



JOHNSONVILLE SAUSAGE:

Developing Employees With a Taste for Leadership

The Situation

In 1945, Ralph F. and Alice Stayer opened a butcher shop in the quaint town of Johnsonville, Wisconsin. Named after this town, the company became known as the producer of the sausage with “big taste” and its products quickly took over breakfast tables and backyard grills across the Midwest. You may have some of their products sitting in your refrigerator right now—Johnsonville Sausage.

After years of growth, in 2000, Johnsonville began a deliberate transition from a strong regional brand to a multinational brand. Today, it takes 1,600 members to manufacture, market, sell, and distribute their food across 40 countries. In particular, this growth required Johnsonville to develop leaders in manufacturing who could successfully scale up operations, lead teams, and exemplify Johnsonville’s corporate culture, which valued integrity, respect, and innovation.

Following the results of a survey that identified current manufacturing leaders’ skills gaps, the senior leader team recommended that the organizational development and

learning (OD&L) team launch the Building Leaders and Superlative Talent (BLAST) program. Participants who completed the program would be equipped to lead manufacturing teams and the company successfully during its expansion. The program's content focuses on self-understanding, understanding others, team knowledge, and using this awareness on the job. BLAST has not only thrived since 2000, but also evolved to meet changing learner needs.

Program Design

When the program was first developed, the OD&L team wanted the program to help close the existing leadership skills gaps (such as monitoring employee performance and intervening during difficult situations) identified in the survey, and align the program with current and future strategic goals. OD&L collaborated internally with the operations and HR teams to identify how the leadership challenges needed to be addressed specifically for manufacturing employees.

Using the 70-20-10 model, OD&L designed the program so that formal instruction took up 10 percent of each participant's training time. The formal components of the program would happen during nine, day-long, instructor-led sessions over a nine-month period. This spaced-learning model reinforced learning by requiring application-based homework following each in-person session.

The majority—70 percent—of learning would happen on the job as participants had the opportunity to test the concepts they learned in class. The remaining 20 percent would happen through social learning during time spent passing knowledge gained in the program on to co-workers.

BLAST was designed to be made up of multiple modules focusing on different leadership areas; modular courses allow for quick content adaptations based off user data and feedback. Program components could easily be removed and replaced with updated content.

Course Design

Initially, OD&L considered developing all content internally. However, due to the amount of additional resources (including staff time and financial resources) that the team would need to design a nine-month program, OD&L leaders decided that using externally-created content was the better path. In selecting vendor material, OD&L gave preference to content that they thought was practical and could be quickly and easily applied on the job.

BLAST is divided into three sections: pre-course work, nine main sessions, and post-graduation. Pre-course work begins 60 days before the first main session. Learners link personal goals to company objectives using an impact mapping tool, and sign a learning contract. The learning contract is an agreement between the member, their coach, and the OD&L team stating they agree to the terms of the class, such as participating and doing the homework.

The nine main in-person sessions focus on three areas: self-understanding, understanding others, and team knowledge. Each session combines instructor-led content with scenario-based learning, simulations, and recorded media (such as video).

Coinciding with the main sessions, students work in teams on action learning projects, solving real company challenges selected by senior leaders. Over a three-month period, teams determine an approach to solve the problem and recommend solutions. ATD Research and the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp) found that experiential learning opportunities for leaders, such as action learning projects, are more often used by high-performing organizations that lead in market performance.

BLAST concludes with a graduation lunch attended by senior leaders, including the company president; during the event, graduates give a brief speech on what they have learned from the program and highlight how they will make a difference at Johnsonville as a leader.

Maintaining Relevance

BLAST was designed collaboratively and cross-functionally, and it is continually improved based on feedback from many sources; each year the OD&L team diligently reviews, renews, and curates the program with input from internal consultants and content knowledge experts. Content is reviewed annually and decisions on whether to add, remove, or modify the modules are based on end-of-program surveys, interviews, and functional business plans for the upcoming year. Different human-centered design tools (such as stakeholder mapping and affinity clustering) are put to use as the OD&L team analyzes, prioritizes, and redesigns course structures and content.

The Results

Although BLAST has been around since 2000, evaluation data are only available from 2012 onward. Looking at results from the 73 participants who graduated from 2012 to 2014, feedback surveys have been extremely positive; learners believed their leadership skills improved and felt more confident in their ability to exhibit leadership on the job compared with before the program. Four action learning projects from BLAST

participant teams have been turned into real company solutions. In fact, these solutions have led to a total savings of more than \$2 million.

Of BLAST graduates, 49 percent have been promoted and 14 percent have made positive lateral moves. While numbers are not readily available for comparison with nongraduates, Johnsonville's leaders suspect that graduates have a significantly higher promotion rate.

Lessons Learned

- Build programs so that content can be adjusted easily to keep information relevant to learner and business needs. Consider building programs using multiple modules that can easily be added, removed, and rearranged like Johnsonville did for the leadership development program.
- Formally connect learning to participants' individual goals and to overall business objectives in writing using a tool, worksheet, or contract. When learners are reminded of how their goals affect the company mission, they will be more engaged and motivated.
- Provide leaders with opportunities for experiential learning, such as simulations, on-the-job learning, and action learning. These all drive engagement and knowledge retention and lead to better leader performance in high-pressure situations. ATD Research and i4cp found that high-performing organizations are nearly three times more likely than low-performing firms to use experiential learning to develop leaders.

Additional ATD Resources

- [Designing Learning Certificate](#)
- [Developing Learning Content](#)
- [Experiential Learning for Leaders](#)
- [Managing Learning Programs Certificate](#)
- [Ready, Set, Curate](#)

Submit Your Story

Can you tell us about a challenge your talent development function faced, a solution your team implemented, a program your team created, and the results your organization has seen? Organizations of all sizes are encouraged to apply. [Submit](#) your story today.

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