Established in 1887, William Grant & Sons is a family-owned luxury spirits company with a portfolio that includes many of the world’s leading brands, including Glenfiddich, the Balvenie, Grant’s, Hendrick’s, Tullamore D.E.W., and Drambuie. William Grant & Sons employs 1,800 people globally.

The accelerated pace of the business environment — and its complexity and ambiguity — create major challenges for leaders today. William Grant & Sons wants to ensure its leaders have the capability, emotional intelligence, and resilience to meet these challenges while performing at the highest level.

The company’s leadership development journey began six years ago, prompted by employee engagement survey results: as Christine Penman, HR Organisational Development Partner, notes, “One of the survey questions was ‘How is your leader doing?’ The feedback was not as good as we wanted it to be. After acquiring a new brand, the business was in the process of integrating another organisation and was undergoing major change — we wanted to make sure we retained our talent.”

To address these challenges, Penman took a close look at the talent pipeline: “We found individuals in line for promotion who were technically competent, but who did not have the right leadership behaviours to get them over that next line into a leadership position. We had skills programmes — for example, ‘finance for non-finance managers’ — but we weren’t helping individuals transition from a ‘doer’ to a ‘delegator’ who gets the job done through the team. We realised we needed to be looking more at the behavioural side of leadership — that was the main driver.

Another key driver was the CEO’s talent strategy, which mandated recruiting from within for one out of every two roles. Penman knew that the development solution had to support the CEO’s emphasis on internal recruitment and building talent from within, which would require behaviour change.

Behavioural change is something Penman is passionate about. Working with a partner, she developed the Growing Leader Programme (GLP) to help new leaders build the leadership behaviours they needed to be effective in their roles. In shaping the solution, Penman reviewed personal development plans for first- and mid-level leaders globally to help address the gaps. The result is a programme that provides a strong leadership foundation:

- Module 1 is devoted to developing self-awareness. As part of their preparation for the programme, participants receive 360° feedback and complete the MBTI. For many participants, Penman notes, this is “a ‘light bulb’ moment that makes them think more about their individual behaviours and how they interact with others”.

- Module 2 focuses on engaging others through positive language, situational leadership, and coaching others. Actors bring different coaching approaches to life, showing participants how various methodologies can be applied when coaching different individuals.

- Module 3 centres on influencing and managing stakeholders, and leading others through change — skills that new leaders, as Penman points out, “don’t always get in their toolkit when they get promoted”.

Penman wanted to ensure participants would be accountable for changing their behaviours because, as she shrewdly observes:

“Too often people turn up for a course, they don’t know why they’re there, they have a lovely time, but they go back to work and don’t do anything differently. We wanted to make sure that we were going to get the return on our investment for the business.”
To promote engagement at the outset, participants and their leaders are invited to a dynamic launch event, which Penman describes: “Everyone walks around a room full of colourful flip charts illustrating key concepts. There’s not a PowerPoint slide in sight. Many concepts relate to neuroscience — participants see that it’s not fuzzy soft-skills stuff: it’s about how people’s brains work. Because many of them are engineers and scientists, they really respond to it.”

To maintain the programme’s high level of engagement and emphasis on action, leaders and participants meet prior to participating in the programme and after each module (on a one-on-one basis) to review progress. To further promote leaders’ involvement, Penman introduced a fourth module, a one-day session in which participants present their learning and show how they have been applying it in their roles. Senior leaders attend the presentations, reinforcing the important role the programme plays in achieving strategic goals.

Throughout the programme, participants are given online access to the programme materials and are encouraged to use them with their own teams. To keep the learning alive, alumni are invited to a continuous professional development day each year that brings past cohorts together to further embed the learning and encourage new learning on the latest leadership techniques.

MAKING AN IMPACT
The Growing Leader Programme is helping to achieve the CEO’s goal of recruiting one in two roles from within — past participants who have been promoted cite the programme as being instrumental in developing their ability to advance to the next level. Annual appraisal scores show that 48% of participants improve their score on leadership competence. And in the last five years, approximately 40% of participants have successfully secured a new role internally through promotion, secondment, or a lateral move.

The programme’s impact has been profound on an individual level. Many participants say it’s made a difference in how they interact with others — it’s made them think more about how they communicate and the implications of their actions. Penman observes:

“Participants also learn more about colleagues across the business: As Penman notes, “We found that people in our bottling plant had never actually met their colleagues in sales and marketing. We wanted them to understand each other’s roles.” To strengthen bonds between participants, the programme is residential and includes knowledge-sharing dinners in the evening. “These are our leaders of the future: By building their networks,” Penman asserts, “they are building the business for the future.”

The programme, now in its sixth year, is being delivered globally (in Scotland, the US, China, Mexico, Russia, and Singapore). Although Penman carefully considered cultural implications in planning for global delivery, the core elements of the programme — self-awareness, behaviour change, and practical application — remain unchanged. The programme has met with positive response from participants globally, which, for Penman, affirms that “people are the same the world over — they have the same challenges. It’s about helping them understand how they might manage those challenges in a different way.”

ADVICE FOR OTHERS AND LESSONS LEARNED

DO YOUR RESEARCH TO BUILD CREDIBILITY
“When you embark on this type of journey,” Penman says, “stay true to what you believe is the right intervention for the business. But put your case from a business perspective, making clear the benefits that the business will gain and backing it up with research. I made a formal recommendation to senior leaders, citing research which showed that leaders who engage with their people and motivate the right behaviours can make up to a 20% difference to the bottom line.”

SECURE SUPPORT
Penman emphasises the importance of enlisting support from participants’ managers: “People can go away from the programme feeling hugely motivated, but they really need that support back at base” for new behaviours to take hold and flourish.

“When participants return from attending a programme, they look at their teams differently. They think, ‘If my team is not displaying the right behaviours, what am I doing to help or to hinder that?’ It makes them aware of their own behaviour and the impact that has on their teams.”