial assessments and the emerging needs of the group over the 10 months of the program. These thought provoking sessions would raise questions and challenge their existing paradigms around effective leadership. The coaching and executive support would provide regular opportunities for reflection and assist participants in developing new strategies to address their most pressing leadership challenges. PDA Associates incorporated the full power of their most advanced theory and leadership development tools, and they worked closely with Michelle and George to create a program to best meet Southland's needs. The result was christened, “Built to Lead,” and it became the genesis of a PDA tool which would eventually become known as AL²: Agile Leadership in Action Learning.

GETTING THE “BUY IN”

According to Southland CEO, Ted Lynch, the ramifications of pursuing Built to Lead were substantial. When the program was presented to him, he quickly recognized its merit in that it was wrapped around three concepts which he considered to be of the utmost importance:

1. It gave employees a meaningful chance to be challenged and to have growth opportunities within the company
2. It provided necessary leadership development training
3. It enabled participants to sustain what they had learned for a significant length of time, in this case one year, as they worked on a project of great importance to the company.

“The thing that I used to stay up at night thinking about was, how do we challenge our employees? How do we give them opportunities?” said Lynch. “The leadership development program they showed me did that, but,” he
continued, “the piece that really caught my attention was the action learning part of it.”

Lynch said “We had some key challenges that needed to be resolved, and that the teams would be tackling one of those issues as part of their training was pretty exciting—and, incidentally, they did great… We wouldn’t have moved forward this quickly without those groups working on these challenges.”

IMPLEMENTATION

With the Board of Directors and Lynch solidly behind the program, the selection process for participants began. In the first year of implementation, 2011, the list was meticulously narrowed to six employees who were invited to participate, but, because the program was brand new, they were not given much information other than the knowledge that they had been hand-selected to pilot a leadership development program. Of course by the second year, word of Built to Lead’s success had begun to spread throughout the company so it was easier to promote internally.

As the participants became more deeply involved, they were made aware of several things:

First, the leaders of the company, namely the Board of Directors and the CEO had been apprised of the names of the team members, and participants would have access to these leaders throughout the course of the program.

Second, participants would be working to resolve a significant corporate challenge which eventually would be presented to them by the CEO.

Third, every effort would be made to give team members the support they would need to be able to maintain their daily responsibilities while also working on their challenge project.

A PEEK INTO THE LEARNING LABS

As mentioned, the program was designed to move through various phases with the first devoted to readiness, in other words, increasing self-awareness and team building. State of the art personality assessment tools such as the Leadership Agility 360 Assessment were used to build awareness in the participants in terms of what their communication styles were, how they approached change and problem solving, how they viewed competition, adversity, new ideas and many other factors. It gave them a personal benchmark in terms of how they handled pivotal one-on-one interpersonal conversations, how they functioned as a leader in a team situation and how they led within the context of organizational change. Often these assessments led to key moments of insight for team members, and from those moments, participants could see what they were doing well and also where they needed to improve. With the assistance of a personal coach, individualized growth plans were created, and over the course of the year, work with the coach, peer coaching and individual reflection were used to develop skills. The Learning Labs were tailored to the development needs of the participants and they provided a framework to learn and apply new skills that would build on their strengths and address their development needs.

THE “STRETCH” PROBLEM

Once the first phase was underway, participants entered the experience-based phase in which the corporate stretch problem, or challenge, was presented. For example, the first year’s problem had to do with energy services.
Southland Industries had been in and out of the energy services market several times over the course of the past twenty years. What Lynch and the Board wanted was a recommendation as to whether or not it would be worthwhile to pursue the market wholeheartedly, and if so, how best to go about it.

**QUESTIONS FOR ANSWERS:**

Once Lynch presented the problem, Tweedly reviewed the rules that guide the action learning process:

- Statements can only be made in response to questions
- Anyone can ask a question of anyone at any time

Action Learning emphasizes questions and reflection above statements and opinions. Questions prevent the group from solving the wrong problem and precipitously jumping into wrong action. The process drives home the point that most challenges of significance are “problems, not puzzles.” As Tweedly explains, “with a puzzle you know what the solution will look like and you have all the pieces to put it together. Problems are messier. You often have no idea what the solution should look like nor do you necessarily have all the right pieces.”

The benefits of the technique are many. It becomes more likely that all participants will be drawn into a dialog and that multiple talents and perspectives will be utilized to define and eventually solve the problem. It keeps the problem open long enough so that the issue can be pared down to what truly lies at its foundation. This means that once the effort to resolve an issue begins, work advances efficiently.

After participants believed they fully understood the problem, the program switched more fully into the experiential phase of developing a solution. However, even with this very action-oriented phase underway, a steady stream of exercises and learning labs were injected to teach participants other key leadership tools. Sometimes these labs were on topics chosen by the coach, but often they were facilitated by the experiences brought back to the table by team members themselves. Throughout the process, every effort was made to utilize the full strength of Action Learning by tying theory and practice together.

The third phase of the process, or reflection, is something that in reality, Southland team members were encouraged to practice throughout the program. In his role as action learning coach, Tweedly stressed the importance of taking time to reflect on what was learned, how it was applied, whether or not it worked, and how the situation could have been improved upon.

**QUANTITATIVE RESULTS**

At the culmination of the first year of Built to Lead, the team recommended to the Board that Southland Industries invest in the energy services market. They further recommended the Board take the first step of hiring someone devoted exclusively to developing that market. As a result, the hiring of a new vice president in charge of energy services was announced in 2012, and Southland’s competition in that sector began in earnest.

The second year resulted in recommendations having to do with the modular construction segment of the industry. Using the tools taught in Built to Lead, the team came up with a consensus on Southland’s focus, and the Board is now implementing those recommendations.

In addition, many of the people who participated in Built to Lead ended up being promoted in some manner. Often they took what they had learned in the program and started implementing it in their departments. For example, in one case, a new dialog was opened between a manager and the department’s interns. Employee reviews also became more productive by incorporating two-way conversations.
QUALITATIVE RESULTS

“As a result of the program you can see those who participate going from employees to leaders of the company. You saw them take ownership of the company. That’s something I didn’t necessarily anticipate.” - Ted Lynch

Perhaps the best indicators of lessons learned and benefits reaped by Southland’s Built to Lead participants and by the company itself can best be understood through the words of those who were involved:

On the transition from solving problems independently to becoming a leader who uses the power of a collective to solve problems and implement change...

“Before, we sat down in a meeting, we reviewed what was happening, I made the decision and we moved on. Now, I sit back and start asking questions to see where people are coming from. You learn to be able to engage people and get the most out of what they think… get a solution that will work for everyone. In our group, with the problem we were given, the solution we came up with as a whole was a better solution than what I would have thought of on my own.” – Nicholas Sfier

“Prior to my involvement, a lot of the stuff I did was completely normal to me. I just assumed other people understood it. Taking a step back made me realize the stuff I do may not be understood. I did not put much consideration into this in the past, whereas now I am much more aware of making sure.” – Dan Navarette

“In the past, maybe if something wasn’t getting addressed with a co-worker, I wouldn’t have done anything or maybe I would have gone to my superior. But, as a result of the program, I learned I could sit down with the individual and talk. I could ask, ‘How can we get ahead of this because it’s going to set us back.’ Now I try to understand the individual and listen to what he has to say so we can see what the obstacles are.” – Jose Felsmann

“… I’m more of an individual kind of guy, and I was surprised at how quickly and strongly we came together… unified and in one direction. In thirteen years I’ve never been part of a group like that, and now there’s this group I can call and bounce ideas off of— that’s been very valuable.” - Ken Lindsey

On personal growth...

“One of the benefits is there is a personal coach assigned to work with you. The coach monitors real time progress. Unlike other kinds of training where the impact might be just for 6 months or so, this one is way more lasting, and by the time the year ends, it’s pretty close to being embedded.” – Dan Navarette

“If you find the right guy at the right point in his career, this program can have a massive impact. I know it did on me. It got me focused and ultra-confident-- some of the board members made the comment it’s the most important thing we’re doing right now.” – Ken Lindsey

“The biggest surprise for me was in learning there really is not a set of rules to becoming a leader… not a prescription for it. We can all be different.” - Jose Felsmann

On professional growth and opportunities...

“It’s made an impact on the way I manage my team here. There is a ripple effect that will impact almost anybody else you can deal with in the organization as well as outside the organization.” – Dan Navarette

“I have a lot more to offer, and that’s a reflection on Charlie. Being able to understand different personality traits; being more self-aware has helped tremendously. Maybe I didn’t 14 months ago, but I understand it now-- especially given the results we produced. Charlie has given me at least three or four different tools or ideas that I can use when approaching another individual. I understand what leadership is, and I can see how it worked on me. In fact I’ve turned it around to start my own little leadership group with the five or six guys that work for me.” - Ken Lindsey
On how the program has made Southland more competitive…

“It changes the way we do business within the company and with our clients. You see differences in the way we negotiate with the client. Going into a meeting, you try harder to get their perspective and engage them so you have a better idea of where they are coming from and what they might be dealing with. The more people we have out there who have been through this type of program, the better the company is going to get.” – Nicolas Sfier

“It’s given us a tool to identify the root cause of the problem. For example, say a client comes to us and says, ‘You are behind on the job.’ Before, you’d end up with all those ‘love notes’ between us and them, and you’d start referring back to the contract, and this is in there, and this is not in there, etc. But Built to Lead shows you how to engage them-- to find out the real problem by asking questions. So you find out the real problem is not that you’re behind. Rather it’s how can we facilitate the guys being more productive out there? It definitely changes the perspective. You have more of a collaborative approach, and I think our clients notice that.” – Nicolas Sfier

“We’re growing, and we can groom the next set of leaders here. The CEO has called us a couple of times. He took everything we produced and looked at it, but he gave us the freedom to figure it out on our own. Because of our recommendations, the company is taking steps towards modular construction.” - Ken Lindsey

On recommendations to those considering an Action Learning program of their own…

“If they are serious about it, there is a level of commitment you have to make. All of the participants have day jobs, and they are busy. They have to peel away to work on it-- and it’s not just their time, it’s also my time and the Board’s. But it’s been a great program, and the results prove the value of it.” - Ted Lynch

“I think it’s a program that allows your employees to catapult into their leadership skills! But you have to keep at it. It’s like playing on a sports team—the first year you learn the basic skills, the second year, you improve, the third year you really start being able to play the game. You’ll see improvement in the first year, but it takes two to three years. You’re always improving. I learned the tools, now I have to learn to practice using them.”
– Jose Felsmann

“This is a very different way to go about problem solving so your participants need to be open to that and willing to try it. The most important thing you can do is to find a strong coach who is well qualified to handle action learning scenarios. You need someone who can help you learn how to frame a problem, and then the solution. Had Charlie not been able to pull that off, I could see the whole thing derailing.” – Dan Navarette

“Every company should have something like this. It has a positive impact on the company’s bottom line—or, in the case of a non-profit, the way in which they do business.” – Nicolas Sfier
IN SUMMARY

In the case of Southland Industries, AL² was effective because the company devoted the resources necessary for the program to do what it was intended: Give independent, task-minded engineers the tools and insights they would need to become thoughtful, effective managers.

During interviews with those involved, most expressed the desire for a follow-up program. Each one said their involvement had made such a deep impression that not only did they feel more effective at work, but they also noticed their approach to life outside the office had been enriched in terms of their marriages, parenting abilities and even in volunteer activities such as coaching.

As one participant joked, “My wife likes me better now!”

The process implemented at Southland, now known as Agile Leadership through Action Learning, works because it is based on the old fashioned, common sense notions that “learning is doing,” “confidence comes through action,” and “getting an outsider’s objective perspective can be valuable.” In Southland’s case, the facilitator tailor-fitted leadership development best practices to the company’s unique situation. It evolved into the perfect tool for teaching Southland employees leadership skills and giving them a chance to cement those skills in a real world laboratory.

For more information on how the AL² process can be adapted to fit your own organization’s needs, please contact:

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