

The Challenge:

Create a cost-effective, interactive learning environment accessible to employees with leadership potential within VA's Mid-Atlantic Healthcare Network – A three-state, 8,500 square mile area.

Veterans Health Administration in the Mid-Atlantic Healthcare Network Uses the Blackboard Solution to Create “Blended” Distance Learning Opportunities for Leadership Development

The VA Mid-Atlantic Health Care Network serves veterans in an 8,500-square mile operational area across North Carolina, Virginia, and parts of West Virginia. Network facilities include eight VA Medical Centers and ten community-based outpatient clinics. The Network's goal is to provide safe, effective, efficient, and compassionate care to the veterans its staff so proudly serves.

The Catalysts

In 2001, the VA Mid-Atlantic Health Care Network, in collaboration with the Veterans Affairs Employee Education System (EES), planned and implemented a succession planning strategy, to provide a continuous pool of high potential leaders for the Network. Based on the Veterans Administration's High Performance Development Model (HPDM), the Network's model established four levels of leadership that concentrate on eight core competencies:

- technical skills
- interpersonal effectiveness
- personal mastery
- customer service
- flexibility and adaptability
- creative thinking
- systems thinking

The Network's Succession Planning Workgroup, was chaired by Sharon Baldwin, PhD, MSN, RN, who at the time was Director of Employee Education at the Salem VA Medical Center. The Workgroup included educators, labor representatives, human resource specialists, executive leaders and front-line managers. Their challenge was to develop competency-based leadership programs, with increasing scope and depth, for Level II and Level III. Level II comprises work unit leaders, foremen and section leaders and Level III includes mid-level managers, division/department/service line managers and managers of major organizational functions.

Past training initiatives were conducted face-to-face and primarily focused on the transference of knowledge. These programs were effective, but considering the scope of the VA's mission, they presented sizeable logistic and expense challenges. The Network needed a training model that could efficiently accommodate employees' varied locations and round-the-clock schedules.

Distance Learning Provides the Solution

In 2001 Baldwin was working on her doctorate in instructional design and on-line distance learning when the logistical and financial concerns of the VA's existing instructional programs were being considered. She and the members of the Succession Planning Workgroup felt strongly that a virtual learning environment would most effectively deliver the first phase of the HPDM.

“We needed on-line access and an interactive learning system that allowed us to facilitate training of future leaders. This technology met our requirements, and has been well accepted by personnel selected to participate in our leadership development program.”

Sharon Baldwin, PhD
LEAD Coordinator
Mid-Atlantic Healthcare
Network



Blackboard

Educators and employees needed a learning platform that would:

- Maximize the use of subject matter experts (SMEs) as facilitators and coaches across disparate geographic locations
- Be available to employees 24/7 from home or work
- Automate the evaluation process
- Promote reflection, self-management learning practices, analytical dialogue, and facilitation

Overcoming Initial Resistance to Online Learning

Initially a few members of the Succession Workgroup encountered expected resistance to abandoning in-person meetings, audio and video conferencing. Members embraced the change when they saw that the online environment was:

- Dynamic and interactive (unlike the page-turner scenario of some distance learning formats in which the learner's only interaction with the material is to advance to the next screen)
- Conducive to revealing personalities and interactivity among learners
- Empowering for learners because of tools that promoted self-management and self-evaluation such as online calendars, task lists, immediate access to grades and feedback on incorrect test items

Baldwin says, "Our goal was to create an environment that was pleasing to learners and presented factual, conceptual and procedural knowledge (such as Job Aids delivered on a just-in-time basis to improve performance). Blackboard enables instructors to evaluate learner accountability — measuring time spent in discussion boards, assessing grades, and providing multiple forums to review work and to provide feedback."

The Blackboard Learning System Helps Deliver Tangible Results

Deployed in 2003, the Level III leadership program became known as the Leadership Development Institute (LDI). At the same time, the Succession Workgroup implemented an online coaching and mentoring program to prepare Level III leaders to mentor LDI participants. These programs were so successful that in 2004 the Succession Workgroup used BlackBoard as the platform for their HPDM Level II Leadership program.

Online learning provided several improvements over the old instructional methods including:

- Consistent curriculum across eight medical centers in three states
- Immediate access and feedback on assessments for learners
- Improved accessibility to course materials and Job Aids
- Easier revision and reproduction of curriculum materials for instructors
- Reduced travel for all participants

Implementing the Blackboard solution also produced financial benefits:

- A return on investment of 140% since its inception in 2003
- Nearly \$116,000 saved in travel, facilitation and facility costs
- Approximately \$75,000 in hiring costs saved by promoting from within the Network

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Since its inception in 2003, the Veterans' Administration's Leadership Development Initiative using Blackboard technology has shown a return on investment of 140%.