

Excellence in Practice 2021



Cargill / INSEAD

Cargill catalyst: “Paying it forward” with INSEAD





PICTURE COURTESY CARGILL

How do you transform an agricultural and industrial giant with 155,000 employees in 70 countries? Simply take the top 1,700 leaders, give them a new mindset... and get them to pass it on.

Cargill has a proud 155-year history in food, agriculture, nutrition and risk management. Today, it is the largest privately held corporation by revenue (\$114.6 billion in 2020) in the US. But in 2017, its senior leaders recognised that the evolving competitive landscape presented big new challenges. Consumer, supplier and employee needs were changing, technology was advancing, and social and business issues were converging – all at high speed.

Change was also bringing new opportunities. There was huge potential for Cargill, from healthier salmon farming and vegan “meat” to sustainable cocoa and digitised supply chains.

The challenges and opportunities added up to a need to transform on a vast scale – fast. And the implications for leadership development were clear. Julie Dervin, Head of Global Learning and Development, explains, ‘We were asked to entirely reimagine our programmes. Not that the previous ones had gotten it wrong—we just needed something in addition to strong personal leadership skills if we were to accelerate up to the waterline’.

In short, there was a need for a fast-acting catalyst to change mindsets and innovate in processes and products. Much more than a leadership programme, Cargill needed a call to action.

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Choosing INSEAD

As one of the world’s leading graduate business schools, and one of the most international, INSEAD (with campuses in France, Singapore and Abu Dhabi) was an obvious choice for a global corporation. But Dervin and her colleagues wanted more than excellence and global perspectives. They had identified that in order to scale up leadership transformation at high speed, learning had to move from a traditional, in-person approach to a more digital approach – effectively modelling the innovation required throughout the business.

‘Several other top schools insisted that senior leaders could not adapt to digital learning experiences’, says Dervin. ‘We needed a partner who was willing to innovate and experiment with us, and we discovered that INSEAD was on that same journey.’

Among the fellow travellers at INSEAD were Affiliate Professor of Strategy, James Costantini, and Mary Carey, Regional Director of Executive Education. In August 2017, they both boarded planes to Minneapolis and embarked on a three-day design workshop in the basement of Cargill’s headquarters in Wayzata, Minn. Costantini’s analysis was simple:

‘If the top 1,700 leaders all take a small step in the same direction, the centre of gravity of the whole organisation will shift. If they all take a larger step, they will reach a tipping point – and individual change becomes organisational transformation.’

Excellence in Practice 2021**Cargill / INSEAD****Mapping the desired impact**

The Cargill and INSEAD team started by defining the desired business impacts. They then systematically mapped paths back through the required behaviour changes to arrive at the learning objectives. Finally, Costantini and Carey interviewed around 100 top executives, including the CEO and the entire C-suite. 'I don't think I've been involved in a programme where so many people were consulted on the design', recalls Costantini. 'By now, James and I were living and breathing Cargill', adds Carey.

Back at INSEAD, they enlisted some of their most eminent colleagues, including Nathan Furr, co-author of the bestselling *Innovators' Method* and Deputy Dean and Peter Zemsky, leader of the school's digitalisation initiatives.

The carefully mapped learning objectives were finally translated into an ambitious series of programmes, cascading from the 120 top executives to the next most senior 240. The four modules or "experiences" would cover:

- a new leadership mindset for a new world;
- leading strategy in digital disruption;
- activating organisational structure and networks;
- cultivating corporate culture to drive innovation.

Learners as teachers: executive sponsors

The clever twist, however, was the concept of "executive sponsors" to pay the learning forward. Put simply, each cohort of 40 managers would be accompanied through their learning by a pair of more senior leaders. Part participant, part mentor, these sponsors would actively participate in all sessions, playing three essential roles:



- Validating the importance and relevance of the programme content to real-life Cargill practice;
- Acting as a transparent communication channel up (and down) the hierarchy;
- Coaching participants through their "application challenges" (real-life strategic projects anchored in the learning).

The first 120 participants would be "sponsored" by two executive team members, while subsequent cohorts would have a combination of executive-team and less senior "alumni". They would pay forward until a tipping point was reached.

The perfect blend of digital and face-to-face

Learning takes up valuable business time, and paying it forward takes even more time. But Catalyst was ingeniously designed. The first and third face-to-face modules were kept short and intense at just three days. The intervening second module was delivered fully online and part-time, as was the fourth and final "experience". Traditional lectures were chopped up into short, punchy videos with added quizzes, online discussions and interactive exercises for the digital delivery.



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The standout discovery from the early cohorts was that digital learning – INSEAD-style – really does work for senior executives. Cargill's top 360 leaders particularly appreciated the combination of flexibility (working at their own pace) with discipline (shared intermediate deadlines). Xavier Vargas, Group Leader of Protein and Salt, summed up the general feeling of surprise, 'I actually enjoyed the online experience more than the in-person experience! The content is really good, it's interactive, and the short videos are better than long classes.'

The positive feedback encouraged the Cargill-INSEAD team to press on with developing the next 1,300+ leaders. However, it was not financially viable to roll out the programme on such a scale. Instead, the bold decision was taken to do an entirely digital version with just three modules and 350–400 learners per intake. This required further programme design but reduced the required investment by 80%.

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A new, shared language

In 2020, as the rest of the world began to shut down, Catalyst simply went ahead as planned (with some extensions of deadlines). By now, it was more than a programme and a call to action; it was a powerful learning community with a shared language. Costantini sums it up, 'Any one of the top 1,700 leaders knows that all of the other 1,699 have had exposure to the same concepts'.

Better still, the shared language has enabled participants to pay the learning forward to their teams. One business unit has enlisted two major restaurant chains as customers by creating a "minimal viable product". Another has used the same concept to gain an estimated \$10 million in new revenue. An R&D team has increased its ROI from 9% to 20%, while two leaders of country operations who met at Catalyst have achieved a 70% cost reduction by working together.

During the last fiscal year, amid the global pandemic, Cargill posted its best-ever financial results. As Dianne Russo, Global Lead, Executive and Leadership Development, puts it, 'Our leaders embraced, applied and executed Catalyst and, above all, paid forward to create powerful impact'.