Slowing Down for Rapid Change at iD Tech

By Gail Snyder

Imagine being responsible for a single summer camp full of bright, energetic students ranging in age from 6 to 18 years. Does that sound stressful? Now consider managing day camps and overnight camps—located on over 100 college campuses across the United States with tens of thousands of kids. Are you getting a headache? Well this is only part of the challenge for iD Tech, now the largest STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) camp in the world. With a mission that includes the phrase "sparking your internalDrive," iD Tech blends traditional summer camp with visionary, hands-on technology programs.

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— Francisco Gomez

Since 1999, when this family-owned enterprise opened its first office above a garage in Silicon Valley, the company has grown exponentially. With camps located on such distinguished campuses as Stanford, UCLA, Princeton, and MIT, iD Tech recently added two new camp experiences/divisions—iD Tech Mini (for ages 6 to 9) and the Alexa Café (an all-girls program for ages 10 to 15). Pete Ingram-Cauchi, CEO, knew these additions meant new challenges in operations and changing roles for many employees, so he called a meeting with Joy Meserve, VP of Operations. "Pete challenged me," Meserve explained. "He asked me to figure out a way to ensure that each of our divisions remain unique and shiny. We call that *brand shininess* at iD Tech."

Meserve decided that she needed a systematic method for managing performance at all levels from the highest ranks on her team to the summer staff out at each of their 100+ locations. She Googled "performance management" and found Aubrey Daniels International (ADI). Shortly thereafter, she was discussing iD Tech's challenge with Francisco Gomez, an ADI senior consultant.

"The types of leadership behaviors they have to engage in during camp is different than the types of behaviors they need to do before/after camp," explained Gomez. Prior to the summer camp season there are issues of recruiting quality hires, contracts, negotiations, resource development, ACA accreditation, and all of the aspects of running a large business. During their summer camp season other concerns arise including safety and risk-management, tracking students' food allergies and medications, classroom control, delivering instruction, and supervising outside activities. "When they started describing the business to me, I realized the magnitude of their responsibilities," Gomez commented. These responsibilities didn't rattle Meserve's

resolve to work with ADI to understand and apply their proven Precision Leadership (PL) approach to achieve rapid change.

STARTING AT THE TOP

iD Tech's organizational structure includes top management followed in succession by operations directors, territory managers, hiring managers, onsite camp directors, and instructors (who oversee students). While the company is taking Precision Leadership to all employment levels, it began formal training with the top management tier including Ingram-Cauchi, Meserve, the HR director, and the VP of Finance. After the initial training, Precision Leadership was rolled out at their internal director level.

One tool introduced in the training—ADI's Reverse Engineering model—quickly resonated with the team and made all the difference in achieving success.

THE LANGUAGE OF CHANGE

Before making a final decision on Precision Leadership implementation, Meserve sought the council of an iD Tech board member. "He said something that I really loved. He said, 'No matter what you do, make sure that you get everybody at iD Tech speaking the same language,'" said Meserve. The advice seemed prescient because when Meserve called several ADI references in companies that had implemented Precision Leadership, she noticed immediately that, besides the praise for the PL methods, the references, including a CEO and a VP, shared one thing in common. "They said the things that I really wanted to hear, that the process could trickle down to every single level of the company. But I also noticed they were all using the same language that I had read in the ADI materials. They talked about reverse engineering, weekly debriefs, and so on. That convinced me that this was the process we wanted to go with. It sold me also to hear people speak about how these methods created positive change within their organizations."

It taught leadership how to start at the beginning with a desired result and then work backwards to identify the behavior required at each level to attain that result. "With Francisco's help, we tackled all of those layers down to the instructors," Meserve explained.

In addition to continually incorporating ever-changing technology and managing the ongoing elements of running a business, the people at iD Tech strive to make sure that each camp experience is consistently delivered on all sites. "With reverse engineering we are better able to diagnose and anticipate the things that are going to cause us to be stressed," said Ingram-Cauchi. "We are recognizing how complicated processes actually are. We now understand that we have the ability to manage them and see things through. That's powerful!"

In conjunction with the Reverse Engineering model, iD Tech came to understand the importance of weekly debrief meetings, measurement, feedback, and, of course, positive reinforcement. The weekly debrief sessions, during which each of Meserve's direct reports call in or meet to discuss coaching progress, concerns, and changes in business metrics have proven very beneficial. Two key benefits of these debrief sessions are the best-practice sharing and feedback leaders provide one another on their coaching approach. These meetings are designed to provide sustainability and continuous improvement in the manner in which the Precision Leadership skills are used. "We started breaking off and doing smaller, weekly debriefs within each department and work group. The debriefing sessions really help because we can talk about any current situations and the behaviors we want to see," she said. The plan is to cascade these debriefs through every level of the company.

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ADI's Reverse Engineering Model
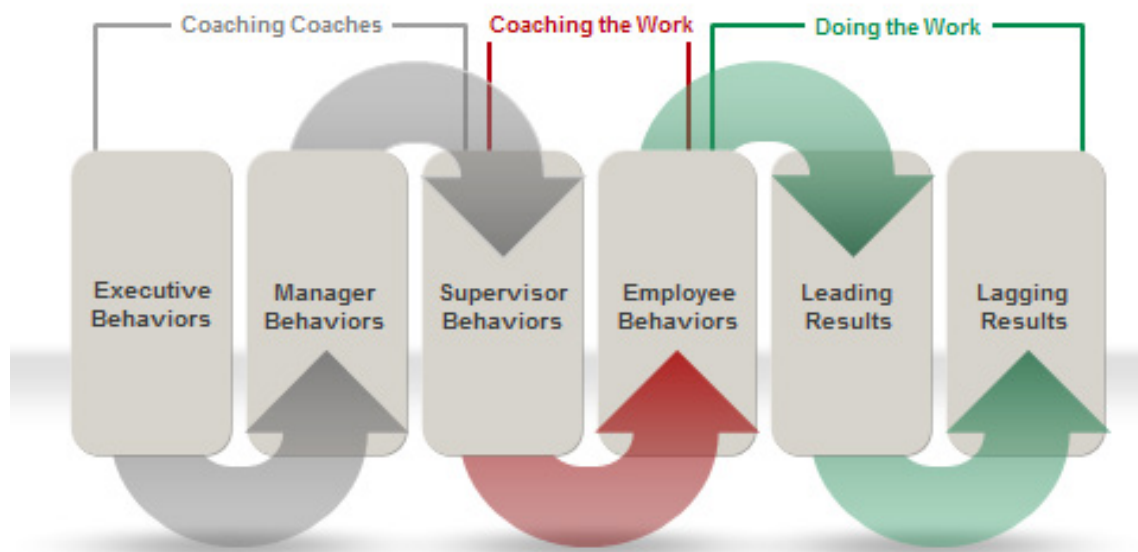
A CULTURAL TRANSITION

Even though not all levels have received formal Precision Leadership training, employees are beginning to demonstrate the positive behaviors modeled by leadership. "We all started seeing Joy's success and because of that we jumped on the bandwagon," said Ingram-Cauchi.

The trickle-down effect has occurred as hoped for, even evidenced in a change in communications. Meserve explained, "This approach has slowed us down when we respond. There are so many more appropriately, positively reinforcing emails going around at all levels. Did this person go through the training? No they didn't. And yet there they are, sending a beautifully well-written, sincere praise of somebody. People are slowing down to recognize what a person did to make something go well and to positively reinforce that behavior so that it will occur again."

UNFOUNDED FEARS, FUTURE PLANS, AND LESSONS LEARNED

Being transparent about the Precision Leadership process and its purpose with all employees has increased the buy-in and use of feedback and positive reinforcement throughout the organization. "People were worried that in trying to reinforce someone, it was going to come off as fake or insincere but in the actual implementation it has not. If you're taking the time to recognize somebody by calling out a behavior, we have yet to find anybody who said, 'Well that made me feel really bad.' But it was a worry. Those worries have completely vanished," said Ingram-Cauchi.

Meserve is coaching the summer staff on the elements of providing constructive feedback and the importance of recognizing and reinforcing specific behaviors. "Those two components have been strategically the most value to us," she said. "We are also talking to our instructors about dealing with behavior management in the classroom."

iD Tech has evaluation tools for soliciting customer evaluations. These online surveys serve as measurable feedback to the customer representatives and operations team. These and other current measures enable managers to reverse engineer the behaviors of the more successful reps and then coach others in those behaviors. This has already occurred in the Client Services Group, where Ingram-Cauchi found the behaviors of the best reps and helped others apply the same skills. "In a span of weeks, the department went from low morale to being a real leader in our company, providing excellent service and improving response time. It was a dramatic change. I attribute that to a new understanding of ADI's behavioral approach: how to take a group and understand what's making them tick (or not tick). It's exciting!" he said.

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Both Meserve and Ingram-Cauchi point out that assessing actions and results using an objective, behavioral approach has greatly improved the ability to look at the data and get things done. Ironically, slowing down has led to rapid change. "I don't think we're wasting as much time now. It's just, 'Here's what happened; now what are we going to do about it? Let's get to it!'" says Ingram-Cauchi.

Getting to it is also the advice he offers to any organization that decides to use behavioral management methods. Wanting to do everything perfectly only leads to analysis paralysis, according to this CEO. "This takes commitment, allotting the time to meet every week, and holding people accountable to the methodology," he said. "It's better just to start and build on your momentum. Don't try to do too much all at one time. Try to form very basic habits. We started with small win, after small win, after small win and all of those small wins equal a big win at the end of the day."

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[About the Author]

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Gail Snyder is a staff writer for Aubrey Daniels International. For the past 27 years, she has worked with clients to share their stories of the impact the science of behavior has had on their people and their business. In addition, Gail was the editor of Performance Management Magazine from 1987 to 2004.

[About ADI]

Regardless of your industry or expertise, one thing remains constant: People power your business. Since 1978 Aubrey Daniels International (ADI) has been dedicated to accelerating the business and safety performance of companies worldwide by using positive, practical approaches grounded in the science of behavior and engineered to ensure long-term sustainability. ADI provides clients with the tools and methodologies to help move people toward positive, results-driven accomplishments. Our clients accelerate strategy execution while fostering employee engagement and positive accountability at all levels of their organization.

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