

# RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

## Foodservice giant Compass USA cooks up an innovative leadership training program crafted for the modern learner.

With more than 220,000 employees in all 50 states, Compass Group USA dominates the foodservice management and support industry. The company serves 8 million meals a day in restaurants, schools, sports venues, transportation hubs, healthcare facilities and numerous other places, but Compass USA isn't just about the food. Recognized as one of America's top employers by *Forbes 2015*, the company is as committed to preparing employees for great careers as preparing great meals.

One lively demonstration of that commitment is the company's management training program at company headquarters in Charlotte, NC. The popular program, known as Meridian, started 10 years ago in response to rapid growth triggered by acquisitions and expansion into new business segments. Functional managers needed to master higher-level competencies so they could move into leadership roles. "We needed to build bench strength," explains Larry Trn, Meridian Program Director.

### Meet the Modern Learner, but Make It Quick

The program has proven exceptionally effective over time, with a high graduation rate, numerous promotions and an impressive retention percentage. Those measures of success indicate not only a strong program but an agile one, evolving to align with corporate goals despite dramatic changes in the workplace and the world in general:

- Today's workers report feeling distracted, overwhelmed and impatient.
- The average worker checks his/her inbox 30-40 times per hour.
- The average attention span is 8 seconds, compared to 12 seconds in 2000.

"Most learning development organizations have not kept up with this new reality, or even thought about it," says Trn.

Modern learners want engaging instruction delivered over multiple platforms, such as online and video, and accessible on multiple devices. Workers seek an informal, collaborative learning environment in which they learn as much from peers as from managers. They find all of that, and more, in Meridian.

### Superstars in a Cross-Functional Cohort

The Meridian program works on a cohort system, in which managers from diverse departments, such as HR, finance, accounting and IT, move through the two-year training together, bonding like classmates. Trainees are called delegates, but Trn has another word for them: superstars.

"These are really smart folks who are excellent at their jobs," he says. "A lot of them are handpicked by our highest-ranking executives, even if they're four levels down." Each delegate is assigned a fostering manager, a senior leader who acts as mentor and coach for the program's duration. (Check off another modern training requirement: access to senior management.)

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### TEAM SPIRIT

Workers promoted for excellent performance in a functional job often stumble trying to cross the threshold into senior management positions, which require a more strategic, whole-company perspective. Experts say experience in a cross-functional team can help overcome this hurdle. In fact, more than 500 studies show increased achievement for students of all types when they work together in small groups. Other studies say 80% of learning happens through on-the-job interactions with peers, teammates and managers.

## AMA/Compass USA Case Study

Compass and American Management Association (AMA) share the instruction. Day-long workshops at the Charlotte training center are led by AMA instructors using AMA course content. Online electives are from AMA as well. Trn facilitates the Connections component, which challenges delegates to apply general principles to specific situations and develop action plans based on fictional (and fun) case studies with titles like Cosmic Pizza, Jet Purple, Really Great Grub and Rooster of the Sea.

### Swimming with the (Friendly) Sharks

Trn also leads the Capstone Project, a foundational piece of the program which delegates start working on from day one. Collaborating in cross-functional teams, they brainstorm new revenue sources and work up a solid business plan to present to senior managers. The project is modeled on ABC-TV's hit reality show Shark Tank, in which entrepreneurs pitch ideas to a panel of billionaire investors.

These "sharks" may not be quite as famous as the ones on TV, but some delegates get nervous pitching to someone who may be their boss's boss's boss. "At the beginning, I was a little nervous too, about what kinds of projects would emerge," admits Trn. "But I've been amazed at the quality."

One project he describes with pride is My Assets. "If we close or move an account, sometimes there are surplus items, like a slicer or a cooler," he explains. "There wasn't a really good method of dealing with all this stuff. Some class members decided to put together a combination database and Craigslist-type classified. They locate surplus items, take pictures with their phones, then upload. Department managers can browse the list and fill out some paperwork to claim an item they want, instead of buying something new."

The team successfully lobbied key stakeholders for funding, and the project is making money. Trn says it could eventually bring in more than a million dollars.

### Bonding and a Built-in Retention Tool

The Meridian experience doesn't end with graduation. Some alumnae/i come back and become mentors or sponsoring managers. High-ranking VPs have moved through the program. "Success stories are all over the place," Trn says. "Top-notch people share this common language and common background."

Speaking to the high retention rate of graduates, he adds: "This may be an unintended part of the program, but when people are told they're emerging leaders, that they're special, they have a tendency to stay. When we lose them, it's painful."

### What's Next?

The Meridian program will surely continue to evolve, keeping pace with new learning needs and corporate objectives. In 2015, AMA shortened the workshops and added the online electives. Trn says the program's time frame may shrink to as little as a year. "If I'm really going to build bench strength, I have to think about how long it takes to get someone through the program," he says.

Trn describes AMA as "a partner like no other" for its role in this training success story. Judy Alden, AMA's sales director in charge of the account, says her company's formidable instructional resources and ability to align the program with continually changing corporate goals prove AMA is "not a cookie cutter vendor."

Even for a program that is turning out excellent managers like, well, hotcakes.

## SUCCESS BY THE STATS

The Meridian program has the support of Compass USA's highest-level executives. These stats show why:



GRADUATION  
RATE



COMPANY RETENTION  
RATE OF GRADUATES



GRADUATES FROM  
16 FUNCTIONAL AREAS



PROMOTIONS/  
POSITION CHANGES

Thousands of dollars generated or saved through the implementation of action plans

## LEADERSHIP TRAINING IN 16 DAYS

Over the course of two years, the Compass/Meridian program offers 16 days of leadership training. Here is the breakdown of major components:

**10 days: Workshops** of core content led by American Management Association (AMA) instructors at Compass USA headquarters in Charlotte, NC. Workshops cover four modules:

- **Management Skills for Managers**
- **Moving from Functional Manager to Strategic Thinker**
- **Leadership Skills and Team Development**
- **Developing Executive Leadership**

**2 days: Electives** from AMA Express Skills Series, chosen from such topics as coaching a virtual team, confidence-building skills for women, prioritizing and decision-making, presented in 90-minute virtual experiences

**4 days: Connections**, active learning units based on industry-specific business challenges, led by Compass/Meridian Program Director