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JV Driver: Building a Strong Leadership Legacy Through Tough Times

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Here's why organizations that invest in their future leaders are always ahead of the curve.

JV Driver started as a very small company on Vancouver Island in 1989. Over the last three decades, it has grown to become a leading “house of brands” in Canada, with multiple companies that operate nationally and internationally. JV Driver provides a wide range of contractor and fabrication services in the industrial, commercial, multiunit residential and industrial buildings, marine, environmental and public infrastructure/institutions space and has a strong culture across Canada and internationally.

Being a leading Canadian organization in the industry, operating across a large territory—with multiple companies—poses numerous leadership challenges. When you've experienced tremendous growth in the recent years, mostly through acquisition of various groups with their own cultures and histories, how do you build a strong leadership bench for the future with your next generation of leaders? How do you promote consistency and unity in leadership across your various groups and regions? How do you build strong relationships from British Columbia to Newfoundland? How do you ensure that JV Driver's core values and core purpose penetrate each group beyond its existing senior leaders? How do you ensure a legacy through the future?

These are the questions that a committee of JV Driver executives began wrestling with in 2013. They needed to solve the puzzle of developing their next generation of leaders in this complex environment, and they were not alone. This is identified as the No. 1 challenge faced by 64% of company leaders in 2018.¹

¹ DDI Leadership Forecast Report, 2018.

A Custom Approach That Aligns With Vision

After multiple conversations, the custom-built “JV Driver Group Next Generation Leader Program” (NGLP) was born. In 2014, 30 next-generation leaders of each JV Driver group were enrolled in a cohort for a 2 1/2-year developmental journey. During the journey, workshops lasted two to three days and took place twice a year, but the program wasn’t limited to the workshops. Participants were accountable for working hard on their development between sessions. Accountability groups were created and would stay in touch to track progress on their established goals. Later on, the company added a second cohort to deepen the JV Driver Group’s bench of leaders, and more recently, a third cohort began training. The program followed a well-thought-out process in order to hit on some established goals:

- Build relationships across the next generation of leaders from numerous functions and companies. As leaders advanced in their careers, their ability to have strong cross-enterprise relationships would be key for personal growth and enterprisewide results.
- Socialize and embed the **JV Driver Group Core Ideology** with the next generation of leaders.
- Develop leadership competencies in the following areas: Self-Leadership, Team Leadership and Organizational Leadership (Exhibit 1).

JV Driver’s Vision (Core Ideology)

Core Purpose	Think Different, Build Better
Core Values	Build Great Things
	Take Care of Each Other
	Be Innovative
	Have Fun



**NEXT
GEN**
NEXT
GENERATION
LEADERS PROGRAM

JVDRIVER
GROUP

Exhibit 1. JV Driver’s Leadership Competencies

Organizational Leadership	Team Leadership	Self-Leadership
Align Teams and Encourage Collaboration	Take Care of Your People	Build Trust
Set and Communicate Direction	Communicate Effectively	Get it Done
Drive High Performance	Encourage Innovation	Understand Yourself
Think Strategically		

A program of this magnitude, influencing individuals working across North America and around the globe in multiple companies, had to be intentional to ensure significant development. This required rigorous planning. More importantly, it was key to have the program custom-built and suited to JV Driver’s specific needs as a “house of brands.” As a company, its core purpose is to “Think Different, Build Better.” While the firm knew it could have had some success with “off-the-shelf” programs, it wanted to think differently about how it was going to develop these leaders to ensure alignment with its vision.

JV Driver followed these steps to define its approach:

1. **Establishing a program charter.** The team established objectives and definitions of success and set program rules, such as deciding whether an individual could be removed from the program or brought into it midway.
2. **Appointing a steering committee.** Early on, the team appointed a steering committee composed of several executives who weighed in and provided feedback on the design of the program and alignment with strategy. All decisions were vetted through this committee, which helped drive accountability and alignment.
3. **Defining the leadership competencies.** The team defined a set of behaviors that should be demonstrated by exceptional leaders, at any level and in any JV Driver group. These competencies aligned with JV Driver’s previously established vision. Leadership competencies could apply to any leader across groups and brought everyone together with a set of common behaviors.
4. **Designing the program flow.** The team established the program flow (e.g., what concepts get covered where) and identified key delivery methods for driving greater learning.
5. **Selecting leaders for the cohort.** The team established a nominating process for selecting program participants. To be enrolled, executives had to sponsor leaders and prove their eligibility through a nine-box grid, which is a visual way to highlight one’s current performance and leadership potential. Leaders in Boxes 1, 2, 3 or 5 were recommended for the program for cohorts 1 and 2 (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2. JV Driver's Nine-Box Grid Framework

		Potential		
		<i>Satisfactory Placed</i> Remain at current level of organization, in current or similar role; has likely achieved highest career level.	<i>High Professional</i> Able to do the work of bigger jobs at the same management level in the next 1 to 2 years.	<i>High Potential</i> Able to do the work at the next management level in 3 to 5 years or sooner.
Performance	Excellent Performance	JVD Leaders in Box 4	JVD Leaders in Box 2	JVD Leaders in Box 1
	Effective Performance	JVD Leaders in Box 7	JVD Leaders in Box 5	JVD Leaders in Box 3
	Performance Needs Improvement	JVD Leaders in Box 9	JVD Leaders in Box 8	JVD Leaders in Box 6

Source: JV Driver

- Assessing the participants to understand their starting point.** Using the competencies as a backdrop, each participant in the program took a custom 360-degree assessment (based on JV Driver's core ideology and leadership competencies/leadership model). To build self-awareness, each leader also took the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) assessment. Next-gen leaders were then debriefed individually by a consultant coach from FMI and identified developmental goals to work on through the program.
- Developing competencies using a highly interactive approach.** The program was built out with workshops covering each competency and a team building component in a highly interactive formula off-site. For many participants, this meant traveling across the country to attend the events. These off-site workshops included training sessions, case studies, action learning assessments (groups of leaders solving real-life organization problems) and interactive executive dinners.
- Driving accountability between workshops.** Accountability teams were created among participants to keep learners progressing between workshops. These cross-country, cross-company teams would touch base regularly and keep track of progress and goals between off-site workshops.



Unleashing the Program's Potential

Besides following a best-in-class approach for their next-generation leadership program, JV Driver executives put various strategies in place to enhance the program and multiply successes, including:

1. **Heavy executive sponsor involvement.** When executives sponsor an initiative or program, they can catalyze change. Leadership development is one of the most important areas where executive sponsorship can have an impact.² Many executives not only sponsored the JV Driver NGLP program but also were heavily involved as co-facilitators. This level of participation from executives was unheard of: Five to eight executives, including JV Driver's founder, Bill Elkington, would attend each workshop and deliver presentations or facilitate case studies.
2. **Co-facilitation by internal leaders.** Leadership development programs are even more effective when some content is delivered by internal leaders,³ instead of being solely led by external consultants. JV Driver appointed many internal speakers for the different portions of the program. The most notable was the program's "Leadership Thoughts" sections, in which executives from across the JV Driver Group reflected and told stories about the power of specific competencies for the business or personal stories about their own learning and growth as leaders.
3. **Highly engaging and interactive workshop settings.** The workshops weren't mere one-way classroom trainings. Some innovative approaches were used:
 - a. Executive dinners were part of each workshop, in various restaurants in a given city, where one executive sponsor would sit at the table of a next-generation group of participants and go to different restaurants in the city. Groups were given conversation topics so they could learn from the executive and have deeply insightful conversations as well as build strong relationships.
 - b. The program included case studies, with participants solving real challenges that companies across the JV Driver Group were facing. The case studies ranged from project issues to ethical issues and leadership succession challenges. Participants built their organizational leadership skills by practicing strategic thinking with real-life, engaging situations.
 - c. At the end of each workshop, action planning sessions were held to establish action items for learners to work on before the next workshop. Between sessions, accountability groups would regularly discuss their progress and offer support.

² Dr. Ajit Kambil. "Four Types of Executive Sponsorship to Catalyze Change." Deloitte. November 2, 2017.

³ "Global Leadership Forecast 2018." DDI. 2018

4. **Frequent program evaluations.** One of the main reasons leadership development programs fail is that their effectiveness is not evaluated, and no adjustments are made in consequence.⁴ In this case, JV Driver gathered participant feedback, but went beyond that by taking the following steps:
- a. At the end of each workshop, participants would evaluate program effectiveness and offer feedback on content, team activities and facilitator effectiveness.
 - b. Using a pre- and post-program 360-degree assessment, progress on the competencies was evaluated using objective data.

Pushing Through Tough Times

In 2014 the program kicked off just as JV Driver was working on its largest construction project in history. “It felt like the perfect time to get started,” says David Whyte, JV Driver’s Director of Human Resources. Soon after, in 2015, the drops in oil and gas prices, combined with the political and socioeconomic climates at the time, started affecting the industry and market conditions. In 2016 this impacted JV Driver directly and, more importantly, its specific industrial and fabrication groups directly tied to the oil and gas industry.

The company’s executives had to make many difficult decisions at that point, including staff layoffs. In tough times like those, it could have seemed like a safe decision to “pull the plug” on the NGLP program to cut costs. Indeed, in an economic downturn, many leaders tend to believe that professional development is a luxury.⁵ However, at JV Driver, the NGLP program was continued despite challenging times. No changes were made in the structure, the cadence or the output of the program.

This decision was well-supported at the executive level, because it aligned with the company’s core ideology and strategy. In fact, it was a crucial part of a people development goal for the company. The group used transparency as a means of explaining its difficult decisions to employees. As counterintuitive as it may seem, executives at JV Driver understood that “actively seizing a downturn as an opportunity [for development] can reduce the pain of the current one and can soften the blow of the next.”⁶

Keeping the program alive during the layoff phase paid off for the company. One of the program’s focus areas was the competency “Take Care of Your People,” which is based on its “Take Care of Each Other” core value. Participants actively learned and practiced this competency during difficult times. For JV Driver, this means developing others and being there both as a support network and for emotional support.

“Participants who understood this and lived the core value were able to take this back to the business after attending the sessions,” says David Whyte. They worked actively to move their teams forward by showing understanding that while they have lost teammates, they have to remain optimistic and continue living out the core values. The participants were encouraged to take responsibility in motivating the teams and showing positivity in the midst of the downturn.

⁴ Pierre Gurdjian, Thomas Halbeisen and Kevin Lane. “Why Leadership Development Programs Fail.” McKinsey Quarterly. January 2014.

⁵ Robert S. Kaplan, David P. Norton, Stewart D. Friedman, BV Krishnamurthy, Tamara J. Erickson, Jeffrey M. Stibel and Peter Delgrosso. “Unconventional Wisdom in a Downturn.” HBR. December 2008 Issue.

⁶ Ibid.

Strategic thinking is another competency developed in the program. Leaders were coached and developed on strategic thinking—the backdrop for great organizational leadership. In the midst of difficult times, leaders must learn how to respond to and spot potential challenges to the business in the future. Participants thought deeply about emerging trends in political, economic, social and technological areas and how these trends might impact their respective teams and businesses in the future. With more strategic thinkers across the group, JV Driver maximizes the chances of responding effectively to the next challenging situation coming its way.

Reaping the Benefits

In 2017, as the program wrapped up for the first two cohorts, FMI and JV Driver evaluated program success by looking at behavior change. Before and after the program, participants received the same 360-degree evaluation. The participants from both cohorts improved their 360 evaluation scores on all competencies. For nine out of 11 competencies, the changes were important enough to be considered statistically significant. This means that individuals in the organization noticed obvious behavioral changes. Some of the most noticeable changes in competencies were around “Take Care of Your People,” “Encourage Innovation” and “Understand Yourself.” There was an even more noticeable increase in how the core purpose and core values were lived out across all participants.

On top of these competency improvements, JV Driver noticed many other tangible results, based on the NGLP program. While one of the goals was to strengthen relationships across the various companies, the group was amazed to see how the program elevated the connections between leaders from the various offices. Executives knew the cultures of the various companies would align fairly well, since this was a prerequisite JV Driver had for acquiring new businesses. However, the depth of the relationships this program helped create was beyond what leadership had anticipated. For instance, it’s not uncommon to see a participant from Alberta leveraging an existing client relationship for a colleague in Texas, or a participant from Newfoundland pick up the phone to call someone in Edmonton to “pick his brain” about a project. This kind of relationship really helped strengthen and integrate the business.

According to Whyte, the post-program self-awareness changes were also impressive; the feedback received by some of the participants was life-changing. For example, a participant who struggled to speak in front of a group at the beginning of the program was able to articulate—in his closing presentation—how his increased self-awareness as a leader not only helped him at work but also had tremendous, positive impact on his family.

To say that this program added value to JV Driver is a euphemism. Not only did the firm make it through an economic downturn, thanks to developing leadership at various levels, but also it built a strong, engaged, competent bench for the future of the various groups and strengthened relationships across Canada.

If you are questioning the returns of investment in high potentials, or if you’re debating starting a program at a time when the economy could soon enter a downturn, reconsider. Slower times can, in fact, be a great opportunity—with less work in the pipeline—for future leaders to invest in learning. Moreover, building great leaders prepares the organization for facing any challenges more effectively, whether it’s temporary financial difficulties, increased competition or talent shortages. Organizations that invest in their future leaders are always ahead of the game.

Thank you to David Whyte, HR Director, JV Driver Group, for his testimonial.



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