

Leaders in the Making

Holden Industries gets out in front of workforce demographics with a customized leadership development program.

As Baby Boomers began to retire from the Deerfield, Illinois-based company, the loss of top talent would create leadership gaps in the firm's diversified manufacturing subsidiaries. Holden intensified its efforts to prepare the next generation of leaders to guide the companies forward.

This outlook led to the creation of Holden Industries' Leadership Academy, a program designed with AMA Enterprise to provide leadership development. Under the guidance of their now retired Director of Human Resources, Barbara Barkley, the program develops potential leaders in the company's four core businesses: Vac-Con, Nosco, Setco and Wildeck. In fact, about two-thirds of the earliest participants in the program have been promoted to leadership roles, evidence of the positive impact of talent development.

"We realized that we needed to really take a hard look at our succession planning—at who we were developing—and set a formal process in place to develop future leaders in the organization," says Barkley. We [needed] a bench strength of potential individuals who could take the next step to higher-level leadership roles."

Building Core Leadership Competencies

For Holden Industries, a commitment to training and development is not new. The 100% employee-owned company, which has a workforce of 1,500 in the United States, supports the accomplishments and advancement of team members through continuing education and internal development. Employees have attended AMA courses for many years to build their knowledge and skills.

"Throughout our history, Holden Industries have always been committed to training and to employee development. And we've always been committed to promoting from within whenever possible,"

The Leadership Academy builds on that tradition by formalizing the development process for certain high-potential employees (HiPos). Holden Industries identifies its HiPos through a biennial succession-planning process, placing them in one of three categories based on their degree of readiness to take on higher-level roles. Those in the "gold" category—meaning they will be ready to assume more responsibility in two to three years—participate in the Leadership Academy.

Drawing on Holden's long-standing relationship with AMA, the Holden and AMA Enterprise teams worked to create a custom training curriculum for these potential leaders. The Leadership Academy is designed to build skills that can be applied universally across Holden's four core companies. Each of these industry leaders has its own products and markets. Despite the differences in the businesses, their managers need a set of core leadership competencies to progress in Holden Industries.

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Core Skills That Create Leadership Foundation

Holden Industries selected five top AMA courses to serve as the core of its leadership development program. These courses teach management skills that can be applied across the diverse markets served by the company. They are:

1. **How to Communicate with Diplomacy, Tact and Credibility**
2. **Fundamentals of Finance and Accounting for Non-Financial Managers**
3. **Successfully Managing People**
4. **Strategic Planning**
5. **Strategy Execution: Getting It Done**

At the end of the core program, participants receive a personalized training plan that identifies another 8 to 10 AMA courses that will build their management know-how. Employees' next-step training often includes courses such as:

- **Improving Your Assertiveness and Leadership Skills**
- **Analytical Thinking, Problem Solving and Decision Making**
- **Delegation Boot Camp**

Customized Training Brings Home the Learning

Over the course of two years, participants in the Leadership Academy complete five AMA courses related to the target competencies (see box). These courses—which form the core of the leadership program—were selected to meet Holden’s specific needs. Working with the Regional Account Manager, Holden Industries identified the best content for the leadership curriculum. “The guidance we got in being able to select the right course for our level and what we were trying to communicate was very valuable,”

More than five AMA course leaders deliver the training onsite at Holden locations, and both the length and the content of several courses have been adjusted to create a unique learning experience. Through this customized content, the company can include information related to its employee-owned culture and financial status. In the financial course, for example, the AMA trainer uses Holden Industries’ own financial statements to teach accounting and finance concepts. This customization makes the information especially relevant for employees.

The Leadership Academy is structured so that participants learn more about Holden Industries as well. Each training session includes two to three days of AMA content and one day of content devoted to Holden. The company-specific content, facilitated by Holden’s senior executives, provides insights into the organization’s mission and strategy, rules of management, key value drivers and other corporate practices.

Thanks to feedback from the first group in the program, new participants also get a firsthand look at the company’s diversified businesses. The first group suggested a change of training venue, from an outside meeting facility at corporate headquarters to the sites of Holden’s four companies. The multi-day training sessions are now held at these locations, allowing participants to tour the facilities and learn more about their sister companies’ operations.

The five AMA courses are the core of the Leadership Academy, but the training continues even after the two-year program ends. Each participant leaves the Academy with an individualized training plan to help further develop their skills. This plan, based on the company’s pre-training assessment of the employees, identifies another 8 to 10 AMA seminars that each person will attend over the next few years. Because the training plans are personalized, employees strengthen their skills in select areas. The next-step curriculum may include courses in leadership, communication, project management, critical thinking, and many other skills.

New Skills, New Leaders

Barkley notes that a training program must deliver the results—changing employee behavior and having a real impact on the company—to be deemed a success. The Leadership Academy’s training content has been credited with helping participants succeed at Holden Industries. Graduates of the program are applying new skills on the job for greater efficiency and role satisfaction. And participants have said that the opportunity to build their financial acumen, in particular, has changed the way they think about the business on a day-to-day basis.

Most importantly, the Leadership Academy has developed career-building skills in Holden’s high-potential employees. Of the original 22 people who completed the core program, 64% have earned promotions to higher-level positions.

Those results put Holden Industries where it needs to be in developing its next generation of top leadership: out ahead of the demographics.

Competencies for Developing High-Potential Employees

The Leadership Academy targets five competencies for development in Holden’s high-potential employees:

1. Communicating effectively
2. Understanding financial concepts
3. Managing employees
4. Creating strategic plans
5. Executing plans

These core competencies provide a foundation for effective leadership in the company. Holden’s employee satisfaction surveys highlight the importance of communication skills in the management role.

Holden Industries subsidiaries:

