



WILLOWTREE®



LAUNCH PROJECT



## How WillowTree Partnered with Launch Project to Build A Scalable Leadership Development Program

Since WillowTree's founding, culture and core values have been central to the company's brand and success. When the staff wrote their core values as a team, the words flowed easily because they reflected the people and their way of doing business. Today, the core values are at the heart of every project, partnership, and even happy hour. They get revised, taught, and enhanced by the teams who live them every day. The autonomy, inclusivity, and openness of the project teams reflect WillowTree's core values in action.

In early 2018, as the company entered another phase of rapid growth, the executive team began asking: **How can we maintain our culture and our core values as we continue to expand?** Partnering with Launch Project, a leadership development and coaching firm, WillowTree realized that to sustain and evolve its culture, it needed to invest in its high potential leaders.



Our core values are everything. They are who we hire, how we work, and what we create. Everything we do is a reflection of our core values.  
-Tobias Dengel, CEO, WillowTree



## High Potential Leaders at WillowTree

Leadership at WillowTree does not come from a position on the org chart; it is simply about putting the company's seven core values into practice. Leadership means taking responsibility for your work and colleagues (**ownership**), caring enough about your team members to be clear with feedback (**open communication**), and finding inspiration in the face of uncertainty and challenge (**optimism**).

About 85% of the company is divided amongst 20+ project teams, making each team its own entity, operating with the support and values of the larger organization. Each team is led by a small team, including a Principal Engineer, Business Development Lead, Test Engineer, Design Lead, and a Project Manager (PM). WillowTree vests tremendous trust in these leaders as they design and build products for high-profile clients such as Pepsi, Johnson & Johnson, and Time Warner. These leaders do not directly manage the people on their team, yet they are responsible for what each person on the team delivers and for creating safe environments that align with the core values.



## The Challenge

WillowTree's team leaders must navigate through times of disruption, motivate staff in the face of uncertainty, and remain inspired themselves. To date, they had not received formal training or support in some of the most challenging and critical aspects of their jobs:

- Soliciting, receiving, and giving **feedback**
- Engaging in **difficult conversations**
- **Coaching** their team members

To ensure continuity and consistency in how the teams are led - and make sure that the core values are put into action - WillowTree needed to intentionally design training and support for these emerging leaders that would go beyond a one-and-done workshop.



## The Process

The desired outcome was clear: Team leaders who could carry forward WillowTree's values and culture by creating safe and open environments where feedback flows easily and team members empower and support one another. To move toward this vision, WillowTree partnered with Lisa Rogoff, Leadership Coach and Founder of Launch Project, to focus on **three key areas**:

### Listen at All Levels

WillowTree team members participated in small discussions around the core value of open communications. It became clear that the PM function held one of the more challenging leadership positions, and that supporting the PM's growth would have a powerful impact that would ripple across the company.

### Design Experiential Learning

Launch Project crafted an experiential learning program with workshops, a customized 360 assessment, 1:1 coaching, peer coaching circles, and ongoing webinars. Participants deepened their leadership, cultivated coaching skills, and gained the confidence to give meaningful feedback and have difficult conversations.

### Scale and Sustain Results

Launch Project partnered with an internal WillowTree "Momentum Team" to create an experience that was unique and relevant to the organization. Through the development of the program, the Momentum Team learned how to continue the program in perpetuity for executives and other leaders across the company.





## An Agile Approach

Much as WillowTree runs any project, this program was designed to be agile, allowing for nimble iteration in response to ongoing feedback:

### Modeling Instead of Training

The program design included a train-the-trainer component, but early on participants shared that they didn't feel prepared to do that. The facilitators were able to shift, meeting the participants where they were in their learning. As the PMs gained confidence with the material, they trained their teams by modeling behaviors and designing their own materials.

### Introducing Co-Active Leadership

Almost all participants had varying - and perhaps, conflicting - definitions of leadership. To gain common language and purpose, the facilitators introduced **Co-Active Leadership**, a model grounded in research and practice that aligns with WillowTree's values. Co-Active leadership offers five new ways of leading in today's world of uncertainty and disruption.

### Offering More Space for Community

At the outset, the workshops and coaching circles offered a great deal of content. While this was valuable, it was clear that leaving more time and space for the participants to connect with one another and build community was just as important. The facilitators redesigned portions of the curriculum to allow for more practice and connection among the participants.



This program changed me as a leader and as a person. I don't think I understood what leadership meant; now I know and I'm just beginning to live into it. The workshops gave tools, strategies, and time for practice. Coaching in between was phenomenal and transformed how I see myself and behave at work. I'm grateful for WillowTree making this important investment and to Lisa for making it a reality.

Before I was scared to have certain conversations or give feedback that needed to be given. I still need to work on it, but I have way more confidence and tools to be able to live true to the value of open communication.





## The Results

WillowTree's collaboration with Launch Project led to meaningful results for the PMs and leadership across the company. Almost all of the participants reported stepping more confidently into their leadership roles as they developed more comfort with their coaching skills and the power of not having all of the answers. They gained greater self-awareness through the 360 assessments and by requesting feedback from a variety of colleagues. And nearly all of the participants reported that they had begun using the learning to enhance open communication on their teams.

Perhaps the most important result is the ripple effect the program has had across the company. Other team members are intrigued and excited to learn from the Project Managers about leadership, coaching, and open communication. The Momentum Team is prepared to begin delivering the content to other leaders across the organization starting in early 2019.



The Leadership Bootcamp introduced practical and proven leadership concepts and educated us on when and how to use them in our lives. Participating in this training opened up my eyes to new ways of leading people and bolstered my confidence in my ability to lead.

**-Josh McVeigh, Project Manager, Charlottesville**

### About WillowTree

[willowtreeapps.com](http://willowtreeapps.com)

WillowTree is a digital innovation agency with a mission to bring together diverse, smart teams who want to continuously hone their craft. We cultivate a collaborative environment focused on continuous learning and unlimited opportunities to impact our clients, products, teams, and company as a whole.

### About Launch Project

[yourlaunchproject.com](http://yourlaunchproject.com)

Launch Project is a leadership development firm supporting organizations and individuals on leadership, culture, and communication. We partner with clients to develop as leaders, navigate work challenges, build coaching skills, and design inspiring careers.