

COACHING IN ACTION: HOW WEX DEVELOPS LEADERS

US coach **Sherry Harsch-Porter** describes an in-depth leadership programme that helped US-based company WEX face the challenges of a growing global workforce and leverage cultural diversity.

If you've used an online service to book travel or a card to buy fuel, you may have been touched by a company called WEX and not even know it. As a global leader in corporate payment solutions, WEX's goal is to simplify the complexities of payments across continents and industries – including Fleet, Travel and Health. Founded in 1983 in the state of Maine (USA), WEX has grown rapidly to serve customers in 200 countries with offices in Australia, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States.



Alison Soine-Norris

WEX's CEO and President, Melissa Smith, has publicly described the company's strategic objectives as follows: accelerate growth, make targeted investments, and scale. Since going public in 2005, WEX's growth has been exponential both in terms of revenue and people, expanding from 650 to more than 2,500 employees. To support scaling at this level, WEX needed to develop a steady pipeline of ready-now leaders with a global perspective. The company knew that its employees were smart, driven

and fiercely proud to be WEXers. But it knew that more was needed to sustain its global success. WEX wanted to build on its 'people-first' culture in a measurable, methodical way. Alison Soine-Norris, WEX's Director-Global Learning & Organization Development, describes the organisation's previous leadership development as 'a patchwork quilt of on-the-job learning, off-site courses for high-potential employees, and informal mentoring.' This was effective, but did not knit together the various regions, functions and lines of business to allow leaders to build broad networks and learn together. Nor did it prepare leaders for the challenges they would encounter in a more complex and competitive global environment. With the aim of building a workforce of strategic thinkers who were results-focused, culturally competent, globally mobile and able to manage the complex relationships of a matrixed organization, they engaged consultants Rosinski & Company to conduct a needs analysis. WEX wanted a programme that would give managers the skills and tools they needed to drive their career forward; build cultural competency; and deliver measurable outcomes for the company. Further, the company wanted to build the skills needed to sustain learning in a coaching culture.

A leadership roadmap identified leadership development needs at all levels of the organisation, and a tiered series of development programme was created, based on the leader's level in the organisation and the company's core values. The Integrated Leadership Development Program (ILDLP) focuses on senior leaders with further programmes for managers, team leaders and others with first-line supervisory responsibility, all based on the six perspectives in Rosinski's *Global Coaching*¹.



ILDLP cohort group with Melissa Smith, WEX CEO, in center of front row.

Participants attend in cohort groups balanced for gender, race and national origin, and care is taken not to include a manager and direct reports together. Participants complete several pre-course assessments, including a 360-degree feedback tool: FIRO (The Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation), based on social needs theory; the Campbell Leadership Index (CLI[®]) a 360-degree leadership assessment tool that measures personal characteristics; and the Cultural Orientations Framework (COF)², a self-assessment that examines the cultural influencers that make up our identities. Results of the assessments are debriefed in a three-hour session with a professional coach during the ILDP programme. This starts a year-long engagement between the participant and the executive coach designed to support learning from the programme. The first ILDP programme was held in 2015.

As you would expect, activities during the five-day experiential workshop reflect the behaviours needed on the job: active listening, inquiry-based questioning, a willingness to be open and vulnerable, flexibility and responsiveness – and there are multiple opportunities to practise giving and receiving feedback from peers. However, other activities, such as a mindful eating or creating a vision through an art project, are not so common. The aim is to recognise the whole human being and to encourage leaders to stretch beyond typical boundaries. An important element is to explore cultural diversity in all its aspects including geography, generation, race, gender, family origin. Participants are encouraged to move beyond recognising differences to using these as strengths.

Soine-Norris says that early impact measures of the ILDP programme are very positive. The number of graduates who have been moved, promoted or transferred since attending outpaces those who have not been on the programme by three to one. The company repeated the Campbell Leadership Index 360 assessment for ILDP graduates one year after the programme, and across the board, assessments showed improvements in all areas with ratings from subordinates and managers markedly higher than the baseline scores. There is anecdotal evidence that quieter leaders have become more assertive and individuals are delegating more effectively.

Soine-Norris described an experience at the company's recent Leadership Summit. Attendees were asked to volunteer to lead what the company calls a 'RED team'. These are short-term, cross-functional projects that individuals take on in addition to their regular jobs. In the past, a handful of employees would volunteer to take on a RED team assignment. This time, when CEO Melissa Smith asked, 'Who is ready to lead this RED team?' the response was overwhelming. 111 of the 120 attendees, nearly 93%, volunteered to lead a RED team.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sherry Harsch-Porter leads PorterBay Insight, a leadership development consultancy based in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. She has a wide corporate experience and holds a Ph.D. in Social Science, an M.S. in Human Resources Management, a B.S. in Business Administration, and is a Board Certified Coach. Sherry teaches graduate courses, including Executive Coaching, at Washington University (St. Louis). She is a contributing author to the coaching reference book *The Handbook of Knowledge-Based Coaching: From theory to practice* published in 2011, and author of *Education as Possibility: Coaching for Persistence*, published in 2012.

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<https://www.linkedin.com/in/sherryharschporter>

¹ <http://www.globalcoaching.pro/global-coaching-synopsis.html>

² Further information on these instruments is available on their respective websites:

FIRO - <https://www.cpp.com/products/firo-b/index.aspx>

Campbell Leadership Index - <http://www.ccl.org/leadership/assessments/CLIOverview.aspx>

Cultural Orientations Framework - <http://cofassessment.net/>