



WP Engine Builds Leadership Pipeline Through Simulation-Based Training

WP Engine and Abilitie

Best Development Program for Frontline Leaders

March 2025



Company Background



WPengine

Company-at-a-Glance	
Headquarters	Austin, Texas
Year Founded	2010
Revenue	\$192.4 million (2023)
Employees	1,000+
Global Scale (Regions that you operate in or provide services to)	North America, Europe, Asia, Australia, Middle East
Customers/Output, etc. (Key customers and services offered)	Managed WordPress hosting for businesses, which includes plugin, theme, and WordPress updates for over 185,000 customers worldwide. WP Engine proudly serves clients like Hello Fresh, National Geographic, and Texas A&M University.
Industry	Technology
Stock Symbol	N/A
Website	https://wpengine.com/



Company Background



Company-at-a-Glance	
Headquarters	Austin, TX
Year Founded	2015
Revenue	\$13 million
Employees	32
Global Scale (Regions that you operate in or provide services to)	Worldwide
Customers/Output, etc. (Key customers and services offered)	Learning & Development/Leadership Development
Industry	Ed Tech/Leadership Development
Stock Symbol	N/A (private)
Website	https://www.abilitie.com/



Budget and Timeframe

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Overall budget	\$125,000 - \$150,000
Number of (HR, Learning, Talent) employees involved with the implementation?	2
Number of Operations or Subject Matter Expert employees involved with the implementation?	5
Number of contractors involved with implementation	0
Timeframe to implement	2022 to 2024
Start date of the program	2022

Fit to the Needs

Business Need:

Leveraging a small L&D team, elevate the effectiveness of learning and development initiatives at WP Engine to bridge the skills gap faced by leaders transitioning from technical to managerial positions within a fast-expanding organization. This initiative also aimed to sustain the company's internal promotion culture while nurturing the professional growth of its employees.

Business Condition:

In 2022, WP Engine was a successful late-stage startup in the technology industry. While its managers were very technically skilled, the organization's rapid growth emphasized day-to-day performance over long-term leadership development. The fast-paced business often put new managers into roles without ample training, creating a team of very technically sound business managers with little/less experience leading people.



While WP Engine's leadership team recognized the value and need for management training, to sustain its continued growth, no dedicated resources were available to implement it in an organized, systematic manner. However, after joining WP Engine in 2022, Sr. Leadership Development Manager Brian Kenney soon recognized that formal management training could solve many of WP Engine's growing pains.

Brian soon earned a reputation for his passion for management and leadership. It became increasingly common for managers to casually ask him for advice on managing and interacting with their people. WP Engine didn't have formal internal training in place yet, and Brian knew a program could boost managers' confidence and team performance, increase engagement, and combat attrition.

At first, Brian took up the effort of training managers with the goal of educating leaders on fundamental skills. He started "Bootcamp" workshops on fundamental management skills, which were a big hit. However, in addition to his full-time workload, he could only do so many workshops, which made it challenging to scale learning in an organization with hundreds of managers.

WP Engine saw the value of the fundamentals training and wanted to expand on Brian's flourishing program. They mobilized with the leadership development company Abilitie to build a scalable training program rooted in simulations and practice.

Goals:

- Invest in managers to improve WP Engine's culture, skills pipeline, and productivity by providing them with the knowledge and tools to lead teams confidently
- Simplify long-term hiring
- Retain institutional knowledge within the growing company

The leadership development program at WP Engine was strategically designed to address two key goals aligned with the company's growth objectives.



1. Improve business skills

The primary goal was to **invest in managers to enhance WP Engine's culture, skills pipeline, and overall productivity**. Recognizing that managers play a pivotal role in shaping the workplace environment and directly influencing employee performance, WP Engine identified them as critical targets for development initiatives.

The program aimed to equip managers with the necessary knowledge and skills to lead their teams confidently. By providing tailored training focused on leadership competencies, WP Engine sought to empower managers to navigate complex challenges effectively and foster a positive work environment conducive to productivity and innovation, which are critical to overall business success.

2. Establish a clear leadership path to promote employee retention and scale the business

WP Engine recognized the significance of long-term talent development and succession planning. By investing in the growth and development of current managers, the company aimed to streamline its leadership pipeline from within, ensuring a continuous supply of capable leaders to support its expanding operations. This strategic approach also aimed to retain institutional knowledge within the organization, mitigating the risks associated with turnover and ensuring organizational stability.

To achieve these goals, WP Engine collaborated with Abilitie to develop programs that emphasized experiential learning over traditional workshop-based training. **This innovative approach allowed participants to actively engage in simulated scenarios, providing practical experience in handling real-world leadership challenges.** Abilitie's management simulations proved particularly effective in coaching leaders and managers-to-be on navigating complex social dynamics and decision-making scenarios.

By partnering with Abilitie, WP Engine not only enhanced the quality of its leadership development program but also expanded its reach within the organization. By outsourcing certain training components, WP Engine's internal



team was able to focus on broader initiatives and open up training opportunities to a wider range of employees across different segments of the company.

Overall, the leadership development program at WP Engine invested in managers to improve culture, skills pipeline, and productivity. Through a combination of targeted training, experiential learning, and a partnership with Abilitie, WP Engine cultivated a strong and capable leadership cadre to prepare for long-term success.

Design and Delivery of the Program

Together, WP Engine and Abilitie created four management training programs tailored to different levels of experience. Every program includes social benefits, encouraging attendees to mix and mingle in person when possible. This not only contributes to a close-knit culture but also grows attendees' networks across different lines of business.

Each program is delivered in 4 sections:

a. Kickoff

b. Self-Awareness

Participants deep-dive into Type Coach, a personality type training that takes the guesswork out of how to inspire, lead, coach, influence, or collaborate with any personality type. They also gain a better understanding of their own tendencies and learn how to become better leaders by utilizing this data. This learning frames the entire experience and helps learners apply the training to their day-to-day lives.

c. Case Study + Real-world Application

Each program provides participants with an interactive Case Study to explore relative to the skill development within the program. Expert faculty then lead discussions on Case Study outcomes, approaches, and the real-world application to WP Engine's operations.

d. Game-Based Simulation

Competitive simulations (each program features a different simulation) assign learners to teams and task them with various real-world business problems. By immersing themselves in lifelike scenarios, leaders gain hands-on practice with immediate application to their real-life jobs. This



method has been highly successful, giving learners the chance to practice, see the consequences of their choices, refine their approach, and become better leaders when the training is over.

WP Engine Programs

1. **Emerging Leader Program (ELP)**

High-potential employees on the path to Manager are selected for the ELP to practice their communication, coaching, and people management skills.

- **Simulation: Management Challenge**

Management Challenge is a simulation that places learners in teams and tasks them with managing a group of simulated direct reports. Together, the learners encounter “employees” Tamika, Jim, Patrick, Mary, and others—and are faced with a unique challenge posed by each employee. Jim is taking credit for others’ work and needs coaching. Patrick is unmotivated and could use some recognition. Tamika is perfect for promotion but values peer collaboration more than management. Together with their teammates, learners decide how to handle these difficult management scenarios and chat with the AI-enabled characters, giving feedback and coaching to their fictitious direct reports. The simulation provides immediate feedback, and learners can repeat the exercises to improve their coaching or communication styles. The winning team is chosen based on the engagement, productivity, and skill set of their fictitious employees, rewarding them for their people management prowess.

2. **Accelerate Bootcamp**

This six-week intensive program for junior to intermediate managers is a fast track to business and management. An impressive 83 employees were enrolled in the first cohort. The boot camp is intensive and covers business acumen, financial statements, people management, and holistic value creation. It’s also the most popular program at WP Engine.



- **Simulation 1: Management Challenge** (see description above)
- **Simulation 2: Business Challenge**

In Business Challenge, learners engage in a high-stakes and competitive business simulation, immersing themselves in managing the complete value creation cycle, from sales and operations to launching new business units. This dynamic program fosters a fun and interactive learning environment where teams collaborate and compete to interpret financial data through targeted exercises. Participants gain invaluable insights into strategic planning, financial statement analysis, cost structure analysis, evaluating financial levers, and understanding business value drivers.

3. **Elevate**

Elevate takes senior managers to the next level. The program provides practice in high-level corporate strategy, building a successful business, and people management.

- **Simulation: Enterprise Challenge**

Learners are assembled into teams and collaborate to form companies competing for customers in a dynamic marketplace, offering a fast-paced and realistic business experience. Participants take on diverse roles within cross-functional teams, navigating challenges with limited resources and evolving responsibilities. With roles changing over time, individuals gain insights into the business from various perspectives, enhancing their understanding of organizational dynamics. Managing virtual employees adds an additional layer of complexity, as participants must ensure high morale to prevent them from being poached by competitors. Furthermore, unexpected events such as social media mishaps require quick thinking and cross-functional collaboration to resolve under time pressure, fostering adaptability and teamwork skills essential for success in today's fast-paced business environment.



4. Leading Organizational Change

This program is designed for director-level and above to practice setting and maintaining organizational alignment while executing high-stakes strategic choices.

- **Simulation: Executive Challenge**

In this simulation, teams of participants form companies and engage in fierce competition for customers within a dynamic marketplace. Each participant assumes an executive role within a cross-functional team, tasked with crafting a cohesive business strategy. With roles evolving frequently, individuals gain firsthand experience from various functional perspectives, enriching their understanding of business dynamics. Teams must adeptly manage both financial and human resources, with virtual employees susceptible to being poached by rivals, adding a strategic dimension to talent management. Unexpected events, ranging from acquisition opportunities to product recalls and intellectual property infringements, inject high-pressure scenarios requiring executive-level decision-making and effective communication skills, thereby simulating real-world challenges faced by business leaders.

Adoption of the Program

L&D Evolution at WP Engine:

Initially, the L&D team created six-week New Manager Boot Camps organized by skill set. Each program focused on how to avoid basic mistakes and the core philosophy of management. It was great for aspiring managers and new leaders, **but it had a ceiling. And WP Engine quickly outgrew the model.**

WP Engine worked with Abilitie to create a full training ecosystem as it exists today—touching on every aspect of leadership, based on career stage. **The four leadership programs now address complex problems at every level of the organization, driving business value and creating holistic value for WP Engine.**

**New Program Challenges:**

Rolling out these programs at first was challenging because only some managers saw the value in training. With such a fast-paced culture at WP Engine, employees were too busy with their day-to-day work to spend three months in training. The L&D team wanted to create a culture that valued leader development, but that required building hype around these programs. It decided the best way to do so would be to offer prestige to employees who invested in their skills.

Solutions:

To make the programs more substantial and relevant, WP Engine limited the scope of training and restricted access to high performers only. However, it didn't want to limit training by department. Instead, it opened up training opportunities for engineering, marketing, product, customer service, tech support, sales, and legal. The development team ensured at least one slot was available for each team, making more slots available for larger teams.

While any employee or manager with tenure could qualify, they could only be nominated by their functional lead to be considered for the program. The invite-only setup simplified enrollment and even created a “fear of missing out” (FOMO) that immediately drove demand for the program.

In fact, interested employees come to the development team months in advance, asking to reserve their places. The program didn't accept self-nominations, but this surge in interest showed how WP Engine's setup encouraged ambitious leaders to take the initiative and make themselves candidates in time for nomination season.

Addressing Demand for Program Participation

WP Engine's training program was exceptionally successful, leading to unforeseen challenges in distributing responsibilities within the company. The comprehensive training inadvertently resulted in a situation where employees were well-prepared for advancement, but WP Engine's growth rate couldn't keep pace with the demand for new positions. Consequently, WP Engine found itself with more qualified employees than viable opportunities for advancement.

In response, the L&D team got creative. They expanded horizontal roles across the company. This new approach encouraged the expansion of existing roles to cover more responsibilities, giving employees opportunities to flex their new skills at their current level.

Measurable Benefits

2024 is the third year of WP Engine's partnership with Abilitie. To date, over 200 people have gone through the programs.

WP Engine admits it's hard to quantify the impact training had on its profit and loss statement. **Still, the leadership team knows training is a significant contributor to the company's recent performance improvements, and this is why they've continued to invest in it.**

Measured Benefits:

- Programs have a 90-plus Net Promoter Score (NPS), showing that attendees are incredibly happy with the programs
- Key performance indicators (KPIs) like retention, engagement, and internal recruiting have improved. In fact, around 50% of employees participating in the Emerging Leaders program have gone on to accept management positions.
- Existing managers also received better year-on-year ratings from their teams, which shows that the programs work for both aspiring and experienced managers.

"Our partnership with Abilitie has enabled us to create a customized end-to end leadership development curriculum that enables us to continuously build new leaders AND accelerate the development of our existing leaders as they advance through their careers. We went from building classrooms to building schools." — Brian Kenney, Sr. Leadership Development Manager at WP Engine

"I loved the dynamic and team-based activities. Working with other people really is the challenge, and so it was great to have so many opportunities to practice collaborating. The lessons learned in those activities and challenge simulations have had a tremendously positive impact on my



ability to work effectively with cross-functional teams and stakeholders.” — Participant

Qualitatively, WP Engine is thrilled with the cultural shift at its company. The exclusive nature of its programs continues to drive demand and has created a cultural change where employees are excited about and seek out development opportunities. Thanks to WP Engine's investment in professional development, the team is more engaged, confident, and productive.

Overall

Key Findings

WP Engine's L&D efforts have created impressive gains in productivity and retention among frontline leaders. While some businesses hesitate to invest so much into their employees, **WP Engine has learned that investing in its technical employees to develop more leadership and management skills vastly improves retention, allowing the holistic business to reap the benefits of internal training and institutional knowledge.** WP Engine's leaders have a structured pipeline that will continue to enable them to upskill throughout their tenure at WP Engine, allowing them to become leading candidates for future management positions.

While WP Engine's programs exceeded expectations, the tech company believes in constant innovation, so its program content changes from year to year based on participant feedback and organizational needs. The goal is to make the content more valuable, innovative, and unique to each cohort.

Future Outlook

Both employees and managers feel supported and more confident because they have the ability to take on more projects thanks to WP Engine's additional investment in their training and skills development.

In the future, WP Engine plans to create additional professional development programs that anyone can join, not just star performers. The L&D team is also excited about expanding Abilitie's simulations to include additional AI-enabled conversations, which will allow even more participants to simulate real-world conversations and scenarios to improve their business acumen and leadership skills.



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