Amsted Industries Partners with Notre Dame for Bigger, Bolder Thinking

BACKGROUND
Headquartered in Chicago, Amsted Industries is a large, privately held manufacturer of component products for the railroad, construction, and vehicular industries, employing 18,000 people globally across six business divisions.

CHALLENGE
Amsted’s greatest strength—more than a century of success that resulted in strong market share in several categories—also became its greatest challenge. The company had already implemented initiatives in lean operations and product development, and it would be difficult to grow market share any further without some innovative breakthroughs. “To continue to grow the company and improve, we had to step out of our comfort zone,” says Shirley Whitesell, VP of People. “The problem is, when you’ve been really successful at something, people think, why are we trying to fix something that isn’t broken?”

Amsted’s leadership knew otherwise: ultimately, they would need new ideas to fuel their strategies for long-term growth. They began seeking out opportunities to train their team members to think about challenges in new, exciting ways—and to create a company-wide culture that would reward creative thinking.

NOTRE DAME SOLUTION
Amsted approached Notre Dame’s Mendoza College of Business about creating a custom version of its seven-month Certified Innovation Mentor Program™ that would allow multiple teams from different business lines to experience an intensive week of innovation training. The result was the Innovation Mentor Boot Camp, which has been attended so far by 80 Amsted team members over three different weeks.

Through faculty presentations, case studies, team breakout exercises, and lectures from business thought leaders, attendees got an immersive experience in fostering innovation. Team members discovered their own thinking styles via a profile that assessed their problem-solving and innovation preferences, and learned how to build diversity into their project teams based on those preferences. Over the course of the week, they learned Notre Dame’s Unifying Innovation Methodology™, which offers a structural framework of best practices to organize what can often be an abstract, messy process.

Each Amsted team left the program with concrete 30-day, 60-day, and 90-day action plans to achieve a specific goal. As successive teams came to the program, they often built on the goals achieved by the teams that came before them.
Chief Technology and Innovation Officer Mike McDonnell of the Amsted Rail division says the most eye-opening thing about the Notre Dame experience was learning about the extent of the cultural change that would be necessary to encourage innovation.

“It wasn’t that you and your team attended the course and suddenly became innovators,” he says. “Instead, Notre Dame offered us a way to embed innovation as a core capability so that good ideas had room to happen. Before this training, we had a lot of smart, capable people with good ideas, but they didn’t have the avenues available to navigate those ideas through the organization.”

THE BIG IMPACT
McDonnell says that initial innovation efforts in his business division met with some predictable resistance, and the unstructured nature of innovation was difficult for some members of Amsted’s process-oriented workforce. But simply implementing some of the tools from Innovation Mentor Boot Camp softened people to the idea of change and got good ideas rolling.

For example, Amsted Rail installed a SMART Board®—an interactive whiteboard technology for collaboration—in an innovation lab near McDonnell’s office. “There’s an engineering group nearby, and I never really saw them in a room together before,” he says. “But now, every Friday, they go to the I-Lab for a couple of hours a day doing ‘what-if’ meetings. I don’t know what’s going to come out of that, but the behavior is awesome.”

The concept of collaboration on new ideas has spread, and has led to a particularly successful effort to increase production capacity at Amsted’s manufacturing plants. “After the Notre Dame training, there was a concerted effort by project teams to bring in a broader group of experts rather than just relying on their own experience,” McDonnell says. “They broke geographic and organizational barriers to get the input they needed. They also got the whole company on board with the storytelling skills they’d learned—they actually used a cartoonist to storyboard the new process, which was a really extraordinary, creative, non-technical way to tell the story that the whole organization could understand and support.”

Amsted is now working with Notre Dame to develop customized training for each business division that meets teams where they are in the innovation process. “Now that we’ve got the basic skill sets in place, how do we go deeper, wider, faster with innovation?” McDonnell says. “Embedding innovation into our culture has been critical to our success, and partnering with Notre Dame on this effort has been absolutely invaluable.”

ABOUT NOTRE DAME EXECUTIVE EDUCATION
Notre Dame offers a rigorous and relevant education experience delivered by the some of the world’s top business minds. Designed to meet the needs of busy executives, our degree, non-degree, and custom programs can help you solve your most pressing business challenges. To learn more about what Notre Dame Executive Education can do for you, contact us at executive.business@nd.edu or (574) 631-5285.

ABOUT NOTRE DAME INNOVATION PROGRAMS
Innovation is essential for business success—but challenging to implement. That’s why we offer a wide range of programming—from our comprehensive Certified Innovation Mentor Program™ to our intensive, short-format Innovation Boot Camp workshops—to help you embed innovation into your company’s core culture. To learn more, contact program director Donna Porter at dporter5@nd.edu or (574) 631-8876.