

Finding the Power to Do More Through Teaching

BY MAX MIHELICH

Dell's executive director of leadership development Maureen McDonald found a way to combine her passion for teaching with a rewarding career.

Rather than discovering a passion for making award-winning jams or jellies during her time as a member of a 4-H group in upstate New York, Maureen McDonald realized at an early age her true calling was teaching.

She never grew up on a farm or wanted to be a farmer, but McDonald's 4-H years proved to be invaluable to her personal and professional development. McDonald, executive director of leadership development at Dell Inc., said leading demonstrations and speaking in front of fellow members of 4-H — a youth organization administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture — showed her that she wanted to be an instructor.

"4-H is one of those organizations when you go to the state fair, and everyone thinks about jams and jellies. But they also do demonstrations. It's a great way to get some experience early on in public speaking. It's what led me into being a teacher," said McDonald, who holds a bachelor's degree in education from the State University of New York at Oneonta.

Although McDonald now focuses on developing leaders on a global scale, she got her start teaching health and home economics. She said she was drawn to those topics because they're practical and applicable. That love for practicality now drives her approach to learning and development at Dell.

A Teacher at Heart

"The one thing that we try to do in our classes is get to the subject matter in the first half an hour. I'm not a fan of the big warm up. I want to make sure if it's a coaching class, we're talking about the coaching model in the first half an hour," said McDonald, who also holds an MBA from Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

After only six months as a schoolteacher, though, McDonald decided she wanted to do "something more." She responded to a job posting at information technology company Electronic Data Systems, now owned by Hewlett-Packard Co., to teach a course on spreadsheets and simple computer applications.

"This was before most people really thought about desktop applications or even knew what that term meant," said McDonald, who knew enough about the subject to teach it to others. After taking a class at EDS in presentation skills, she was eventually offered an instructor job — her first professional foray into corporate learning.

While at EDS, McDonald also got her first experience in professional leadership development, which honed her skills in technical development and content delivery. She also was given the opportunity to move to Japan for a year to work with human resources managers as they partnered with EDS' business unit to determine what kind of training programs would benefit the business side of the organization.



PHOTOS BY KIRK TUCK

McDonald said her time in Japan was a revelation. “I realized HR managers played an important role in organizations. And I thought that after having 10 years of good solid training experience, I would like to make the switch to HR.”

During her last of couple years at EDS, McDonald held a role in the organization’s HR department before becoming the senior director of HR at global computer technology company Oracle Corp. in 1997. Although she led Oracle’s “HR for a business unit” program during her 11 years with the company, McDonald never left the learning arena, taking on training and development and training and organizational development roles. She then became the vice president of global human resources at Perot Systems, an information technology services company founded by former presidential candidate Ross Perot, in 2008.

McDonald landed at Dell after the company acquired Perot Systems in 2009. Marie Moynihan, Dell’s chief diversity officer and vice president of talent, said McDonald brings an invaluable set of skills to the company’s learning and development initiative. She “is very skilled at looking at learning the initiative from the learners’ perspective and thinking through what would best embed the learning,” wrote Ireland-based Moynihan in an email. “Maureen has also had the benefit of working directly with the business in her former role as an HR business partner of the Dell Services business unit, so she has a great sense of the skills and capabilities the business is really looking for in our senior leaders.”

One of things McDonald likes best about Dell is that corporate learning is an organizational priority. She said Dell does a wonderful job of creating a comprehensive view of the business, employees and its customers. “Dell has a corporate strategy that really drives everything we do. What’s unique is that we also have a people strategy. We articulate, in a formal way, how people are a part of the business strategy through our learning and development programs.”

Leadership Development at Dell

Corporate learning has come a long way since McDonald first taught employees at EDS to use spreadsheets and other computer applications back in the 1980s. She said back then some classes were two days long and only instructor led. The length of classes made it difficult for organizations to persuade managers the time investment was worth it, or could add value to their career prospects.



McDonald said learning has shifted over time, becoming much more blended, which is a good thing. “The people who had the two-day classes probably liked it, but there were probably a lot more people who we were never able to reach because they were never going to be able to get away from their jobs for a whole two days. Learning is much more focused, faster paced and more modular. People want more training particular to the skill set they see themselves needing at that point in time.”

At Dell, corporate learning is focused on staying ahead of the trends that many corporations are playing catchup with — particularly, combatting the soft-skills gap that plague a hefty portion of newly graduated business majors and MBAs.

Some 92 percent of senior executives in the U.S. acknowledge there is a severe gap in workforce skills. Specifically, 44 percent cited soft skills as the area where there is the largest gap — critical thinking, collaboration, communication, application of emotional intelligence and other personal attributes that enhance individuals’ interactions and job performance, according to the 2013 State of the Economy and Employment Survey from Adecco Staffing US.

The report also found that 14 percent of senior exec-

utives believe there is a lack of leadership skills in the U.S. workforce. McDonald and her team are dedicated to ensuring there is no leadership skills gap at Dell.

“In today’s [economic] climate, businesses have to be constantly evolving and innovating. That means our people and most especially our leaders have to be agile, self-aware and constantly learning.”

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—Maureen McDonald, executive director of leadership development, Dell Inc.

Moynihan wrote. “Also critical is the ability to be able to think strategically but also be deep enough in the business that you can constantly tweak and iterate your strategy to adapt to changing customer requirements, and be able to inspire and communicate effectively with a dispersed global team.”

When an employee is first promoted to a manager position, they are invited to take part in Dell’s Foundations Program. The first part of Foundations is reminiscent of the corporate training courses McDonald taught at the beginning of her career. Three times a year, she and Dell’s 25 leadership instructors around the world lead new managers through a two-day, in-person “kickoff,” or orientation to the program.

After the kickoff, all new managers stay together as a cohort and participate in five virtual learning modules over the next three months. At the end of those three months, all program participants come back together for another two-day capstone event.

“We craft the Foundation Program in a way that people realize leadership at Dell is a big step up. We want them to realize they’re playing a bigger role,” McDonald said.

Growing Into a Leader

Once managers graduate from Foundations, they can continue learning in a variety of ways. For instance, leaders can access Dell’s suite of online courses, videos and business simulations from any-

where at any time. They can even sign up for full- or half-day instructor-led training courses if they’d like. McDonald said it’s just one way Dell looks to support their employees in leadership positions.

“One of the most sought-after experiences for discerning candidates today is to be able to learn and grow,” Moynihan wrote. “A well thought-out and personalized approach to learning including effective individual development plan, ongoing and insightful feedback, a range of different experiences, mentoring opportunities combined with formal learning program, [which] are key components in providing a great place to work.”

McDonald said Dell leaders’ value skill-building and training offerings, but they also value how learning programs allow other higher-ups to demonstrate their skills and what makes them successful through Dell’s Directors Series program. Series courses cover a number of different topics, presented online or even by book. But the most important aspect of the advanced program is to bring in Dell executives to talk about their most valued skills and how they use them.

“When we look at the director level, those employees value training, but they also value from hearing from Dell leaders on what makes them successful,” McDonald said. “Our Director Series offers something a little bit different than the Foundations Program. We offer topics in skill building, but, more importantly, we partner up with an executive who talks about how they use those skills.”

About five years ago, Dell decided to shake up its leadership development training. Instead of having training done region by region, the company looked for a more global approach to add consistency to the process, and create a common organizational culture across borders. According to McDonald, a global approach creates a sense of satisfaction for leaders throughout the organization. “The positive is that you know other professionals around the world are doing what you do,” she said. “For a lot of people that’s very satisfying.”

Dell’s learning and development initiative gives McDonald a sense of satisfaction, too, in an important way. She still finds time to get back up in front of the classroom and indulge in one of her life’s passions: teaching.

“Everybody in our group all the way up and down the chain should be comfortable in the classroom,” she said. “It’s a great skill to have, and it’s a satisfying skill. When I come away from teaching in the classroom, it’s a pretty good day.” **CLO**

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