

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION FOR GROWTH THROUGH LEADERSHIP EXCELLENCE

AN EAGLE'S FLIGHT CASE STUDY WITH AECON



By cultivating an ideal client-vendor relationship, Eagle's Flight helped a leading construction and infrastructure development firm establish the necessary foundation for their successful growth.

In 2006, Dave Brennan, VP of Human Resources with Aecon Group Inc., secured Eagle's Flight, a global experiential learning company, to provide leadership training. At the outset, neither party imagined the long-term benefits that such a partnership would bring. However, the relationship has developed over time, with Eagle's Flight establishing themselves as a trusted advisor whose contribution to Aecon encompasses much more than purely training. They have been valuable partners in building the foundation that has allowed Aecon to grow significantly over the past seven years. That growth is spearheaded by highly skilled leaders who have more ownership and accountability over people development and HR practices, and a professional Human Resources team that has created a robust curriculum of training programs for the organization.

The leadership development initiative began at Aecon with one division and a two-day program. After short-listing three companies, Brennan and his advisory team chose Eagle's Flight for three reasons: the people, the content, and the delivery methodology. First, they liked the people. The account team from Eagle's Flight spent substantial time identifying Aecon's needs and helping to define the type of leadership development that would assist them in meeting their goals. Second, they valued the content. Having been exposed to much leadership curriculum over the years, they appreciated the practical models and principles and the fact that the Eagle's Flight Living Leadership™ program would be fully customized to Aecon's requirements. Finally, they were drawn to the firm's experiential learning methodology, which made the program interactive, engaging, and memorable for participants.

CUSTOMIZING TO ADDRESS UNIQUE NEEDS

Prior to launching their first Living Leadership module within the Civil and Utilities Group, Eagle's Flight sought to understand Aecon's reality through an in-depth discovery process focused on gaining a clear picture of the audience, the company, and the existing barriers and enablers to training.

This information was used to customize the leadership program, to speak to the specific challenges faced by Aecon, and to engage the audience by ensuring relevance.

What began as the customized Living Leadership initiative for senior leaders, then expanded to include Foundations™, a personal leadership course for individual contributors and Management Matters™, a five-day course for new and mid-level managers. The strategic decision to align all three levels of leadership training to the principles established in Living Leadership was crucial. The integrated approach established the consistency and common language across all levels of the organization that ultimately contributed to the success of Aecon's leadership development initiative.

ESTABLISHING COMMON LANGUAGE AND ALIGNMENT

For many senior leaders in the company, the common language is the element that continues to have a lasting impact on the culture of the organization. The leadership programs each come with their own “living language” that provides consistency across all business units and leadership levels in Aeon.

“This language allows employees to tackle topics that may be difficult to talk about.”

- Greg Rooney, Senior VP of Human Resources at Aeon

“The leadership training has created a common bond and a common language between divisions.”

- Kim McCoy, Human Resources Manager with the Innovative Steam Technologies (IST) division

“The leadership initiative has become part of Aeon’s life blood.”

- Brian Swartz, Executive VP of Legal and Commercial Services

In combination with the common language, Foundations, Management Matters, and Living Leadership have built performance consistency and alignment across the many divisions that make up Aeon. The chemistry between departments and divisions has grown and helped mesh the new leaders at Aeon with those who are more seasoned. “The leadership initiative has become part of Aeon’s life blood,” observes Brian Swartz, Executive VP of Legal and Commercial Services and a member of Aeon’s executive team. Swartz was one of the first to experience Living Leadership when the program was introduced to the Corporate Group.

His initial experience with Eagle’s Flight then broadened to include consulting on strategic planning, delivery of conference programs, implementation of 360 degree feedback assessments, and coaching and mentoring for himself and his direct reports. Personally, Swartz has adapted his management style to incorporate many of the techniques taught in Living Leadership. He feels he has become a more effective leader of people and has been infusing the same principles and values into his team to cultivate their own growth. Organization-wide, Swartz witnesses increased alignment between the Aeon divisions where the President and VPs take personal ownership for demonstrating and cascading the principles and methodologies from the training.

DRIVING ENGAGEMENT

A key objective for Aecon was to make the list of the 50 Best Employers in Canada. Compiled by Aon Hewitt, the list focuses on employee engagement, which is driven by leadership, rewards, workplace culture and values, productivity, and support of performance and development. The leadership training, combined with the involvement of Eagle's Flight in Aecon's company-wide conferences and Town Hall meetings, have been supporting factors in improving corporate communication and employee engagement scores.

In conjunction with ongoing initiatives, these efforts helped Aecon establish themselves on the Top 50 list for the past five years running.

"A lot of factors contributed to our success, and the Eagle's Flight partnership has certainly been part of our journey to get us where we are today," shares Paul Pastirik, Executive VP of Finance with Aecon's Infrastructure Group.

While the impact of this level of investment in people and leadership development is not necessarily quantifiable in dollars and cents, Greg Rooney notes that in challenging economic times, Aecon is retaining their talent and has a strong leadership group. He attributes this to the training initiatives and Aecon's continued focus on developing people. Furthermore, they have committed to 40 hours of training per employee each year, a significant investment and a testament to the value Aecon places on training as a driver of engagement, performance, and workplace culture. Much of this training content is provided by Eagle's Flight as their partner on this journey.

John Wright, President of Leadership Development for Eagle's Flight, has played a major role in Aecon's leadership and HR evolution since that initial meeting with Dave Brennan in 2006. He has witnessed firsthand the growth of Aecon leaders into a committed group that owns responsibility and accountability for the HR practices and people development.

"When I first started working with Aecon, they believed that HR takes care of the people and the leaders take care of the work. Through their personal leadership growth, they now recognize the need to be concerned with both. Leaders have discovered that effectively managing their people drives greater results. By leveraging the HR and people practices established through the training, leaders are better able to diagnose issues and put a plan in place to achieve success."

- John Wright, President of Leadership Development for Eagle's Flight

BUILDING HR BENCH STRENGTH

In step with these achievements has been the growth and development of Aecon's Human Resources team with the support of senior Eagle's Flight executives, including Wright and the company's CEO, Phil Geldart. When Eagle's Flight embarked on their partnership with Aecon, their involvement with the company's HR team was significant. Functioning as an extension of the department, the firm helped the team hone their HR skills, taking Aecon from a company with limited HR and training and development capacity to a professional and focused HR group.


Concurrent with Aecon's significant overall growth, over the past seven years the team has expanded from four people and one training program to over 50 HR professionals and 106 training programs, now including a number of technical courses as well. Currently, Aecon's HR team, under the direction of Jeff Sutton of the Corporate OD group, is preparing to launch their own Aecon University. Sutton notes that Aecon worked closely with Eagle's Flight, establishing the framework that would help to guide the principles and the early development of the University.



EVOLVING PARTNERSHIP

From the onset, Aecon's relationship with Eagle's Flight was more than that of client and vendor. Today, as Aecon's own HR capability expands, the Eagle's Flight team continues to provide advice, coaching, guidance, and a valuable third party perspective on various business challenges. "In my dealings with Eagle's Flight over the past six years, the people at the very top took a personal interest in working with us. They were helpful in a lot of different areas and were willing to be our partner in whatever direction we wanted to go," comments Paul Pastirik.

Now that Aecon has a strong base in both the leadership and the HR areas, the nature of their relationship with Eagle's Flight will naturally evolve. John Wright sees it as an opportunity to move the established partnership in a new direction. "We're now exploring how we can continue to build on what has been started, while adding value to Aecon in completely different ways. Because of the foundation that has been formed over the past seven years, and the solid partnership between our companies that has been established, we're excited to discover what comes next in the journey for both of us."

A woman with short blonde hair, wearing a black top and a green scarf, is speaking into a microphone at a podium. She is gesturing with her right hand. In the foreground, the backs of several audience members' heads are visible, including one person wearing a bright pink shirt. The background is dark with some blue lighting.

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