



Known for its Entrepreneurial Spirit, The Walsh Group Takes a Courageous Leap to Build Tomorrow's Leaders

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ABOUT THE WALSH GROUP

From an immigrant to an institution

In the late 19th century, an Irish immigrant named Matthew Myles Walsh came to Chicago to lend his carpentry skills to the Chicago World Fair. In 1898, he started a small carpentry business, which in the 120 years since has evolved through four generations of family ownership to become the \$5 billion contracting business it is today, employing more than 8,000 skilled tradespeople and professional staff. The Walsh Group is the 11th largest contractor in the United States, operating out of 18 strategically located regional offices across North America.

In recent years, Walsh Group realized a need for a more strategic way of developing the talents of their junior-level employees. Said Craig Atkinson, VP of communications and strategic services, "We saw there was a need to prepare the next generation of leaders today, but we needed to do it in a way that would remain true to the entrepreneurial spirit and values of our organization. It used to be we were small enough that you knew everyone, but we were way too big for that. There was no reliable means for senior leadership to identify and develop talent on a consistent basis."

In an industry where labor is competitive, it was crucial that Walsh Group give its rising talent a reason to stay—which included a sense of belonging and the tools they would need to lead.

A BALANCING ACT

Walsh's business units need to be able to work locally to respond to their markets and their customers, while remaining coordinated with other units; there can't be chaos. The company sought an outside partner that would help develop an organizational framework for everyone to work under; that partner ended up being Bill Treasurer and his consultancy, Giant Leap.

Giant Leap worked with Walsh to identify the underlying challenges that held back similar leadership initiatives at the company in the past. Together they determined that the key to making it stick this time around was balance. Any company-wide effort like this would need to balance the spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship the company prides itself on with an understanding of the processes and procedures that must be in place for a company to function when it reaches such a large scale.

"Not all consultants are flexible about the solutions they bring to you," said Atkinson. "In our search for a partner, we ran into a number of situations where the solutions offered felt generic, and providers were unable to customize the content for our needs. What we wanted was a partner, not a vendor. Something transformative, not transactional. That's what Giant Leap represented for us."

Giant Leap created a leadership development program with Walsh that would bring early-to-mid career employees from all over the company together to have shared experiences, learn about important topics identified by senior leadership, and be mentored by a senior expert in the company.
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RESULTS

"Through our engagement surveys and analysis of our retention statistics, we know that Walsh employees who complete WGLI are 70% more likely to stay with the company," says Atkinson. A 70% increase in retention would be a major success for any employee initiative, but making this number even more impressive (and important) is the fact that WGLI attendees are early-to-mid career employees who have a huge amount of upward growth potential. That makes them highly recruitable and harder to keep around, but being able to do so (at a 70% higher rate) has allowed a better return on their employee investment, as those employees are far more likely to stick around and grow with the company.

Walsh credits the retention rates, and the overall satisfaction of employees with WGLI and the initiative's ability to connect the company's people with its culture.

INVESTING IN EMPLOYEES AND A SHARED FUTURE

The 18-month, nine-workshop course was called the Walsh Group Leadership Initiative (WGLI), and the first iteration kicked off in 2008. Ten years later, it's still going strong.

Attendees of WGLI have two main charges outside of each workshop. First, in off weeks, attendees reinforce the lessons of the most recent gathering via conferencing, using handbooks Giant Leap developed for mentors that provided scripts, assignments, and tips to guide the process.

Second, mentees are given a large strategic assignment that they work on as a group and will present to senior leadership near their graduation from WGLI. This isn't busywork; attendees are given real, important challenges that can have a significant impact on the company's operations and future. A number of improvements implemented in the overall company have resulted from strategic action team assignments in WGLI.

WGLI ran into little friction as it was implemented at Walsh, due to the clarity of purpose the initiative was introduced with, as well as the customized content to best fit company culture. Said Atkinson, "WGLI is not a 'training program.' It is a developmental experience aimed at transforming our organization. Giant Leap saw that from the start—we knew right away that they were the partner we needed. The focus on courage as a foundational aspect resonated with the company's entrepreneurial spirit, and their willingness to bend their material to fit our needs and co-create new material as required was a significant plus."

Thanks to their work with Giant Leap and Bill Treasurer, the Walsh Group's leadership reserves are looking strong for the coming years. "We define leadership by a person's ability to make decisions and motivate others even in situations of high ambiguity and high risk. Often times, there is no right answer. We may work in the unknown, but decisions are always consequential. We want people who are comfortable and skilled with motivating others in tricky moments like these."

In the WGLI program, leaders like these are being developed every day.

For an initial consultation with Giant Leap Consulting, contact us by phone or visit the website to learn more.