

How Ameristar Casinos is Teaching New Employees Corporate Values and Culture

A CLIENT STORY



About Ameristar Casinos

Based in Las Vegas, Ameristar Casinos (ameristar.com), a leading gaming and entertainment company sought a fast, effective way to welcome large numbers of new employees into the family and reassure existing employees that despite the company's rapid growth, its core business values remained the same. The company turned to a unique learning method, Discovery Maps[®], to bring these critical messages to life.

Growth Means Change

A growing company is an exciting place to be. New opportunities, new revenue streams, new coworkers—these are all good things. But a growing company is also a challenging place, whether you are a new employee or a veteran who must navigate new systems, places and coworkers.

Consider the circumstances at Ameristar Casinos. Through a series of acquisitions and expansions, it found itself in major growth mode. One of its biggest acquisitions was a Chicago-area casino, which brought 1,300 employees into the organization; employees who were used to doing things the way the previous owners expected. Business was changing fast at Ameristar.

Culture Shock

Executives at almost every company that has gone through similar rapid growth will tell you that despite the many obvious benefits accompanying growth, there is serious potential for an unexpected casualty—losing the company's culture. The qualities in an organization that position it for growth may become diluted or outright forgotten if there's no effort to keep them alive and thriving. Ameristar executives were well aware of that possibility.

"We knew it was important to reinforce our history, the values we focus on—values that drive our decision-making process and where we're going as a company," says Jared Satz, corporate director of training. "We had to say, 'This is who we are, this is what we're all about and this is what we do.' "

The company's roots run deep, dating to the early 1950s, and it has had a successful track record because of its commitment to its core principles. To retain these principles, it was important to get all new employees to understand and embrace them. Executives decided it was equally important to remind current employees that those principles had not changed.

But how could this be done quickly, efficiently and successfully?

Discovery Maps[®] are colorful tabletop depictions of a company and its business situation—vibrant directional visuals that mix literal and metaphoric imagery to deliver specific messages to audiences of any background.

Make It Count

Ameristar Casinos has eight core values, which are as follows:

- Quality
- Do the Right Thing
- Inclusion
- Care and Compassion
- Collaboration
- Respect and Candor
- Hands-On Management
- Continuous Improvement

Getting employees to memorize a list like this is not enough. It's getting them to understand and commit to what these values mean that is most important. Ameristar used a Discovery Map[®] program, based on a methodology known as discovery learning, to accomplish just that.

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A New Way

It was determined that all employees needed to understand and articulate several important aspects about the company, its customers and its employees. These were:

- Ameristar's rich history and how it relates to the company's growth plan.
- Ameristar's purpose, commitment and values.
- How Ameristar supports its employees.
- How Ameristar supports the customer experience.
- Ways in which employees are expected to provide excellent service.

"We have a fairly comprehensive new-hire orientation that includes an all-day program from the human resources department," Satz says. "But one of the things we learned when we purchased another property 2½ years ago was that even with the orientation process, it took many months for our new team members to truly understand who we are as an organization—our culture, our values, our history. We determined there would be a golden opportunity during our next acquisition to improve how we orient a new team.

"We felt that it was important to come up with a new program, a new methodology that would quickly share who we truly are," Satz says.

Worth a Thousand Words

Because of the company's rapid growth, speed was essential. After researching various options for an approach that would meet the desired objectives, Ameristar partnered with Paradigm Learning to create a highly engaging and interactive program that would rapidly convey key information about the company's vision, strategy and goals. Together, Ameristar and



Paradigm Learning began working on the design of a Discovery Map[®].

Discovery Maps[®] are colorful tabletop depictions of a company and its business situation—vibrant directional visuals that mix literal and metaphoric imagery to deliver specific messages to audiences of any background. With vivid artwork and embedded story lines, maps engage participants and encourage them to actively discover information and ideas. Game elements, case studies and critical-thinking exercises are used to make the experience relevant and fun.

For Ameristar, Paradigm Learning created a Discovery Map[®] titled "Building the Gap," to graphically and powerfully illustrate how the company distances itself from its competitors—especially through the decisions and actions of team members and managers. By taking participants on a visual journey through many different parts of a hotel casino, from the front desk to the gaming tables to a restaurant, the map highlights the myriad of opportunities that Ameristar has to be better than the competition.

About Paradigm Learning

Paradigm Learning (ParadigmLearning.com) is a privately held company based in Tampa, Fla. Since 1994, it has worked with more than half of the companies on the Fortune 500 list, creating award-winning business games, business simulations and Discovery Maps® to address a company's specific business needs. Its flagship business acumen training program, *Zodiak®: The Game of Business Finance and Strategy*, has been played by more than one million people worldwide. Other products address such issues as talent management, employee alignment, leadership accountability, building teams, project management and organizational change.

About Ameristar Casinos

Ameristar Casinos (ameristar.com) is known for premier properties characterized by innovative architecture, state-of-the-art casino floors and superior dining, lodging and entertainment offerings. Founded in 1954, the publicly held company (NASDAQ: ASCA) has a portfolio of eight casinos throughout the United States.

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How It Worked

In a classroom setting, small teams of Ameristar learners worked together to explore the map's content, discuss issues and develop insights. Company facilitators helped to guide the experience without "teaching." "Building the Gap" started with simple concepts like a discussion of what the company's name meant and eventually explored deeper philosophical issues such as the company's eight core values.

From start to finish, the process took less than three hours. Discovery Maps® use the power of an educational concept called discovery learning, which says that participants will learn and retain material more successfully when they are actively involved in the learning process. This approach is in contrast to more passive and traditional training methods such as lectures, memos and slideshows.

"By immersing participants in information, concepts and ideas, and challenging them to work together with other learners to explore, discuss and come to conclusions about these ideas, learning is happening even when participants don't realize it," says Robb Gomez, president of Paradigm Learning. "When you create a learning opportunity that allows people to tap into their own curiosity, their own experiences and their own intuitive skills, they absorb the information more quickly and are much more likely to understand and embrace that information."

Adding Value to Orientation

Ameristar first launched its Discovery Map® for the 1,300 employees of its newly acquired Chicago-area casino.

Considering Ameristar's game-oriented culture, it was no surprise that the Discovery Map® was a good fit. "It was a brilliant match," Satz notes. "It added significant value to the orientation process. It really imparted the critical information we needed and, just as important, it added great fun to our training program."

"The nature of this product is that everybody who goes through it has a different "Aha!" moment. We rolled this out to groups of 200, and there might be 75 separate "Aha!" moments in each group."

Increasing Reach

Armed with this initial success as well as post-session feedback, executives decided that the Discovery Map® experience would be a great way to remind current employees that despite the rapid changes taking place within the company, its core values were not changing. So, within four months of implementing the Discovery Map® in the Chicago area, it was introduced to every Ameristar location and more than 10,000 employees had a chance to experience it for themselves. And now the "Building the Gap" program has become an integral component of the company's orientation program for new team members.

"The rollout to existing team members was fun. Everybody loved the experience as they reconnected with our company and values. But really, the program was all about setting up the experience of our new hires so that we can introduce our company's key issues to them when they join our family," Satz says. "It has added so much value to our orientation process."

BUSINESS GAMES, SIMULATIONS and DISCOVERY MAPS®

