

From Campus to Partner

A comprehensive leadership development initiative LEADS Grant Thornton into the future.

The Company

Grant Thornton



[MORE/www.grantthornton.com](http://www.grantthornton.com)

The Supplier

Development Dimensions International



[MORE/www.ddiworld.com](http://www.ddiworld.com)

GRANT THORNTON, United States member firm of the global accounting organization Grant Thornton International, is growing. The company provides independent services to mid-cap, small-cap, and privately held clients, and non-audit services to Fortune 1,000 clients. Given that business focus, Grant Thornton must also meet industry demands for greater integrity and oversight of financial information and compliance requirements.

"Today, with the changes in our business and in the marketplace, and the need to rebuild trust and confidence in the financial information provided to investors, I think accountants can play a significant role," says Shelley Stein, Grant Thornton's chief operating officer. "And we've experienced huge growth in the last few years."

According to CLO Bob Dean, in 2001, the company had approximately 3,000 employees. Now that figure has ballooned to 4,400 people in 50 U.S. offices.

"I haven't seen this level of growth that's focused on accounting and tax services in my 30-year career," says Dean. "It puts a lot of pressure on the firm to retain its best people, to recruit more leaders, and to build leadership capabilities at the executive level."

The experience

Last year, Grant Thornton hired more than 1,000 people from other accounting firms for positions at all levels. "These people wanted to join Grant Thornton because of the experience we provide," says Stein.

The Grant Thornton experience underpins all of the company's people initiatives, including LEADS, a leadership development initiative that supports Grant Thornton's leaders during their entire careers with the firm—starting before they come on board.

"As part of LEADS, we have a program called Footsteps, which is geared toward college sophomores and juniors," explains Don Beeman, Grant Thornton's director of leadership development. "We invite them in, give them a couple of days to experience the firm, and send them through different mini leadership sessions. The goal is for these students to feel that this is a firm they'll want to be a part of when they graduate. So in that way, it's a recruitment tool."

Including the Footsteps program and a college intern program, the LEADS initiative has 12 distinct steps, each marking a career milestone. All of the steps are supported by coaching and mentoring, e-learning, classroom learning (delivered through Grant Thornton's corporate university), and leadership competencies.

At the front end of LEADS are programs designed to recruit talented new employees into the firm, get them up to speed, and acclimate them to their new jobs and the organization. Recent graduates progress through those programs during their first couple of years on the job.

Once they move into their first leadership positions, employees then go through senior-level development programs, which give them the skills they need to be successful first-level leaders.

"Our people get more client exposure at a younger level, which is vital for their development," says Beeman. "So, we need to make sure that they're ready to lead and supervise." For those transitioning into leadership roles from other organizations, there's an Experienced Hire Development program that provides technical training while also introducing them to the Grant Thornton culture.

When leaders advance to the manager level, they are invited to a new manager development conference. "The conference is a celebratory time," says Beeman. "Becoming a manager is one of the milestones that the firm really celebrates."

In addition, new managers also become responsible for actively coaching others. They participate in Development Dimensions International's Coaching for Improvement course to learn the skills needed to coach effectively.

Managers and senior managers also can complete Program Leader Certification, a process that certifies them to deliver technical courses in the local offices as well as a curriculum of courses from DDI's Interaction Management: Exceptional Leaders, Extraordinary Results leadership development system.

"When people come out of certification, we want them to be ready, comfortable, and credible in front of a group of people," says Beeman, a DDI certified master trainer. "Plus, we think it's important for our more senior people to be the ones delivering this training. It sends a powerful message."

Chris Reed, human resource manager for the Kansas City office, describes the certification process as "extremely valuable" and speaks enthusiastically about his role as a facilitator. "It's exciting to share these skills and to help people succeed within the firm," he says.

Near the top of the LEADS ladder are specialized academies and industry and service line conferences, which are designed to impart highly technical knowledge on small, select groups of participants relative to their specific part of the business.

The need to “build leadership capabilities at the executive level,” that Dean mentions, is the goal of the Partner Candidate Development Program and the Partner Leadership Program. The former is a demanding, highly structured and collaborative two-year experience designed to prepare qualified senior managers for the transition to partner. The program, in which participants work in teams to formulate solutions to real issues facing the firm, allows participants to build a peer network across the firm and to interact with Grant Thornton’s senior leadership team. It also gives them feedback on their leadership abilities and creates a personal development plan.

“We feel gratified about the development of the people that emerge from this program and about their readiness to become partners,” says Dean. “The graduates become catalyst leaders within the organization.”

LEADS doesn’t end for participants once they make partner: They continue to grow and develop through a Partner Leadership Program. This year-long program brings together a group of Grant Thornton partners at various off-sight locations. They sharpen leadership skills, broaden their perspectives, and reinforce team-building efforts through such activities as a ropes course and a culinary school experience.

While participating in ropes courses and preparing gourmet meals may sound like activities that typically would be frowned upon by busy partners, the Partner Leadership Program is drawing rave reviews from participants and leaders.

“If I had to pick one thing that I thought was the best development experience I have had during my 28 years at Grant Thornton, it would be the Partner Leadership Program,” says Stein. “It gave me a chance to learn different things from a leadership standpoint and, at the same time, it gave me a chance to bond with people from other offices that were experiencing the same types of challenges—that’s just huge.”

Paul Wolber, the managing partner for the Detroit office, finds the program to be equally valuable.

“I’ve had to do things that pushed me out of my comfort zone. But it feels good to be pushed out of that zone,” he says. “I’m having the time of my life, and I come away from each experience with insights I can use to build a better team back here within the office.”

The need for great leaders

The LEADS program is impressive because of its ability to touch every individual in Grant Thornton’s leadership pipeline. But, the compressed timeframe in which the initiative came to life is equally as impressive.

Dean joined the firm as CLO in 2001 and reorganized the company’s strategic learning group, which now includes designers and delivery professionals. In late 2003, Beeman came on board. By December of that year, he and Dean presented a leadership development vision to the firm. A month later, Grant Thornton’s senior leadership threw its support behind that vision.

“It’s made my role so much easier because they truly believe in this and support it 100 percent,” says Beeman.

Less than two years later, LEADS continues to evolve, but its initial goals and business needs remain unchanged.

“We’ll be successful if we’re able to reduce the number of experienced people we have to hire externally and if we are able to develop our leaders from within and grow them as we move forward,” says Beeman.

From his local-office vantage point, Wolber has no trouble seeing why LEADS is so important to Grant Thornton.

“How do you build a great organization?” he asks. “You build great people. And how do you build great people? You build great leaders.”

Leadership development from campus to partner

