Excellence in Practice 2017

GOLD

Cisco & LIW
Refocusing for leadership

CISCO and long-term partner LIW combined to upgrade and refocus a programme to support individuals making the transition from technical leader to business leader

Cisco is transforming on a grand scale: transitioning from a hardware company into a software and solutions leader. It needs exceptional technical leaders to navigate its rapidly changing environment. These leaders must translate new technologies and the opportunities they offer into real solutions that meet changing customer needs. To do this they need to be able to marshal Cisco's considerable collective capability into developing market-leading initiatives.

The Global Technical Leader Program (GTLP) was designed to meet this need, developing the ability of Cisco's technical talent to collaborate across the organisation and deliver on Cisco's strategy.

The GTLP has its genesis in 2006 as a programme to address a skills gap among technical leaders in Cisco's APAC Services business unit. The success of this early version of the programme led to it expanding globally across business units until the global financial crisis in 2008. To save costs the programme was redesigned on a virtual platform. After two years, HR leadership and development (L&D) teams reviewed the programme and identified its content as critical to the development of technical leaders and further redesigned it into the current blended programme.
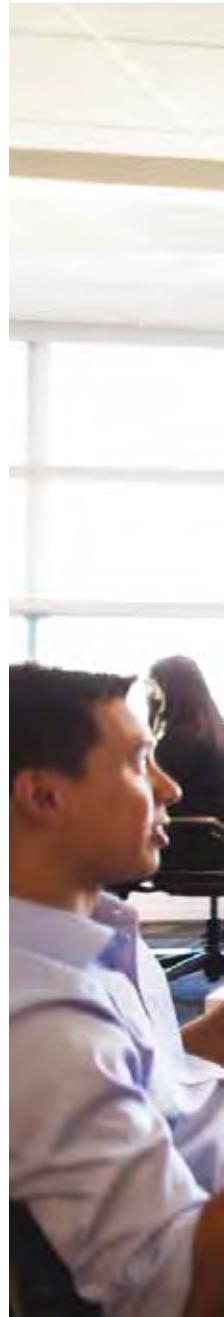
The Cisco-LIW partnership

LIW, a global leadership consultancy based in Australia, has been involved in the programme's design and delivery since its inception. Cisco has partnered with LIW since 2000 to develop a range of award-winning global leadership programmes including Cisco's Advanced Manager Series (CAMS), which won a Bersin by Deloitte WhatWorks award in 2014, and Leadership Breakthrough, which garnered the EFMD Excellence in Practice gold award in 2015.

LIW worked with Cisco's L&D team, technical specialists and business leaders to understand the challenges facing the business and to define the leadership needed to meet those challenges. The diversity of the team paid dividends with the Cisco side providing the broader organisational context while LIW brought an external perspective to challenge existing expectations of leadership and technical roles. A series of interviews with senior-level leaders underpinned the high-level design of the programme. Key stakeholders ensured that the programme design also aligned with Cisco's strategic priorities, clearing the way for the detailed design and a facilitation plan.

"The success of the GTLP programme is a testament to the true partnership between Cisco and LIW. The Cisco programme team brings a tremendous passion, determination, transparency and drive to deliver a high-impact learning experience - and we have fun in the process. This has allowed the programme to deliver the business impact while also being able to be agile to evolve the programme to changing business circumstances."
Mark Ferguson
LIW Programme Manager

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Key stakeholders raise GTLP's profile within Cisco

The programme design team successfully engaged a Cisco Fellow and co-founder who helped to secure numerous stakeholders and project sponsors, including VP-level CTOs across the technical functions. His support brings a high level of credibility to the GTLP programme and has enabled the perception of GTLP as a key incubator of technical projects for Cisco.

GTLP target audience

The programme serves technical talent in individual contributor roles, supporting them in the transition from technical leader to business leader. Participants will move into roles as principal engineers, architects or distinguished engineers in the various technical functions of the company. Since 2010, 467 senior technical leaders have participated, contributing to the development of approximately 80 business cases representing future business opportunities.

Programme content

The programme spans three months and covers self-awareness, influencing, coaching, business communications, innovation and business case development. It is delivered in a mix of face-to-face workshops, virtual sessions and group project work to optimise the application of learning and embed new leadership behaviours.

An action learning project requires participants to work on real business case projects. Project teams, consisting of six cross-functional technical leaders, apply the skills learned in the workshops to research and develop a business case. At the end of the three-month period they present their case to a panel of vice-president-level CTOs and executive senior technical leaders.

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The success of the programme is evidenced by the many graduates who have come back to serve as project advisors. This has developed a genuine community of practice within Cisco

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"The long-standing support from VP-level CTOs, Distinguished Engineers from the engineering, services and sales functions, and the GTLP graduate community, is a critical factor in the programme's success. These stakeholders serve many roles for the programme participants: action learning project sponsors, project SME advisors and project team mentors. The programme team often call this group the 'unsung heroes' of the programme; they graciously dedicate their time and passion to help develop the next generation of technical leaders and make the program a success."
Rob Dinsmore, Senior Programme Manager, Learning Delivery, Cisco

GTLP participants achieve real and measurable business outcomes

Project outcomes are key evidence of the real impact the programme delivers for Cisco. Projects tend to be cross-functional/geographic in scope and provide opportunities for teams to deliver truly innovative solutions to some of the organisation's most difficult challenges.

One project, which fell under Cisco's corporate social responsibility remit, had a hugely positive impact on the company's international brand. It is best described by a member of the project team:

"Our team was tasked with designing a technological solution to the problem of game poaching in African national parks. We travelled to the park and met with local stakeholders to understand the problem and scope the technical possibilities. Then we worked collaboratively with technology partners, wildlife experts and local communities to implement new technologies in tracking, security and data capture. We used cutting-edge 'internet-of-things' technology to get real-time data to the right people at the right time. The project advanced animal protection as well as showcasing Cisco's technology and commitment to the region."

This project features in one of Cisco's 2016 series of adverts – "There's never been a better time to save the rhinos" – where the technology solution was described as "a game changer" in catching poachers.

The projects themselves are not the only significant impact generated by the programme.

LIW and Cisco use the Kirkpatrick methodology to track learning through behaviour change to business impact, collecting data through surveys and case studies. Participants attribute a 15.3% average performance improvement to the programme and 91% of them agree that the GTLP was a worthwhile investment in their leadership development.

They rate greater collaboration, strengthened stakeholder relationships, increased team engagement and better work efficiency as some of the strongest business outcomes from the programme.

"Using the new tools from GTLP: business communication, delegating and consensus building, and the feedback from my LSI assessment, I convinced the business unit to do something they had never done before for a customer, and influenced a competitively held account to go with our solution. We won the account, built new relationships and got our team to overcome some previously immovable obstacles. We won a $16m project which is 20-30% of our region's annual goal as a result."
Sales/Systems Engineer Program Participant

The GTLP legacy

The success of the programme is evidenced by the many graduates who have come back to serve as project advisors. This has developed a genuine community of practice within Cisco, with participants able to observe their graduate peers putting their learnings into action. Senior leaders remark on seeing a demonstrable leap in leadership competency among graduates in comparison to their non-GTLP peers and participants commonly comment on the demanding but rewarding nature of the programme.

THERE'S NEVER BEEN A BETTER TIME

to save the rhinos

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