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Client Story

Leading the American Institutes Way

Leaders at the American Institutes for Research (AIR) are dedicated to helping employees embody AIR’s corporate values by creating an inclusive and respectful work environment. They recently replaced the company’s existing performance review process, which had been based on annual reviews, with a new approach based on giving and receiving feedback on a regular basis. This allows real-time assessment of performance and improves communication. In addition, they have developed a training series they call Living the AIR Values to strengthen the foundation of what it takes to ensure that every staff member feels safe, supported, included and has opportunities to be heard, grow, and thrive. The ultimate goal is to have a workplace anchored in collegiality and teamwork, where diverse perspectives and backgrounds are embraced and applied to enhance their work.

“We kicked off the training series with a session on unconscious bias, followed by a session on feedback,” says Dr. Melissa Edmiston, director, learning and development for AIR. “We wanted managers to be able to use feedback to develop their direct reports, so the next part of the training focused on coaching skills.”

According to Edmiston, AIR didn’t have the internal capacity to create a coaching program, so they looked for a partner to develop and deliver one. “Blanchard® provided what we needed with their Coaching Essentials® program. It teaches managers how to use coachlike behaviors to develop skills and improve the performance of their people.



Dr. Melissa Edmiston

Blanchard® worked closely with us to customize the experience so that we could map the skills of coaching with the specific skills of our unconscious bias and feedback training. It was essential for all three programs to support each other to provide a common language everyone could use. We wanted people to be able to transfer the skills of one training program to the others, so that it would be a complete learning curriculum.”

The Coaching Essentials process is based on these key concepts:

- Connect—Build trust and positive relationships
- Focus—Identify topics and goals
- Activate—Collaborate to develop a plan for action
- Review—Clarify agreements and discuss accountability

Participants learn four critical skills to support the coaching process:

- Listen to Learn
- Inquire for Insight
- Tell Your Truth
- Express Confidence

Learning to use these skills in the coaching process helps managers conduct powerful coaching conversations with their employees that create connection, increase trust, and improve performance. The program is designed to be delivered in a one-day face-to-face session, or in three 2-hour virtual sessions.

AIR has a geographically dispersed workforce of more than 1,800 employees throughout the United States, so bringing people together for face-to-face training would have been cost prohibitive. The virtual learning environment proved to be their best option. “The virtual Coaching Essentials program is delivered by Blanchard staff, so the training is consistent from session to session. This format has allowed us to train far more people than our internal staff would have been able to manage,” says Edmiston.

The virtual program is offered in two formats—six hours over three days in one week or three consecutive Mondays—to allow for variations in employee schedules. AIR has trained nearly 300 people (21 cohorts) in the first four months and plans to train an additional 200 to 300 people with quarterly offerings. Blanchard also designed and delivered a two-hour Coaching for Impact session for senior leaders so that they can support the Coaching Essentials program and help build the culture.

“I was worried about whether people would stay engaged—but Blanchard designed the program to keep people active. The part where people are placed into breakout sessions not only is effective for learning, it also provides an opportunity for people who might not otherwise get to meet each other to work together, learn together, and become colleagues. People who have completely different jobs around the country now have a better understanding of the roles that others play in the overall success of the company.”

Results to Date

Evaluations of the training focused primarily on Level 1 (reaction) and Level 2 (learning), with some Level 3 (behavior change). Feedback has been positive. They used a questionnaire to ask about quality of content, delivery style, relevance of material being presented, and likelihood of recommending the program to others, and more than 80 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the content, delivery style and relevance were all helpful to them and that they would recommend the program to others.

On a 6-point scale, knowledge of the coaching process improved from an average of 3.46 pre-training to 5.16 post training. Confidence to begin coaching others increased from 3.50 to 4.86, while commitment to coach others increased from 3.79 to 5.04.

“While we are excited about the positive results so far, we are working with Blanchard to continually improve the program. Blanchard works hard to understand the different roles people play in the organization and to customize the training to specific needs,” says Edmiston.



She helps sustain the learning by bringing together manager learning communities every couple of months. People share stories about how coaching is working for them and include on-the-job examples. “Sharing success stories really helps embed the skills. We will continue to map coaching skills into future training programs we offer. We are serious about building a culture of feedback and development—and coaching is a key element of that.”

Things to Consider

Edmiston highly recommends that others consider customizing off-the-shelf programs. “We originally piloted Coaching Essentials just as it is, but when we customized the program by connecting it to what we are doing in our organization, it made a huge difference in engagement. It was so easy for people to recognize the relevance to their own jobs and apply the skills immediately.” She also suggests mapping skills from one training program to another. “We didn’t just assume that people would be able to make the connection between our unconscious bias,

feedback, and coaching training; we explicitly mapped the skills between each program. Participants realize we aren’t simply offering a few different programs—these programs are designed to work together to help everyone gain the skills they need to sustain our culture.”

Another important element Edmiston suggests is involving team members from other departments. She worked with a multidisciplinary team consisting of the general counsel, diversity and inclusion, learning and development, and human capital teams as stakeholders. “Bringing people from several departments together to understand the importance of the training created the support mechanism we needed to make sure the training initiative had the right stakeholders involved. It sent a strong message to employees that we were serious about providing skills to improve performance. We all have a stake in making sure we are doing the right things for the continued success of our company.”

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