

# Best Practice Case Study: Improving Leadership Performance at GE Financial



## Interview with Dr. Linda Sharkey by Richard Sharp

Dr. Sharkey is currently Executive Director of Executive Networks, Inc. and author of *Optimizing Talent: What Every Leader and Manager Needs to Know to Sustain the Ultimate Workforce*

Linda Sharkey understands leadership.

As Executive Director of Executive Networks, Inc.—an organization that connects key HR heads from the largest corporations in the world—she provides members with new ideas, advice, practical materials and “early warnings” on key trends and innovations. She is also Strategic Partner with the Vaya Group (formerly Corporate Insights), where she plays an integral role in their talent practice, and a founding member of the Marshall Goldsmith Group.

Her past includes serving as V.P. of People Development at Hewlett-Packard, where she was responsible for establishing and driving the company’s talent management initiative, including a groundbreaking assessment process, which enabled the company to see the behaviors it most valued and culture it supported.

But what Sharkey is best known for is the work she did with leaders at GE—championing a process that was described by CEO and business icon Jack Welch as a “best practice in leadership development.”

At the core of that work are the surveys and inventories that Sharkey used while doing research for her dissertation—specifically, the statistically normed and validated tools created by Human Synergistics International (HSI).

## FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

“I started using Human Synergistics’ *Organizational Culture Inventory*® (OCI®) as part of the diagnostic toolset I selected for research during my PhD program at Benedictine University,” said Sharkey.

Having always been fascinated by the link between culture and leadership, Sharkey found HSI research, and the resulting instruments, to offer something that had been hard to find elsewhere.

“With the OCI and other circumplex-based surveys, I was able to find tools that were well researched, grounded in the literature, statistically validated and normed, and proven by decades’ worth of use in the field,” said Sharkey. “As a toolset, it was aligned with and attuned to the relationship between leadership and effective cultures. As a student, I was very much interested in those relationships, yet there simply weren’t that many tools or research that had been able to illustrate that relationship in a quantitative way.”

## MAKING AN IMPACT AT GE FINANCIAL

Sharkey was able to leverage her experience with Human Synergistics’ culture diagnostics when she was tasked with designing a new leadership development program for GE Financial’s top 600 executives worldwide.

“We started the process by interviewing GE leaders on the top challenges and obstacles facing them as leaders,” said Sharkey, “and from there we developed a leadership framework, focusing on the behaviors and competencies they needed to succeed as part of the organization.”

Using the results of these interviews as a guide, Sharkey developed internally a 360° assessment around the behaviors and competencies required to succeed. While this would have been the sole feedback used by many leadership development professionals, Sharkey opted for a more comprehensive, integrated approach.

“When you do a 360 you are really only getting people’s perception of what your behaviors are. I wanted to get a triangulation of instruments to help leaders get a more holistic view of what they were doing to build a successful, sustainable organization,” said Sharkey.

She used the Human Synergistics International *Leadership/Impact*® survey to help leaders see their values, the impact of their behaviors on

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people and the culture, and whether or not their leadership strategies were aligned with business results. She also used Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® to help leaders understand their own preferences.

“I did that because when you have three instruments—one that examines your behaviors; one that looks at your values and impact; and one that monitors your preferences—and they all align to a certain degree, it’s much harder for leaders to say, ‘Oh, that was simply a result of the circumstances I was put in.’”

### FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

Key to the success of the development process was guidance from trained coaches who understood how the tools worked and what the results meant for leaders.

“I used *Leadership/Impact* as a vital part of feedback on how they were functioning as a leader. Then we trained coaches from within GE to be able to debrief on all three instruments. Each leader had his/her own coach, who could interpret the results as part of the process and develop an action plan to help improve behaviors.”

The circumplex used in *Leadership/Impact* provided a highly visual representation that helped to highlight the key areas for improvement.

“The reaction to *Leadership/Impact* was interesting because the circumplex is very visual. As leaders, executives were clearly able to see how their behaviors and impact compared to other leaders’ in sometimes stark and startling terms. It’s pretty hard to ignore. From there we helped the leader pick one or two behaviors that they really wanted to make some improvement on, and that became the basis for the coaching process.”

The very personalized data gathered from Sharkey’s multi-faceted measurement strategy became a cornerstone of the training and

development process for GE leaders. Using trained coaches, implementing focused action plans rooted in sound reasoning and conducting regular follow-up with leaders, the program resulted in significant and measurable success for the organization.

### IMPROVED LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE

“After the process,” said Sharkey, “we went back and looked at the behaviors that had been targeted for improvement, and we were able to determine that—according to subordinates, peers and their managers—95 percent of participants did make significant improvement. Those that continued to follow through were able to sustain those improvements.”

“In addition, we realized that many of those leaders who had gone through the program ended up becoming more strategic, and were able to adapt to new business strategies more quickly than their peers,” said Sharkey.

Since implementing the successful leadership development program at GE, Sharkey has continued to utilize Human Synergistics’ tools in her client relationships with considerable success.

“Working with effective instruments and analytics has enabled me to be much more insightful about leaders’ behavior and the impact they have on peers and direct reports,” said Sharkey. “These tools provide a deep lens about what makes for a good leader, and my clients like how the customized feedback gives them a clear focal point for action.”

