

RISING ABOVE

THE GLASS CEILING

By Joelle K. Jay

The race for talent is on.

Experts have been warning for years this day would come. An aging workforce, a growing global market, and an increase in the value of knowledge workers have made competition fierce for top talent.

Many companies are struggling to hold onto their talented leaders. How, then, can organizations that are committed to being the best ensure they'll have the talent they need to succeed? The best and easiest way is to expand the use of talent that already exists in the organization, and maximize that talent to its fullest extent.

The Leadership Circles Program

At MetLife, leaders in the Practice Development Group have found a way to leverage talent within their ranks. It's called the Leadership Circles Program, which is designed to develop and retain talent, as well as nurture, preserve, and expand the opportunities for high-potential leaders to succeed from within.

The program was developed for MetLife by Joelle Jay and her team at the Leadership Research Institute, in partnership with leaders at the MetLife Practice Development Group as part of its women's strategy.

Kathy Tague, assistant vice president, and Gail Kelman, director, were actively involved in the planning and implementation phases of the program and stayed active as it has continued. As a leadership development program, Leadership Circles aims to improve the leadership skills of its members. But it's not just skill that is important for success. It's also commitment, engagement, and results. The program team identified

The Leadership Circles Program at MetLife is one example of a leadership development program that works to attract, develop, and retain the company's talented women.



five areas toward which it would drive for results:

- leveraging top talent
- retaining employees
- engaging employees
- generating leadership effectiveness and capacity
- creating professional and personal well-being.

Research supporting the program identified those areas as being the ones that would most directly affect the most critical outcome of the program: an increase in business results as measured by productivity, profitability, and performance. It's working. In 2012, *Working Mother* magazine named MetLife one of its 100 best companies for women to work and named the Leadership Circles Program as one of the reasons why.

A focus on women

At MetLife, the program was implemented to support high-performing women. Program members are selected on a number of criteria—including business results, nomination by management, and an interview process—and the opportunity is extended to the women who best meet that criteria.

Why women? MetLife sees women as an integral part of its global vision. As a company, it is committed to reflecting the face of its customers. The MetLife website proudly proclaims, "We are committed to attracting, retaining and maximizing the performance of a diverse and inclusive workforce." Numerous studies also have shown that having women in leadership is beneficial to business outcomes.

However, as in so many companies, women at MetLife are under-represented at the top. This is particularly true among financial advisors. The program is one strategy chosen by MetLife to advance high-performing women advisors into stronger roles of leadership companywide.

Program philosophy

The program is based on a philosophy called personal leadership, a concept described in Jay's book, *The Inner Edge: The 10 Practices of Personal Leadership*.

Personal leadership is the leadership of the self. While leadership is the ability to describe an inspiring vision of the future and compel people to achieve it,

personal leadership is the ability to do that for oneself.

The program demonstrates that the very skills used by senior leadership to make good companies great—leadership fundamentals such as creating a vision, defining a strategy, aligning action plans to that strategy, and developing a powerful team—are the ones program members need to apply to themselves.

Program members learn the concepts and, more important, learn to apply them directly to themselves on a personal and individual level. The philosophy gives women the opportunity to balance professional ambition with the quality of life that keeps them at their best.

Program members learn the skills and strategies that serve their success in their current roles while preparing them to take more senior leadership roles in the future. By practicing personal leadership, members are able to get a clear sense of their own contribution to the company.

10 practices

There are 10 personal leadership practices that form the framework for the program curriculum. Each practice is grounded in a reflective question designed to help focus members' attention on their own ability to affect change within themselves, and aligned to a leadership skill that will help them more powerfully lead others.

1. Get clarity. (What do you want?) Program members define and clarify a vision for themselves. At MetLife, these visions incorporate both personal and professional goals, including specific goals aligned to the success of the company.

2. Find focus. (Where will you put your attention?) Members focus on top priorities related to the vision—a vital skill for leaders who often report feeling "fractured" and "scattered" in today's busy world.

3. Take action. (What do you need to do?) Members learn how to turn priorities into action items, so they are always driving toward making the biggest impact with their efforts.

4. Tap into your brilliance. (What's unique about you?) Strengths-based leadership is taught as a method to leverage members' natural strengths.

5. Feel fulfillment. (What motivates you

and makes you happy?) The role of values and fulfillment helps members experience a sense of personal and professional well-being.

6. Maximize your time. (How can you achieve more with less?) Members learn to make the most of the time they have. This practice reduces stress and increases productivity and a sense of peace.

7. Build your team. (Who can support you?) Members find the mentors, coaches, sponsors, and partners who will support them and expand their potential.

8. Keep learning. (What do you most need to know?) Members create their own personal learning strategy based on their visions and aligned to their goals.

The intention is to help members understand what learning looks like at the highest levels of leadership.

9. See possibility. (How can you invite success to come to you?) Members learn the elements of leadership related to intuition, instinct, and the ability to recognize opportunity.

10. All ... all at once. (How do you move from excellent to extraordinary?) All the practices of personal leadership are integrated into one cohesive, sustainable theory that members can use as a guide for the rest of their lives.

The goal of the program is to provide a structure that supports success over time and is rooted in a content area of particular interest to its members.

The program is designed to adapt to almost any content or curriculum. The personal leadership practices can be exchanged for another set of topics. Some adaptations being considered include leadership skills for new managers, strategies for women in leadership, and leadership in the 21st century.

The big circle

The strength of the program, in addition to the content chosen to meet organizational goals, lies in its structure. Program members belong to a number of "circles," or groups, that support their growth and learning in a variety of ways.

Program content is delivered in what facilitators call the big circle—the entire group of all program members. In the yearlong version of the program, members meet once a month in this circle to learn the practices of personal leadership.

This gives members a chance to broaden their network, which is a major program benefit according to its members.

In many organizations, including MetLife, one of the most common comments women in leadership make is, “I feel so alone.” They worry about reinventing the wheel and are plagued by questions about whether they’re doing things right. Becoming part of a large group of other women in similar roles gives them a solid sense of community.

The small circle

After they have learned a new topic as a whole group, program members then divide into small circles—groups of 10 to 15 members, each with its own dedicated coach. These groups provide the opportunity for discussion, question-and-answer sessions, group coaching, and brainstorming so that members leave the session with clear plans for implementing the practice they’ve learned.

This kind of group processing of new ideas not only shortens the learning curve for program members, but also gives them a chance to get multiple perspectives on a topic.

The mastermind

Learning new concepts and strategies is only part of the goal. The other part is to help members see themselves as leaders, using the concepts and strategies to drive toward their individual visions and goals.

The mastermind groups, otherwise known as peer coaching groups or triads, comprise about three members in similar roles who put their heads together to support one another’s progress. Often seen as the most powerful element of the program, this also is the most independent. Members are taught to facilitate their own masterminds so as to create a long-lasting support network that can sustain their success long after the program ends.

One-on-one coaching

Research shows that one-on-one coaching as part of a leadership development program can increase results significantly compared with programs without the coaching component. In the program, members have access to a coach who works with them from day one to establish, pursue, achieve, and ultimately exceed an

aspirational vision.

The coaching is a significant differentiator of this program compared with others because it moves the members’ passive learning to active engagement.

Program members achieve extremely high goals faster than expected, with positive results for themselves, their individual firms, and the company for which they work.

A circle of one

There’s one more important circle that completes the Leadership Circles Program. Think of it as a circle of one—a private meeting with oneself.

Every member spends time throughout the program reading, reflecting, and strategizing on her own to make sure she is personalizing the program to her needs, goals, and results. At the end of the program, members report the results they have achieved.

Results

At MetLife, program results have been impressive. Program members who were financial advisors saw measurable effects on their production.

For example, one financial advisor increased production by 45 percent and made Leaders’ Conference, which is reserved for the top-performing advisors. Another advisor made Presidents Conference, the conference to which only 6 percent of advisors are invited. She also achieved this goal two months earlier than expected.

For program members who were part of the management team, bottom line results in their respective areas and key business metrics also were significant.

- An operations manager improved efficiency in a key area of her firm’s operations from 48 percent to 74 percent. In addition, her firm achieved 101 percent of its production goal with two weeks to spare.
- Another operations manager’s firm

was a leading agency the year she participated in the program. Her firm achieved 125 percent of its planned goals, and the manager attributed the success to her work in the program. She was named Operations Manager of the Year, the highest annual recognition awarded to a MetLife operations manager.

- A marketing director increased the return-on-investment for the marketing dollars she manages for her firm, resulting in an additional \$829,000 in revenue to her firm.

These examples illustrate the way program members achieve extremely high goals faster than expected, with positive results for themselves, their individual firms, and the company for which they work.

“Companies need to support these women, or they may go somewhere else. It would be easy to leave,” says one program member. “This program is driving me to go forward instead, in a way that could advance the company. It’s really made a difference for me.”

Paul LaPiana, senior vice president at MetLife, backed her up with his own commitment to women in leadership.

Growing the circle

At MetLife, the leaders who come out of the program do not disappear when the program is over. Several program members have gone on to become mentors for new members. Others have accepted broader leadership roles at MetLife.

In examples such as these, the leadership team at MetLife is witnessing the beginning of a long future for women in leadership: an organic, self-sustaining model of women helping women to succeed.

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