

# Streamlining Blended Learning for Leadership Training

The Ken Blanchard Companies® Scales E-Learning for High Touch Training

– Chris Howard, *Principal Analyst* | July 2006

## ▶ IN THIS CASE STUDY

Corporate leaders today require an unprecedented number of skills. They need to carve out a clear vision and strategy; to motivate and inspire; to make tough decisions; to be top-notch communicators; and to serve as models of ethics, accountability, and transparency for their organizations.

Leadership training and executive development are top priorities for training managers. In a recent Bersin & Associates survey, 37 percent of respondents listed leadership training as the first or second training priority for their organizations.

The Ken Blanchard Companies® (Blanchard®) is a pioneer in the field of leadership training. The company was one of the first training providers to recognize the trend toward more dispersed work units and to design learning that meets those needs. It set out to develop a program that would not only blend different learning modalities but would also blend the company's tradition of "high touch" customer service with the high-tech benefits of a new learning management system (LMS).

This case study discusses strategies that Blanchard has used to meld blended learning with a highly collaborative training topic.↻

### FOCUS:

PLANNING  
& STRATEGY

CONTENT  
DEVELOPMENT

**LEARNING  
PROGRAMS**

LEARNING  
TECHNOLOGY

ANALYTICS &  
MEASUREMENT

TALENT  
MANAGEMENT

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>BLANCHARD® OVERVIEW</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>THE BLANCHARD® ORGANIZATION</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>THE LEARNER CARE APPROACH</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>THE BLENDED LEARNING PROGRAM</b>	<b>6</b>
Making Learning More Flexible	6
Designing a Blended Learning Program	7
Implementing a Blended Learning Program	8
Meeting the Challenge of the Virtual Classroom	9
<b>TECHNOLOGY</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>LESSONS LEARNED</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>NEXT STEPS</b>	<b>13</b>
<hr/>	
ABOUT US	14
ABOUT THIS RESEARCH	14

## Blanchard® Overview

The Ken Blanchard Companies provides leadership training and development solutions designed to unleash human potential, create engaged employees and customers, and drive organizational results and profitability. The firm is a family-owned business founded in 1979 by Drs. Ken and Marjorie Blanchard. Today, clients include many Fortune 500 and *Training* magazine Training Top 100 companies in a wide variety of industries.

Blanchard is known for the theory of Situational Leadership® II, which suggests that different situations require different leadership styles (directing, coaching, supporting, or delegating), and that a leader must be flexible enough to adapt his or her style under different circumstances. The company's methodologies are also based on the view that learning is not just a single event but a continuous and systematic process.

## The Business Environment

Blanchard is a global leader in organizational and leadership training. The firm works actively to track trends in learning and leadership through an in-house think tank called the Office of the Future. This department tries to identify global trends five to ten years out. Such projections often serve as the basis for designing new programs and services.

For example, in the 1990s, the Office of the Future saw a growing trend toward geographically dispersed work units, which led to the development of Blanchard's blended learning curricula.

In recent years, many factors have changed the face of organizational learning. Increased globalization, more powerful technology, and a focus on lower costs and higher productivity have contributed to the growth of self-study, online learning, and virtual classrooms.

For Blanchard, learning outside the traditional classroom environment created a unique business challenge: continuing to provide high-quality, customized training and personalized service—hallmarks of Blanchard's leadership programs—without direct human interaction.

The company's methodologies are based on the view that learning is not just a single event but a **continuous process**.

Blanchard's approach emphasizes **sustainability, follow-up, and reinforcement** after training takes place.

A Blanchard think tank identifies **global trends**, which serve as the basis for new programs and services.

Learning outside the classroom created a **challenge**: continuing to provide **high-quality**, customized training without direct human interaction.

## The Blanchard® Organization

Blanchard is organized around sales, operations, and delivery functions. The delivery function includes training in five separate areas: self-leadership, one-to-one leadership, team leadership, organizational leadership, and coaching services.

The company provides training and consulting at the client's facility, blended learning designs, training for trainers, public workshops (conducted at Blanchard facilities), assessments, and coaching services. Blanchard also runs a keynote speakers bureau and a learning materials eStore.

The Blended Learning Solutions group is part of the company's delivery organization. The Blended Learning Solutions team is headed by a director and includes three learning managers who support client development, and two technical support employees. The group is assisted by Blanchard field engineers who serve as liaisons with clients to address technology issues.

The company offers **on-site training, blended learning, training for trainers, public workshops, assessments, and coaching.**

## The Learner Care Approach

A significant component of Blanchard's customer-focused approach, which it calls Learner Care, is the LearnCenter from Learn.com (see "Technology" section). A LearnCenter acts as a portal that hosts all the information the client will require for its coursework. The Learner Care approach uses the LearnCenter learning management capability to facilitate the management of blended training programs.

The high-tech part of the blended program is enabled by the LMS. The high-touch part is a single point of contact—a Blanchard learning manager who develops the client's Web site, coordinates all communications and logistics, tracks completion rates, and provides reports.

LearnCenter portals were initially conceived to support blended programs. However, these portals are now also used to support traditional classroom-based programs.

Each LearnCenter portal is customized for the client. However, the company has developed a standard site and is able to reuse many elements for multiple clients. When client organizations have a number of different learning groups, Blanchard is able to set up "sub-learning centers," which are further customized and are accessed through the main portal.

LearnCenter portals were conceived for use with **blended learning** and now also support **classroom-based programs.**

The portals are designed to provide a **single access point** for course activities.

The sites create a road map for learning (see Figure 1), including reminders and deadlines for completion of specific assignments. By providing a one-stop place for participants, including login instructions, information on self-paced modules, goals, and expectations, the LearnCenter is intended to make the learning experience user-friendly as well as effective.

The portal can also house messages from the client’s CEO and other executives as part of the effort to keep learners motivated and on track.

Management of LearnCenter portals is largely dependent upon the type of training selected by the client. Typically, clients manage their own communication for a classroom-based model. In this case, Blanchard creates the portal and the client organization sends all reminders and teasers around the training. The blended model is more complex, with different activities spread out over time. In this case, Blanchard manages the communications around training initiatives and integrates this into the LearnCenter LMS.



Figure 1: Situational Leadership® II Road Map

Source: Blanchard, 2006

# The Blended Learning Program

## Making Learning More Flexible

Blanchard’s approach to training delivery rests on an approach that tries to accommodate clients’ unique organizational needs and learning requirements. Furthermore, Blanchard believes learning initiatives must be able to build employees’ skills anywhere at anytime, offer a variety of training methods to meet different needs, and be cost effective. Finally, to achieve results, training solutions need to provide follow-up support and ensure sustainability.

These beliefs lay the foundation for Blanchard’s Blended Learning Solutions. A typical course includes a live or virtual launch, online and self-paced learning, a live classroom application session, and either live or Web-based coaching.

**ANALYSIS**

**Workshops** or other **forms of classroom instruction** should be **incorporated** into any **blended program**.

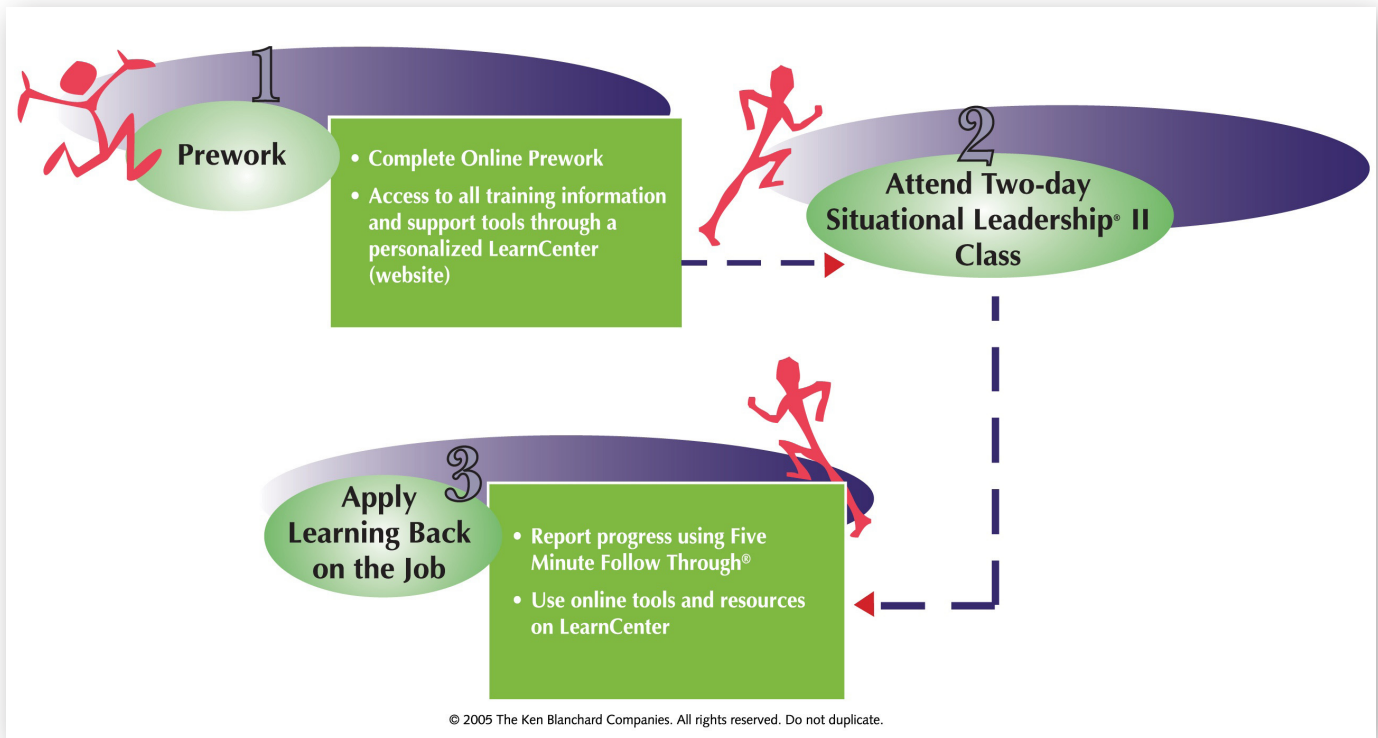


Figure 2: Emphasis on Classroom Instruction

Source: Blanchard, 2006

## Designing a Blended Learning Program

The company offers its clients two different options for Situational Leadership® II (SLII®): a traditional format that uses the classroom for all content and collaboration, and a blended program that involves more online training.

A blended program provides two key benefits, flexibility and sustainability. This type of learning is recommended for groups that need the flexibility of location and time. Some organizations have virtual teams and are not able to come together for several days of training. Meeting virtually and doing work on their own schedule helps them maintain their daily tasks while integrating learning.

This style of learning can be more sustainable than others because it distributes learning in smaller portions that are easier to digest. A typical course includes a live or virtual launch; online, self-paced learning; a live classroom application session; and either live or Web-based coaching (see Figure 3).

The classroom training is preferred by some because it includes face to face interaction with both the trainer and other learners (see Figure 2).

As with any leadership training program, these designs are most effective when they are supported by top management, include sustainability strategies such as follow-up activities, demonstrate tangible value to the learners, and are strategically integrated with the companies' purpose and goals.

**ANALYSIS**

Blended learning in leadership training is often used to **increase reach** rather than **replace classroom instruction**.

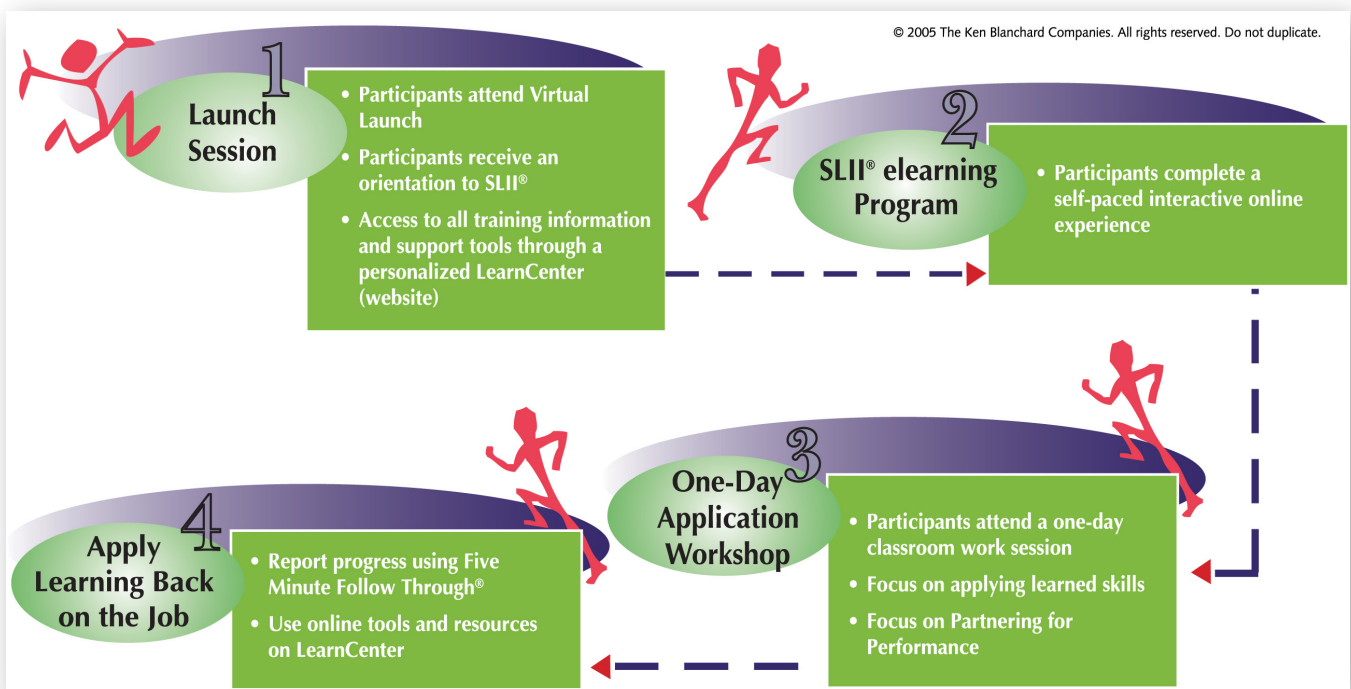


Figure 3: Blended Program Flow

Source: Blanchard, 2006

## Implementing a Blended Learning Program

Blanchard introduced its blended learning option in 2001. The company creates all of its own content and uses its own trainers in order to maintain a high level of quality.

An in-house expert on virtual facilitation has trained the company's trainers in this modality.<sup>1</sup> (All facilitators also provide live classroom instruction.) In addition, Blanchard offers training for trainers courses to clients that want to strengthen the virtual instruction skills within their organization.

Before beginning a blended learning program with a client, a Blanchard field engineer performs an assessment of the client's technology to determine the level of readiness for launching the LearnCenter. The engineer also addresses general requirements for accessing the LearnCenter and ensures that the system can receive e-mails from Blanchard.

Although Web-based and virtual learning now make it possible to reach large groups of learners simultaneously, this is not what drives the Blanchard program. In fact, the online and virtual classroom components of the blended learning solution borrow heavily from the live classroom experience.

This includes a large amount of communication, small groups of students, lots of interactivity, many touchpoints, and creating the opportunity for participants to learn from each other as well as the from the instructor.

### ★ BEST PRACTICE

Virtual leadership programs require **structure** and the enforcement of **deadlines** as the training takes place over a period of time—often requiring **mandatory self-study**.

The solution includes frequent **communication**, small **groups of students**, **lots of interactivity**, and many touchpoints.

<sup>1</sup> For more information on best practices in virtual facilitation, refer to the case study "Training as an Integral Part of the Customer Experience," Bersin & Associates 2006, available at [www.bersin.com](http://www.bersin.com).

## Meeting the Challenge of the Virtual Classroom

Very early on, the company realized that the virtual classroom presents a unique set of challenges. First, engaging the student is much more difficult, because individuals who are working at a computer are likely to multitask—browsing the Web, exchanging e-mails, or engaging in some other activity that distracts from learning.

Based on its early experience, Blanchard came up with a formula to maximize participants’ engagement. This includes structuring the lesson so that students must have their hands on the keyboard frequently—including during those times that the facilitator or another student is speaking. Blanchard also found that humor is important: A sure way to keep people engaged “is to make sure there is a belly laugh about three times per session.”

The other big challenge for virtual trainers is that they don’t have the benefit of physical cues from students that are barometers of how well learning is taking place. “In class, you can see them thinking,” the director points out. Lacking information from eye contact and body language, the facilitator must rely on verbal responses to gauge learning effectiveness. Figure 4 provides an additional roundup of roles reserved for the virtual trainer.

**Engaging the virtual student** is difficult, because individuals who are working at a computer are likely to **multitask**.

Lacking **eye contact**, the facilitator must rely on verbal responses to **gauge learning effectiveness**.

Your <b>Various Roles</b> as a <b>Virtual Trainer</b>	
Deliverer of Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review objectives, agenda, and outcomes.</li> <li>• Teach with enthusiasm.</li> <li>• Weave student responses into future decisions.</li> <li>• Prompt feedback.</li> </ul>
Technology Buff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make learners comfortable with technology.</li> <li>• Walk calmly through the steps with reluctant learners.</li> </ul>
Cheerleader and Social Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invite people to participate.</li> <li>• Celebrate early participation by elaborating on answers.</li> </ul>
Industry Expert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know your audience and industry.</li> <li>• Review related content areas (leadership, customer service, etc.).</li> </ul>

**Figure 4:** *The Roles of the Virtual Trainer*

Virtual classes are conducted through WebEx Web conferencing technology. Blanchard prefers using phone communications in its virtual classes rather than VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) because it finds the latter offers inconsistent audio quality.

Finally, facilitators should avoid the tendency to fill space. In other words, the trainer must learn to stop talking and leave time for the learner to respond. A trainer who doesn't allow for intervals of silence may leave some students frustrated and confused. Blanchard ensures that its virtual trainers have the necessary skills to train effectively in this modality.

Blanchard recommends a maximum of 20 participants for each course, which typically runs over two or three months as a blended program. "For this type of training, we believe it is important to deliver content in little nuggets so it sticks," the lead learning manager says.

## Technology

Eighteen months after launching a blended learning program, Blanchard concluded that its manual system was too slow, inefficient and limited in its capabilities.

The company spent most of 2002 conducting a search of LMS systems. In addition to the Blended Learning Solutions team, a number of other departments were involved in the selection process, including Office of the Future, Marketing, the company's Public Workshop unit, and Human Resources. (Today, the Public Workshop unit and HR both use the LMS to manage their training programs.)

After considering a number of different LMS providers, the group selected Learn.com and implemented the LMS in late 2003. LearnCenter, from Learn.com, is a hosted learning management system designed to create, manage, and track enterprisewide learning, both classroom and online.

The primary reason for selecting Learn.com was that the technology offered the most flexibility for development and customization of Web portals for Blanchard's clients.

The ability to automate class work (assigned before and after the training program) was also important. And finally, the system needed to be cost effective, because the company did not want to have to pass excessive costs on to its clients. The hosted option works well in this regard.

A virtual trainer who doesn't allow for **intervals of silence** may leave students frustrated and confused.

Blanchard's clients pay one overall fee for Learner Care services. This fee is based on the specific services they engage with the cost of the technology built into it.

After purchasing the system in early 2003, an eight-person Blanchard team spent approximately nine months designing the LearnCenters and testing and fine-tuning the system until they felt it was ready to roll out. The lead learning manager says that the team did not want to rush the implementation; they took their time and worked through several iterations until they were confident that the system was easy to navigate and very intuitive. Following a beta test with the first client, the LMS was launched on a larger scale in the fall of 2003.

The company has essentially reversed the LMS model: While most LMSs work for a company with one set of employees, Blanchard has a single tool that it has rolled out to numerous groups of people.

While Blanchard's use of the LMS may be exceptional, other organizations may be able to apply this model to their own needs. For example, customization of portals could be useful for companies conducting reseller or customer training, or for managing training in different business units.

The team worked through **several iterations** until the system was easy to navigate and very intuitive.

Customization of portals could be useful for companies conducting **reseller or customer training**, or for managing training in different business units.

## Lessons Learned

Based on Blanchard's experience in implementing a blended learning curriculum and an LMS, the Blanchard team has several recommendations.

- **Be clear on what your needs are.** Project managers collaborated with all internal stakeholders to do a needs analysis and brought their list of requirements to LMS providers. After conducting a methodical search, they selected the vendor that met most of these needs.
- **Don't launch until the system is ready.** The Blended Learning Solutions team was methodical and thorough in fine-tuning the LMS until it was confident that the system would meet their needs and the needs of their clients. The team advises other organizations to expect to spend several months to make adjustments and modifications. Resist the urge to launch prematurely because, in the long run, it is more efficient and effective to implement a system that meets most of the organization's key requirements.
- **Don't underestimate the time it takes to manage learning in a blended world.** When learning is spread out over a period of months and involves a number of different modalities, managing such learning is a complex task. Blended learning has many moving parts and relies on training modalities that require special skills. Managing these activities and ensuring that trainers have the proper skills requires significant time and effort.

The team **collaborated** with all **internal stakeholders** and brought their list of requirements to LMS providers.

Managing blended learning activities and ensuring that trainers have the **proper skills** require **significant time and effort**.

## Next Steps

The Ken Blanchard Companies continues to streamline and simplify its LearnCenters to help clients manage their learning processes with greater ease and efficiency. The company is working to streamline the management of communications by being able to plug in dates and content to create automated e-mail messages. Blanchard says this capability will be a huge time-saver because it now spends a significant amount of time setting up client e-mails for a three- to four-month engagement.

Blanchard is also hoping to automate client registration for its courses. The company is currently using the LMS registration function internally but is working to ensure that the tool is stable before rolling it out to clients. Once this is implemented, users will simply click a button and both Blanchard and the users' employer will be informed of the registration simultaneously.

The company is working to **streamline** and **automate** the management of communications.

It is also looking to **automate client registration** for its courses.



## About Us

**Bersin & Associates** is the only research and consulting firm solely focused on **What Works**® enterprise learning research. With more than 20 years of experience in e-learning, training, and enterprise technology, Bersin & Associates provides a wide range of services, including market research, best practices, benchmarking, vendor and product analysis, corporate workshops, corporate implementation plans, and sales and marketing programs. Some of Bersin & Associates innovations include a complete methodology for learning management systems (LMS) selection and application usage, an end-to-end architecture and solution for training analytics, and one of the industry's largest research studies on blended learning implementations.

Bersin & Associates offers the industry's first enterprise learning research subscription, *The Enterprise Learning Research Center* ([www.elearningresearch.com](http://www.elearningresearch.com)), which offers up-to-date research, product selection guides, white papers, and access to other experts online. This service enables corporate training managers, vendors, and consultants to make faster, better decisions about enterprise learning strategy, programs, and technology.

Bersin & Associates can be reached at [www.bersin.com](http://www.bersin.com) or at (510) 654-8500.

## About This Research

Copyright ©2006 Bersin & Associates. All rights reserved. What Works® and related names such as Rapid E-Learning: What Works® are registered trademarks of Bersin & Associates. No materials from this study can be duplicated, copied, republished, or re-used without written permission from Bersin & Associates. The information and forecasts contained in this report reflect the research and studied opinions of Bersin & Associates analysts. Any company, trademark, trade name, product name, service mark, logo, or the like, referenced herein is the property of its respective owners.