Leading the charge

Using a time-tested, proprietary approach that’s grounded in science, the Truist Leadership Institute aims to change lives—and communities—for the better.

The Truist Leadership Institute may have a new name, but it’s grounded in nearly 70 years of history and psychology. We recently chatted with Will Sutton, President and Director of the Truist Leadership Institute, from his home office in North Carolina. We discussed how the Institute makes a difference, what sets the program apart and what’s next.

First things first: Can you tell us about the history of the Leadership Institute?

Will Sutton: We have to get into our “way-back machine” and go back to the early 1950s. Dr. Jim Farr was a psychologist practicing in New York and became really interested in how psychology and psychological principles played into leadership development. Over the course of the next decade or so, he earned a national reputation and in the late ’60s, he was asked to move to Greensboro, North Carolina, to be the founding director of the Center for Creative Leadership.

Dr. Farr got them off the ground but decided in the mid-’70s that he wanted to break off and do his own thing again. In pretty short order, he came to own leadership development in the banking space. He became so important to BB&T that when we got wind in the early ’90s that he was considering retirement, we approached him about buying Farr Associates, which we did in 1994.

Fast forward to about 2009, and Kelly King took over as our CEO. Kelly’s always had a very deep interest in leadership development, and he had this question, “How do we get our message of positive leadership out to the broadest possible audience?” It dawned on us that we had the nucleus of something with Farr Associates that we’d never fully leveraged. We decided to rebrand it as the BB&T Leadership Institute and shift its focus to working with our corporate clients on how to make them better and more successful through stronger leadership.

Generally speaking, why is leadership training so important?

Sutton: We firmly believe that there is no facet of society that can’t be improved through better leadership. It doesn’t matter if it’s a school, a government agency, a corporation or a nonprofit. We believe that leaders are typically made versus born. By applying self-awareness and the things we talk about at the Leadership Institute, anyone can improve their leadership capacity. But it’s hard work to do it right. It takes a lot of introspection. It takes getting comfortable with feedback and failing forward. But we believe that if people really commit to it, the impact of great leadership is tremendous.

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—Will Sutton, President and Director of the Truist Leadership Institute
What does the Institute look like today? What can a participant in the program expect?

Sutton: In 2020, of course, we’ve pivoted to virtual. We basically walked out of our building on March 17 and haven’t been back. But typically, people would come to our campus at the Kelly S. King Center. We have 48 guest rooms, so when people are in the program, it’s an all-inclusive experience for the week.

Dr. Farr’s heritage of psychology is alive and well. It’s something that we’ve never forgotten. It’s been passed down to our current consulting team, and the generation before teaches the new generation of consultants. We’re very serious about nurturing that heritage, and the programs that we do are based on that, even as our methodology evolves with the latest research.

Everybody who runs our programming and works with our clients must have an advanced degree in psychology, at least a Master’s. Many of them have PhDs. That’s the magic of what we do. We actually say, and I’m a very firm believer in this, “If we can’t thread psychology through it, we don’t do it—we leave it for somebody else.”

Can you elaborate on how science and psychology play such a big part in the Leadership Institute?

Sutton: We’re very grounded in science, in this idea of how the brain and the mind interact with each other. For example, when leaders do certain things to drive connectivity with their employees, the brain releases micro-doses of oxytocin, which is a chemical related to bonding and connection. So, we focus on what we can teach leaders to drive those sorts of connections. That’s an example of how we combine current neuroscience with the idea of how our minds process and think about things.
Many, many people find the application of psychology in this experiential part of our program life-changing, not only from a professional perspective, but also in their personal lives. Because many of them, for the first time, examined who they are, based on their own personality and how they got to be that way.

What differentiates the Leadership Institute from other programs with similar goals?

Sutton: A couple of things. First, we know that great leaders know two things: what to do and how to be. Many programs out there focus on the “what to do” part. But what we understand is, before people know what to do, they have to understand how to be, so that’s what we spend a lot of time on. Who we are, how we got to be that way, what drives us to be successful psychologically, but then also what happens when we get stressed. What are those negative things that leak out of our personalities that can be destructive to leadership? We like to help people really understand where that comes from, and then how to recognize it’s happening.

Like most companies, we use a suite of assessments, both proprietary and commonly used products. But while most people start with these assessments, we layer them on later. We take people through an experiential process, so they really understand, at a deep and personal level, what their leadership looks like, and how their personality drives it. Then we move on to the assessments, shifting from that emotional, deep experience to learn more of what to do with it.

What lies ahead for the Truist Leadership Institute?

Sutton: I have never been more excited about where we are and what we’re doing. Science continues to evolve and new research comes out all the time. So how do we take that research and incorporate it into our programming for the benefit of our clients? And how do we continue to help Truist live out its mission to inspire and build better lives? The business leaders we work with are active in the community. They’re sitting on local community boards. The leadership development that we provide permeates through the community that way.

2021 hopefully will bring more of a return to normalcy, and we’re really looking forward to that. Now that Truist is a much larger company, we are embarking on a process to expand our campus. We’re also going to implement a leadership development process for Truist teammates that will be second to none in the industry. So much so that we want leadership development to be an employment brand for the bank. That way, other financial services industry executives will know and understand that if you’re seeking leadership development, go to Truist, because they will help you fine-tune those skills.

To find out more about how the Truist Leadership Institute can help your organization, contact your banker or visit truistleadershipinstitute.com.