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## Client Story

# A Culture of Leadership Development at Healthfirst

Not-for-profit health insurer Healthfirst is proud to be a pioneer of the value-based care model in the industry. This trailblazing spirit is carried through the corporate culture as well. The company is guided by five strategic priorities to support this culture. There are specific expectations at each level of leadership for reinforcing the trailblazer mindset and communicating it to every employee. Knowing that leaders are the key to sustaining the culture, Healthfirst needed a leadership development plan that would equip all leaders with the skills necessary to support and direct their teams.

“We had provided some leadership training, but didn’t have a programmatic leadership development plan in place,” says Wes Wagaman, vice president, HR, organizational development and training. “We wanted to create a program to teach what it means to be a leader at Healthfirst specifically and needed a common framework and leadership language for all levels of leaders. I was familiar with SLII® from Blanchard® and thought it would be a strong anchor for not only shifting the mindset about leadership but also teaching the skills needed to be an effective leader.”



Wes Wagaman

With clearly defined leader expectations in place, Wagaman decided the best way to test the SLII® content was by piloting the program. “Our leaders had varying stages of experience. Some were new to the role, and others had great experience with us or with other organizations, but there was no consistency of leadership style. We wanted to deliver a program that would provide leaders at every level the same tools, tips, and techniques. So in the summer of 2019, a group of leaders from the Clinical line of business gathered in New York City for a series of two-day pilot sessions of SLII®.”

The pilots were a success—and in October 2019, Healthfirst launched their leadership development program, Trailblazer Ascent. The program was designed for three levels of leaders: Ranger for entry and mid-level people and project leaders, Navigator for directors and associate vice presidents, and Voyager for vice presidents.

The initial design included a virtual kick-off meeting to set expectations with the participants, followed by a face-to-face session where leaders could come together to build networks across the enterprise. Cohorts then returned to their offices to complete a 14-week self-study program of leadership fundamentals. Every two weeks, they came back together as a cohort for virtual facilitator-led sessions to share what they had learned and deepen their understanding. The final phase of the learning design cemented the foundation of leadership skills by bringing participants back together in person for a two-day SLII® workshop.

SLII® teaches leaders how to provide the right amount of support and direction to each team member as they navigate certain tasks. It focuses on teaching leaders how to have productive conversations that empower their direct reports to achieve goals. The event ends with a capstone session, graduation and celebration.

Nearly 1,500 people were in the pipeline to be trained—and great progress was being made, especially with the Ranger group—when COVID changed the trajectory of the program.

“The high touch of the face-to-face sessions was no longer an option for us, so we paused. Of course, the initial priority was to set our people up to work from home and to keep in touch with the entire employee population to see how they were managing in this new reality. But we soon began to look at ways to keep the leadership training going. Since some training was already being delivered virtually, we had a high comfort level with that method. At the onset, our partners at Blanchard had mentioned the virtual design of SLII® to us, and we had opted for the face-to-face delivery—but these new conditions prompted us to reconsider that decision,” explains Wagaman.



Healthfirst decided to continue the program in a completely virtual format using Blanchard facilitators to deliver the sessions. Participants learned SLII® skills and language in two two-hour sessions presented on one day. Additional sessions were held during the next three days so participants could practice their new skills. “The design ended up being beneficial for the learners—they liked the cadence of the training. And because the practice sessions were spread out over three days, instead of taking two full days out of the office, they could learn a new skill and then go back on the job to practice in real time. It was like building sustainment into the learning process. Plus, the Blanchard facilitators gave participants the best possible experience since they were experts in the content and familiar with Adobe Connect, the delivery platform,” says Wagaman.

## Reactions from Participants and Next Steps

The reaction to the SLII® training has been overwhelmingly positive, says Wagaman. “It’s powerful to hear participants talk about the aha moments they experience. When they realize they’ve been using the same leadership style with everyone and they understand the importance of changing that style with people on each task, it is huge. The simplicity of the model makes it easy for people to understand and apply. They use it and get real results right away. My biggest surprise has been seeing how eager our leaders are to learn new skills and how willing they are to put them into practice immediately.”

The positive anecdotal feedback is important, but Wagaman has plans to measure the effectiveness of the program even further. “I intend to gather 360-degree feedback from leaders and their direct reports and correlate that data to engagement scores and our culture survey.”

Ultimately, leadership is about leaders having better, more productive conversations with their team members to help them perform at their highest level—and SLII® is a foundational program that teaches the skills for having those conversations. Wagaman advises that the secret is to get started. It’s important to have SLII® training tie into other initiatives in the company—but don’t get bogged down in the planning phase. “Even if you don’t have a fully baked talent strategy or leadership development plan, you can feel comfortable moving forward with SLII®. It is so flexible that it will work with anything else you are rolling out. If you help your people build the muscle of conducting better conversations, that will create the framework for everything else!”



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