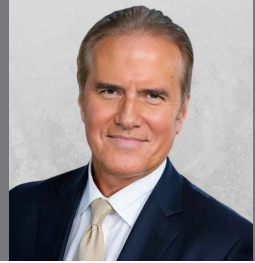


# Growing Leaders

*How two leadership learning programs are helping to ensure SmithBucklin's enduring success*

By Henry S. Givray



**A**n essential part of any chief executive's job is enabling desired annual results: customer satisfaction and retention, employee engagement and retention, and organizational performance, among others. But the mark of a true leader is as much about what happens after he or she leaves as it is about performance while on the job.

With that in mind, my overarching goal as CEO of SmithBucklin is building a great, enduring company. I have outlined certain measures and shared them with all employees to help us gauge how we're doing on our quest to be a great company. They include: creating measurable value for client organizations; attracting, developing and inspiring people of great talent and character; and being recognized, admired and respected by our industry and community by having a stellar reputation for integrity, hard work, excellence and thought leadership—and by doing good while giving back.



So how does an organization achieve greatness? Requirements vary depending on an organization's specific goals, customer base, size, industry, market, and competition, among other factors. But there are three foundational requirements:

1. Articulating, aligning, nurturing and protecting an authentic culture that guides and inspires.
2. Assembling and developing a talented and cohesive management team.
3. Building leadership capacity throughout the organization; in other words, growing leaders from within.

Regardless of the enormity, urgency or importance of my day-to-day responsibilities, opportunities and challenges, I commit a considerable amount of time, energy and heart to these three foundational requirements for building a great, enduring company. The creation of two leadership learning programs is the product of my efforts related to the third requirement.

## Leadership Learning Forum

In 2008, I began to seriously think about how best to address the third foundational requirement—growing leaders from within. To be successful, I knew the ultimate solution had to be purposeful, organized, disciplined, impactful and sustainable. However, despite myriad resources on the subject, no simple

formulas, playbooks or prescriptions exist on how to become a “true” leader—someone who truly deserves the title. That is why you cannot teach leadership. However, you can teach leadership's timeless principles, and you can offer insights, share experiences and provide tools so others can learn through a process of active engagement and self-discovery.

These tenets and others influenced and guided my decision to create the SmithBucklin Leadership Learning Forum, a year-long program for top-performing employees at various levels within the company. Launched in 2011, it consists of

eight two-day sessions designed to stimulate and inspire leadership learning and personal growth—with the overarching goal of growing leaders throughout the company and enabling them to “pay it forward” to other staff. The program relies heavily on active facilitation, homework assignments, invited guests, short lectures, exercises, case studies, and the reading and discussion of core books. These elements provoke, provide context, illuminate ideas and create an environment for reflection, self-

discovery, learning and growth via open dialogue, sharing, debate and mutual problem solving.

The program's content and curriculum are based on a leadership framework and underlying principles and concepts I've developed over the years. I am the lead facilitator for all sessions. For some sessions, I am joined by Chief Human Resources Officer Colette Huzinec. Another guest facilitator is independent consultant Dick Dooley, someone I have known for 29 years and who provided valuable assistance with the unique instructional design of the program.

Each fall, with the help of my management team, I identify and invite 18 employees with varying job functions and seniority to apply for the program. To be considered, an individual must consistently perform her or his job at an exceptionally high level, demonstrate great potential for increased responsibility and impact, show considerable capacity to grow and succeed at SmithBucklin, have a strong desire for a career in executive management – either at the SmithBucklin corporate level or in service to client organizations – and embody SmithBucklin's values. To be accepted into the program, candidates also must assert and demonstrate a deep commitment for personal learning and growth, as well as a willingness to sacrifice personal time to the program's demands.



Participating in the Leadership Learning Forum is intensive and rigorous. Attendance at all eight sessions is mandatory, 18 books must be read and 16 homework assignments must be completed. Students spend four to eight hours per week on reading, homework and preparation between sessions while maintaining their current workload and responsibilities.

Although it's a lot of work, the rewards are significant, according to Barbara O'Connor, an association executive in SmithBucklin's Business + Trade Industry Practice, who says she continually finds herself "recalling a quote that someone said during class, a story from a guest or a passage from a book" that influences how she approaches situations.

Meghan Carey, an association executive in SmithBucklin's Healthcare + Scientific Industry Practice, agrees. "Participation in the Leadership Learning Forum provided me with the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with an amazing group of classmates, as well as reflect on who I am and ensure I am connecting my actions to my core values," she says. "As a result, I am now much more purposeful in my daily interactions with my teams and clients."

Alexa Newman, senior manager of SmithBucklin Event Services, adds that the Leadership Learning Forum helps her "consciously strive to be a more powerful, positive influence on the lives of others." "Each experience that pushed me beyond my comfort zone is one that helps ensure my continued growth and development," she says.

### **Leadership Institute**

Associations operate in an environment of planned and rapid turnover and are subject to varying and often conflicting objectives, as well as fragile commitments by time-pressed volunteer board members. To overcome these inherent hurdles, associations not only must ensure their boards comprise skilled, dedicated and credible individuals, but also must acquire and possess organizational competencies such as effective governance, strategic thinking and action taking,

innovation, change management and—most importantly—leadership. Building leadership capacity on the board is an imperative to ensure the association is vital, value-creating and sustainable.

Another one of the measures of greatness for our company is that we are continually growing leaders – not only our employees but also volunteer board members from our client organizations. With the overwhelming success of the Leadership Learning Forum, I knew that a similar program would be welcomed by the boards of SmithBucklin's client organizations as well as help us deliver on this important measure.

Launched in 2013, the SmithBucklin Leadership Institute is based on the same design, content, curriculum and format of the Leadership Learning Forum, but is offered in five two-day sessions over six months. I serve as lead facilitator and Dale West, a senior SmithBucklin association executive and graduate of the inaugural Leadership Learning Forum class, serves as co-facilitator for all program sessions. Key objectives include:

- Enable high levels of organizational performance within SmithBucklin client associations to ensure their vitality, relevance and long-term success.
- Add tangible value to the volunteer experience by offering a unique and meaningful professional and personal development opportunity.
- Demonstrate SmithBucklin's client stewardship pledge.

Every fall, SmithBucklin conducts open enrollment for up to 18 volunteer board members with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. The first two classes, for example, represented client organizations in medical research, business services, agriculture, technology, nursing, health care access management, credentialing, medical staff services, legal marketing and genetic counseling.

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The program has generated substantive, meaningful personal growth for the participants. They have also forged enduring relationships with each other and made deep commitments to bring the learnings back and “pay it forward” to their associations and employers.

“Although I would describe the program as rigorous, the rich learning I experienced made the effort 100 percent worthwhile,” says Claudia Zacharias, MBA, CAE, president and CEO of the Board of Certification/Accreditation and secretary/treasurer of the Institute for Credentialing Excellence. “Sharing the journey with board members from other SmithBucklin client organizations added an unexpectedly valuable element to the program. I can honestly say that I have remembered and applied something I learned every day since I completed the program.”

Jehannine Austin, Ph.D., MSc, CGC/CCGC, associate professor and Canada research chair in the University of British Columbia’s Department of Psychiatry and Medical Genetics, and the president-elect of the National Society of Genetic Counselors, says she likewise was transformed by the experience. “As a result of participating, I feel I am entering the next chapter of my development,” she says. “I am doing so feeling more centered and certain, with more confidence and bigger aspirations. I am excited to see how much I am capable of growing, and I already see how what I have learned is influencing interactions and outcomes, both at work and in the context of my professional association.”

Adds Buzz Woeckener, associate vice president of I&O risk management at Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co. and a board member of SHARE, an association of companies employing mainframe systems and related technologies, “I am more self-aware of all the lessons in leadership out there waiting to be learned and now have new tools to dig out this valuable information. I will use these newly honed skills everyday as I continue to grow in my own leadership capabilities and impart these skills onto the future leaders I have the privilege to mentor.”

In October, graduates from the inaugural Leadership Institute class held a reunion in Chicago to discuss their experiences since commencement and to partake in another opportunity for learning and sharing.

“Henry and I were amazed at the graduates’ continued commitment to studying and practicing leadership—especially the idea of paying it forward,” West says. “They also remained connected, sharing their thoughts and ideas on leadership long after the last session ended.”

### **Never-Ending Journey**

Leaders have the chance to make meaningful and lasting impacts on people and on the organizations they serve. In doing so, they will experience levels of fulfillment and contentment that they could never have imagined. But to achieve that, they must understand the most important lesson about leadership that is both humbling and inspiring: The journey toward becoming a true leader never ends. •

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**Henry S. Givray** is former Chairman, President & CEO of Smithbucklin Corporation, the world’s largest association management and services company. He served as President & CEO from 2002 to 2015 and Chairman of the Board (non-executive) from 2016 to 2020. Henry is a dedicated, ongoing student of leadership, committed to speaking and writing as a way to teach and give back. His insights and ideas on leadership have been prominently featured in business books and national news media, and he has been invited to speak at numerous association conferences, corporate meetings, and educational forums. One of Henry’s most enduring achievements has been his creation of comprehensive, high-impact leadership learning programs. The programming has evolved to include two offerings under the brand Leadership’s Calling®. The Diverse Cohort Program is for CEOs and other C-suite executives, vice presidents, directors and managers at all levels, business owners, entrepreneurs, individual practitioners, and high-potentials from all types and sizes of organizations representing varied industries and professions. The second offering is an exclusive program for a CEO (or head of an organization) and members of his or her senior management team, participating together.

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