

**CASE STUDY** 



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## COMCAST

The path to results can sometimes be bumpy. In 2012, Comcast Cable launched an ambitious effort to redesign its talent management activities around customer service. That mission reflected a simple philosophy embraced by Senior Vice President and Chief Talent Development Officer Martha Soehren.

"A consistent learner experience drives a consistent customer experience, and that's what the cable TV business is all about," says Soehren, Comcast University's top executive, who oversees the training and development of Comcast Cable's 91,000 employees.

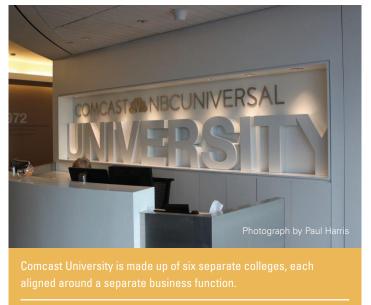
Although tireless efforts within CU to improve training related to customer service had already yielded many positive results, Comcast needed to reinforce its customer-first philosophy among its thousands of employees with leadership responsibilities.

The first indication that more changes were needed came in 2014 when the company ranked low on the American Consumer Satisfaction Index—an annual cross-industry customer evaluation survey. The next year, the company's proposed acquisition of Time Warner Cable was blocked by the U.S. Department of Justice, dealing it another blow.

It was a moment of reckoning for Comcast Cable's learning executives, especially its vice president of talent and technology development, Larry Clark, whose job was to help improve the customer experience. "We have always felt as a company that we deliver great products. But as the survey revealed, the way we engaged with customers did not live up to our expectations," Clark says. In that way, the government's decision actually strengthened their resolve to do more.

#### A Seismic Shift Needed

Indeed, at that moment, the Philadelphia-based provider of cable TV and other broadband services needed to be on point more than ever regarding the way it treated customers. Its parent company, Comcast Corp., had acquired media and entertainment giant NBC Universal in 2011, continuing a growth path that also included the acquisition of AT&T Broadband (which was AT&T's cable operations) in 2002. With the growth, the learning executives at the company keenly understood that customer satisfaction played a key role in the scrutiny of big deals by regulators.



"We decided it was time to take a new outside-in perspective around customer service," explains Clark. "Rather than just being efficient at achieving internal metrics, we [needed to] let the customer define success "

In short, a seismic shift was required within the organization; one that would be vigorously endorsed by top executives. Orchestrating that mindset with teammates was the perfect assignment for Clark, who left Microsoft in 2012 to lead Comcast Cable's leadership development activities.

His team would build on the groundwork already laid within CU. In 2011 the company created five

separate colleges within the university (recently expanded to six), each aligned around separate business functions: Sales, Customer Care, Technical Operations, Comcast Business, College for Technologists, and Talent and Professional Development. Clark heads the College for Technologists and the College of Talent and Professional Development, which encompasses all areas of leadership training.

Clark was asked as one of his first assignments to examine an existing developmental initiative called One Comcast Leader (OCL). Launched in 2010, OCL was a well-received first effort to achieve consistency in the development of leadership skills among supervisors, managers, and directors across the organization.

But as demands increased on the company to become more customer oriented and respond more nimbly to new competitors outside the cable TV business, it became apparent to all that a second phase of the OCL initiative was warranted.

## Laying a Leadership Pipeline

One of Clark's first duties was to examine the existing OCL program and devise a new leadership development strategy that would affect the company's entire leadership cadre, which was some 18,000 strong. After meeting with teammates, he recommended reconceiving OCL around a leadership pipeline model.

"People go through distinct stages at every level, and then transition to the next level," the energetic training executive explains. "Those are the key events in development that need to be supported with training."

Clark began by dividing team members into two groups. One would pursue a broad-based strategy to drive performance by developing individual leadership skills at their current level within the organization. It would emphasize onboarding new supervisors and maximizing job performance.

The other group would devise a strategy to build future capacity within Comcast Cable. Specifically, it would prepare leaders for the next career level, focusing on high potential and bench development. The goal was to create separate competency models for each of three job levels—frontline or supervisor level, managers, and directors—which would focus on the skills needed for advancement.

It became a strategically innovative exercise that devised and mapped the leadership pipeline around the way individuals actually develop within the company. The teams essentially created a road map, based on clear expectations and a mandate to meet them, which included "mapping for onboarding, job progression, and transition to the next level, all within a single holistic strategy," says Clark.

Once the strategies were developed, the OCL rebuilding program could begin. The in-house teams created the new model internally without engaging outside partners. Instead, they relied on popular leadership pipeline models, such as one developed by author and consultant Ram Charan, author of The Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership Powered Company. Selective outsourcing would come later when the concept moved to the development and delivery stages.

Another priority was to take full advantage of the robust blended learning technologies that were available. Social learning platforms from suppliers were carefully selected based on their ability to deliver the full gamut of collaborative and experiential learning opportunities at any time and on any device, supplemented by live and virtual instruction as required. Leaders would be able to access learning content and a broad array of tools for self-directed and shared experiences.

And this time around, the new OCL initiative would be supported by a culture of shared accountability that would permeate all levels of leadership.

#### How the Customer Comes First

Maximizing the customer experience has become paramount within every functional group throughout Comcast Cable. "There isn't a single business group that doesn't have it as their top priority," Soehren points out.

Clark agrees, saying the concept is "like gravity here since it's embedded in everything we do." He also notes that every leader in the business unit is measured by their contributions to improving the customer experience, which served as a foundation for redesigning the OCL programs.

Successes in earlier CU initiatives underscore the extent of the mission and the company's emphasis on measurable results. One example is the initiative to expedite the new call center associate onboarding process. By eliminating a tedious six-week, classroom-based orientation, and replacing it with a new self-directed online learning lab called Learning Nucleus, CU put recruits fully in charge of meeting their own instructional demands. The initiative was so successful that experiential learning was adopted for onboarding technical employees too.

"It's amazing how much more positive the customer experience metrics are today" because of the program, claims Soehren. Equally impressive is the performance of learners who go through the self-directed lab compared with the previous classroom-based model. "Business leaders were even able to build savings into their operational education budgets for 2017," she says.

Soehren anticipates the same positive results from the OCL initiative when it becomes fully operational.

Her colleagues agree that much of CU's success stems from Soehren's passionate and collaborative leadership style. The personable executive sets a high bar for her CU team by addressing daily challenges with unflinching determination. She expects the same level of dedication from her staff. (Formerly Comcast's chief learning officer, Soehren was named CTDO in 2012 when the talent management function was added to her list of responsibilities.)

## Training in a Red Bull Environment

A noteworthy aspect of Comcast Cable's bold new OCL initiative is the business context in which it is being introduced. The media industry is a relentlessly volatile climate of competitive, regulatory, and economic challenges that affect the many dynamic markets served by Comcast-NBCUniversal.

Such a climate is arguably best reserved for nimble executives who can adjust quickly to new technologies, everchanging viewer habits, and the unceasing tide of fierce new competitors. That competition can even come from within the confines of Comcast-NBCUniversal itself, such as its Hulu video streaming service, which faces off directly with the legacy cable TV division.

So, how do CU personnel cope with these dynamics as they pursue both short- and long-term goals?

"We must constantly adjust," explains Clark. "We are a diverse media and technology company operating within a fluid marketplace. We aren't run like a manufacturing organization, but rather like a project-based company that requires us to be constantly agile."

The result, he says, is an emphasis on recruiting and developing a new breed of leadership talent. "There is much more complexity and speed involved today. We all must adapt what we're doing very quickly without losing sight of the big picture." And while the skills expected of Comcast Cable's leadership are changing, so too is the quality and timeliness of training that its managers expect in return from Comcast University.

Clark and colleagues are mindful that leadership development content enjoys a lengthier shelf life than, say, product training. "But we still must regularly assess the relevance of our training to what we're doing," he says. Vital skills for today's leaders include dealing with complexity and stress in the workplace and perpetual change.

While that doesn't mean traditional leadership content like delegation and communication is now irrelevant, Clark says that those qualities must be taught within today's high-intensity, constantly shifting Red Bull environment. The fast-paced, run-on-empty ethos required of today's tech-based industries requires a new kind of leader. "I see lots of leaders who in previous eras could have run companies, but now top out at mid-level because they can't cope with the complexity and stress," Clark explains. "That's the context in which we now must develop our people."

That philosophy is much in evidence within both the curricula and delivery of the multifaceted OCL version 2.0. Instead of following a Six Sigma approach for problem solving, the CU teams devised a more design-thinking "outside-in" approach. "We are teaching people that work happens in iterations," says Clark. "It's constantly fluid. That has become the context of everything."

#### The New OCL

Comcast University is currently rolling out the revised OCL program in phases, which will ultimately constitute nine independent and customized modules called OCL experiences. Each will be delivered as one-time, multiweek learning events for individuals at critical points in their careers:

- when they are new to their role (launch)
- when their tenure in role reaches a minimum of 18 months (transform)
- when a seasoned employee considers advancement to the next level (advance).

At-a-Glance: One Comcast Leader					
	Onboarding	Midpoint in Role	Senior in Role		
	O-6 months in role (all leaders)  Foundation skills to onboard new leaders at their level, to accelerate ramp-up in role.	18+ months in role (all leaders)  Assessment and advanced leadership skills to maximize performance of teams.	Skills for those weighing career options and considering or preparing for the next career level.		
Director	OCL Launch: onboarding experience for directors	OCL Transform: midpoint Experience for Directors	OCL Advance: experience for directors		
Manager	OCL Launch: onboarding experience for managers	OCL Transform: midpoint experience for managers	OCL Advance: experience for managers		
Supervisor and Frontline Leader	OCL Launch: onboarding experience for frontline leaders	OCL Transform: midpoint experience for frontline leaders	OCL Advance: experience for frontline leaders		

When fully implemented in late 2017, OCL will deliver these three tailored training experiences to individuals at the supervisor, manager, and director levels. The program will have a staff of 15 full-time leadership instructors performing in both live classroom and virtual instruction settings. Clark declines to discuss financial aspects of the initiative.

The launch phase for frontline leaders and managers was developed in 2014, followed by the 2016 pilot of the transform course for the two leadership levels. The advance level courses will follow.

"The focus is on helping ramp speed-to-proficiency for those who are new to a role, and to move from good to great for those tenured to a role," explains Mike Smith, senior director of leadership and professional development. Smith, who is responsible for broad-based leadership development across the organization, oversees the OCL initiative's development and rollout.

Smith predicts that revolutionary changes within the company will ensue once the learning organization and the leadership corps overcome a variety of start-up challenges. These challenges include delivery in complex and demanding modules to busy team leaders who have to juggle the experiences around other priorities. There will also be a separate learning curve for the delivery method. Smith notes that CU personnel will have to show patience and understanding with OCL participants, who will be new to the social learning platforms the program is blending with more familiar instructor-led training and e-learning formats.

Finally, the importance of the company's new culture of accountability linked to customer service cannot be overstated. That mandate requires every OCL participant to report to their managers, and every manager to become a diligent coach. This drives accountability in both directions, Smith explains.

The emphasis reflects a vital lesson gleaned from OCL's original iteration. "We learned from feedback that participants struggled to apply their new concepts on the job because their managers had not been informed about the learning concepts and thus weren't equipped to support them," says Senior Program Manager Jennifer Lagana. Breaking that cycle, which undermined the entire learning experience, was a top priority this time around.

CU selected three principal vendors to help facilitate the OCL learning initiative, including NovoEd and Entelechy. The former's customized social learning platform was tapped for the principal mode of delivery, while the latter helped jointly develop the broad array of customized courseware alongside CU's in-house development staff.

#### **Numerous Metrics Foreseen**

CU will employ a variety of business metrics to measure outcomes from OCL. As it rolls out onboarding training for leaders new to their roles in director, manager, supervisor levels, it will measure their performance against others who have not been onboarded in the same way. Clark says that this will provide a clear although brief window on business performance impact.

"In our drive to enhance the customer experience, we recognize that we have to collect data in a very different way," says Smith. One important measurement tool the team is integrating into the OCL program is Bain and Company's Net Promoter System. A Net Promoter Score (NPS) metric measures the willingness of Comcast call center customers to recommend the company's products and services.

Comcast is also rolling out a separate employee NPS tool to measure the opinions of its employees regarding their experience at work, and to garner suggestions for improvement. Every leader down to the supervisor level will receive NPS data that reflects, in part, their leadership skills.

The companion tools will enable Comcast to correlate employee and customer data down to the supervisor level. "Every leader, that leader's leader, and that leader's leader will have a lens into the feedback coming from his or her employees as well as the customers served by that group," says Soehren proudly.

With its focus on current and future leadership performance, the OCL program operates independently of an existing curriculum within CU devoted to preparing high potential leaders at Comcast Cable. It pursues that activity with select outside partners to fulfill the unique needs of high-potential audiences across Comcast.

Another priority for the team is to ensure that the OCL initiative is seamlessly integrated into a diverse leadership development agenda. This often means insisting individuals stay focused on the big picture to avoid prioritizing one project over another. For example, as with many learning organizations, CU tends to prioritize pipeline issues, says Clark. If a talent shortage is perceived at a certain position, the solution is to find the best people and put them

through the requisite training. CU addresses that concern largely through its separate program for high potentials.

"Yes, it's great to emphasize business acumen so that our people are ready to make that next leap," explains Clark. "But if you're not developing their core leadership and management skills at their current levels, you'll never know who's got the potential. Both strategies must be executed at the same time."



## Social Learning: OCL's Indispensable Tool

The backbone of the blended OCL program is a modern social learning platform that enables participants to collaborate and learn in a variety of innovative ways. After considering options, Comcast University selected the platform provided by San Francisco-based software firm NovoEd.

The customized website features a modern and intuitive interface that is easy to navigate, especially for anyone familiar with social sites like Facebook, says Jennifer Lagana, senior program manager. Users are greeted with an opening page that introduces the learning program and its various elements, including guides, tutorials, discussion groups, postings, and assignments. It can be accessed from any device.

The NovoEd platform was introduced in 2016 to participants in the 12-week manager transform pilot. As with all other OCL sessions, the 45-person class was divided into "trek teams" of four or five participants who were each asked to devote two hours on the site each week at their convenience on team-based assignments.

The platform features an array of options for participants to receive instruction and collaborate with peers and facilitators in groups large and small. Instructional videos are available on the site, and participants are expected to contribute informal video reflections about leadership concepts uploaded from their portable devices.

Employing the social learning platform over a three-month course enabled CU to ensure that experiential learning is incorporated into and reinforced within each manager's professional life, says Lagana. Learners are not in an isolated bubble of a training environment, but rather are applying leadership concepts in real situations and then sharing those experiences with colleagues.

Another priority for the platform was to ensure that CU's top goals for the OCL initiative—a high course completion rate, a positive learner experience, and an improved customer experience—are met. Thus far, reactions to the social platform have been positive.

"It is not only a tool for learning, but also for sharing of best practices," says Lagana. "The virtual world format enables users to collaborate at any time and in many ways."

NovoEd is one of two social learning platforms CU uses to develop its leadership corps. The company uses SurePeople's platform for the director launch and high potential leader programs, which is separately operated. Why the two different vendors? "We wanted to explore different options in this space and to test both platforms," Lagana says. She says the SurePeople platform provides a leadership assessment tool that CU finds useful for its director level executives, and which is not part of the NovoEd experience.

## In Depth: OCL Pilots the Manager Transform Module

OCL's manager transform module, designed for tenured manager-level leaders, employs a variety of tools to create a new culture of leadership. Piloted in 2016 with a class of 45 nationally dispersed managers, the 12-week module typifies the depth and scope of every OCL experience.

The transform program seeks to instill an overarching progression of leadership development around self, team, and organization. Its fundamental message is simply that when individuals develop their leadership skills, they can lead their teams and meet organizational needs more effectively. However, that is easier said than done.



The primary goal of the course is to train leaders to adopt a design-thinking model of problem resolution. That means developing a new mindset about leadership and each individual's role in guiding their teams to improving the customer experience.

"We want our leaders, especially at the manager level, to continually ask the question, 'how might we . . . ?' and fill in the rest," explains Lagana. "Once people train themselves to do that, they view challenges differently."

During the 12-week program, the pilot's participants engaged primarily in collaborative and self-directed learning using a robust social learning platform developed by NovoEd. That experience also included weekly virtual classroom sessions bookended by a pair of two-day in-person events. These face-to-face sessions are held simultaneously at Comcast regional offices in Atlanta, Denver, and Baltimore.

"The blended approach is what makes the OCL program so innovative," says Clark. "It can be run regionally, divisionally, or nationally. That flexibility helps us manage our business and meet time and flex demands of business units and individuals."

Prior to starting the program, each participant underwent a 360-degree assessment of their leadership competencies. The results were distributed in the first in-person session and scrutinized. Following a thorough introduction of the design thinking model, participants were asked to apply its concepts in a real-life setting of their choice. They were to identify a specific opportunity under their direct control to improve the customer experience, and then prepare a specific plan to do so.

The assignment, referred to as a Customer Experience Innovation (CEI), was conducted individually by participants during the second week of the program. However, they weren't required to complete the assignment during the course; they gave an update on their progress and presented any relevant findings during the second in-person session. The goal was simply to introduce and develop skills in the new thinking mode for future use, says Lagana, because "they learn to apply the CEI concepts to everything introduced during the program."

The transform pilot also emphasized the degree to which Comcast leaders are engaged in their journey to leadership expertise, and why they should regard the training experience as a single trek. Classmates were divided into trek teams of four or five participants, and met virtually to reflect on what they'd learned during the course. Peer-to-peer coaching was encouraged.

The OCL initiative's emphasis on improving the customer experience, and being held accountable for that, was also introduced during the pilot.

The learners were also asked to write developmental goals in a digital reflections journal for use as discussion points for the weekly virtual classroom sessions. These online reflections on thought-provoking concepts are not read by other participants or required for course completion; they are simply stored in the cloud for possible use at the discretion of students.

Another new concept was the Transform Manager Field Guide, an online digital reference tool designed expressly for managers to whom the participants reported. It includes a program overview, week-by-week chapters of content-specific video links, related articles, and coaching conversation starters to help managers coach their subordinates throughout the program. In addition, frontline managers were given weekly accountability mandates to reinforce with their managers.

The field guide is considered the principal tool for building a culture of accountability at that level, Lagana says. "It makes them responsible for the development of their people, and ensures that there is no gap between the learning and its application on the job." The concept will be applied to all OCL programs to ensure that no such gap exists.

CU is also devising metrics to measure manager participation, and thus ensure they meet their new expectations. Right now it employs the built-in analytics of the Inkling content platform to measure manager accountability. "We can see the usage data that tells us how often the leader's guides are being opened and read," says Lagana. Assessment efforts will be stepped up once OCL initiatives begin yielding substantial data.

### Reflections on the Transform Pilot

Lagana says that results of the transform pilot were promising in many respects, especially its broad flexibility: "It can be run regionally, divisionally, or nationally. That helps us manage our business and meet time and flexibility demands of business units and individuals."

The pilot also demonstrated that an unlimited number of managers can participate simultaneously in social learning portions, while the in-person classroom events are limited by capacity.

Another instructive lesson was the importance of upending a deeply entrenched learning system. One of the OCL program's primary goals was to intentionally disrupt the time-honored ways that instruction is delivered within CU so that its personnel would become advocates for new delivery methods and technologies. "You have to break it to fix it sometimes," muses Lagana.

Clark views the disruption as a timely learning experience for CU personnel. "In a traditional model, program managers develop content and throw it over the wall to delivery organizations," he explains. "It's a clean handoff. They schedule it and run with it independently."

The new social learning—based model introduced in the OCL initiative breaks down geographic boundaries because the content's online components no longer need be run through CU's regional training organizations, he says. "That requires a different mindset in delivery operations, forecasting, and orchestrating trainer schedules."

Other new hurdles for CU include the prudent deployment of trainers in the social-learning era and the increased burdens on systems administration.

Immediate feedback from the pilot's participants, the only student reaction solicited to date by CU, included high praise for the innovative content, its immersive delivery, and the program's emphasis on sustained on-the-job reinforcement. Among the comments:

- "I like the blended learning approach and the way different elements are interwoven into the program. It keeps things from getting stale and allows for different learning styles to be successful in the course."
- "This course encourages people to really evaluate their leadership style and look for ways to grow and develop. It also challenges your traditional way of thinking about group dynamics."

## A New Era for Learning

Along with the glowing participant feedback has been a relative flood of other positive response to the pilot. The heaviest interest has come from managers eager to take the training module, and CU's leadership trainers who want to know more about the program. The unexpected demand has prompted the university to roll out the module nationally rather than through traditional regional channels.

This promises to make 2017 an exciting year for the university, says Lagana. As it ended 2016, CU was digesting equally impressive feedback from the pilot of the launch module aimed at director level leaders. The group plans to roll out every other OCL module during 2017, alongside numerous other training priorities. Those priorities include capturing critical baseline data on OCL modules for the metrics needed to define and measure its success.

As they prepare to meet these challenges, CU executives are confident that they have found a winning formula in the One Comcast Leader initiative. They believe that the strategic development of the innovative curricula and its thoroughly blended delivery will create a superior leadership corps at all levels of the company.

Bolstering their confidence was a timely piece of encouragement from the American Consumer Satisfaction Index. Its 2016 survey found a marked improvement for Comcast among companies in its group. Although consumers again soured overall on providers of Internet access and cable TV services, they ranked Comcast in the middle of the bracket, and ahead of several of its fiercest competitors.

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