

Growing Your Own

Building an Internal Leadership Training Program

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The usual suspects. You may be one of them. At the very least, you will recognize them: the people who always volunteer for committees, task forces, projects, working groups, and the like. As with many other organizations, libraries often have a small band of volunteers who step up and a large majority of other folks who tend not to do so.

At the Washington State University (WSU) Libraries, there is a fairly good cross section of people who volunteer for such opportunities. Another related problem, though, is that people are reluctant to chair committees, working groups, and task forces. While a number of people may be interested in contributing, they express reservations about how to lead a group, if they have time, or if they could do it well or do it right. To encourage more people to feel confident leading committees or initiatives, the WSU Libraries administration decided to develop an opportunity for employees to increase their skills and comfort levels in these roles. The intent was for this to be available to any interested staff and faculty. So expensive, lengthy external training events were impossible, given limitations of both time and money. Bringing in one speaker for an event also seemed very limited, as experience has shown that the energizing effects of a great speaker/workshop quickly fades as staff return to the routines of their jobs. The WSU Libraries set the goal of establishing a program that would make difference over weeks or months, cover several topics, and give people a chance for self-directed discussion of issues in small-group settings.

Given the lack of budget and the specific needs of the institution, the clearest option was to create such a program. Two staff members from the Libraries' training team joined forces with two interested faculty members to establish a task force to plan and design the program. This task force was charged with building a leadership curriculum using readily available or quickly adaptable resources.

Structure of the Program

During the planning phase, the task force conducted a brief online survey to gauge interest in the program overall, as well as to gain insight into people's preferences about duration and topics. The data helped us fine-tune the program

and select the topics that included: leadership styles, organizational culture, leading from the middle, leading across generations, and emotional intelligence.

The task force decided to conduct one introductory session, to be followed by individual readings and three to four small group discussion meetings. Mixing these learning modes was a conscious decision of the task force, to be able to better serve the cohorts. Groups were designed to include no more than four to seven people so that scheduling the cohort meetings would not become impossible.

The first session provided an introduction to the program, as well as information on a foundational topic. It included a presentation about leadership styles, a mini case study, a discussion group activity that focused on organizational culture, and a personal inventory survey, which was given as a pre-test and as a post-test.

The presentation on leadership styles incorporated the task force's brief research into the topic, presenting what the literature identifies as basic leadership styles, ranging from task-oriented and people-oriented, to democratic and transformational. The brief presentation gave examples, and discussions of each type were encouraged throughout the presentation. Participation in the discussions varied from group to group, but attendees were able to contribute examples from current events and business that illuminated the discussion.

The mini case study was a shortened version of a case about Proctor and Gamble that appeared in *John P. Kotter on What Leaders Really Do*.¹ The case involves an internal reorganization at the company and outlines the changes that were made within and across divisions. The case lent itself particularly well to a discussion of the various leadership styles that were employed during the transition there, and it served as a useful follow-up exercise to the formal presentation.

The discussion activity was based on a self-assessment tool that is part of the American Library Association's "Ladder to Leadership" initiatives.² This tool takes a two-pronged approach, addressing both individual leadership skills and one's ability to understand an organization. The

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document has three to five reflective questions linked to concepts such as personal sense of direction or vision, optimism, one's ability to motivate others, self-confidence, emotional intelligence, tolerance for risk, and other related topics. The tool also offers a series of guiding questions about organizational health that can shape discussion about the larger organization and how one fits within it. Some groups preferred using this tool as an individual reflective exercise, but other groups were comfortable with discussing their ideas. The tool is thought-provoking and can be adapted to a variety of situations.

The pre-test and post-test was adapted from a skills inventory found online at a University of Baltimore training site.³ This tool allowed participants to assess their own skills and abilities in areas such as self-confidence, negotiating with others, resolving conflicts, time management, goal-setting, project managements, facilitating meetings, and understanding diverse perspectives. The same instrument was used as part of the conclusion for the session. Participants did not share or discuss their responses, but several did note that the tool had focused their thinking and that they gained ideas and identified areas they wished to improve or expand on.

The remainder of the program was designed to be self-directed, with assigned readings on the other three topics: emotional intelligence, leading without authority, and cross-generational leadership. The readings were selected from a collection called Skillsoft (www.skillsoft.com) to which Washington State University provides licensed access via the human resources department. Skillsoft markets itself as an e-learning company, offering flexible training solutions to companies and institutions. Skillsoft also operates Books24x7, a large collection of e-books on business and IT-related topics to which many libraries subscribe. Skillsoft modules provided the bulk of the content for these sections of the program, offering readings and various activities. The group members decided how to conduct their meetings to discuss the topics.

First Cohorts and Initial Assessment

The response to the survey was encouraging, and twenty-two people registered for the program. People were arranged into cohorts to ensure that there was a mix of staff and faculty in each group, as well as a blend from various units and divisions. No cohort had any supervisor-subordinate pairings or married couples.

At the conclusion of the eight-week program, cohorts were asked to take an online survey regarding their experiences. Thirteen of the twenty-two participants responded to the survey. The survey results showed that people wanted fewer Skillsoft readings, more structure, and a wider array of materials. The responses to the question about the reading materials were quite negative, with 76.9 percent finding the materials somewhat or not at all use-

ful. One person who rated them "somewhat useful" commented that "I forgot we had them," while another noted that they provided a good starting point for conversations, but were "often self-contradictory and patronizing." These results were not entirely surprising. The program leaders' own experience with the Skillsoft content had led them to understand its limitations, but given the tight timeline and lack of budget it was an expedient solution.

Another issue was the request for more substantive sets of discussion questions or guides to the readings. Cohort members felt as though their time in the small group discussion could have been better spent if the task force had supplied some more structure to those meetings. Also, several people commented that not everyone in the cohort group was prepared for the sessions. This was unexpected because during planning meetings and the first sessions, participants agreed that it would not be necessary to construct study questions or reading guides, and the cohort members all agreed to a process. One group had a member take responsibility for leading the discussion on each topic. Each person further agreed to come prepared with a question or an issue from the materials to spur discussion.

Most experts in adult learning practices devote a great deal of time and energy to discussing self-directed learning as a central tenet of andragogy.⁴ The decisions to direct their own discussions and their initial lack of interest in being given guided materials seemed to match those standard behaviors and preferences of adult learners. This led to some surprise for us when the initial assessment revealed that many of the group of adult learners in the cohort groups did not respond favorably to that approach. It may be that this program was not viewed by the participants as requiring the same type of commitment that a credit-course would, for example, or that people were too busy to devote a good deal of time and energy to the program. Although it was marketed—and embraced—as a self-directing learning experience for individuals to gain insights into their leadership potential and to build their comfort and skills with leading, it seems that many participants may have preferred packaged content to deliver the information rather than an extended experience of inquiry and contemplation.

Informal conversations with several people who went through the program uncovered another unexpected insight. People who were in groups that had a "natural leader" or a "born facilitator" were very content with the delivery of the program. People who were in groups without such a member appear to have been more likely to feel that the program lacked direction.

The Second Round

After the conclusion of the initial program, we opened registration for a new cohort. Six people signed up for the second round of leadership training that we offered during the fall of 2007. We knew we had reached most of the

people who had expressed interest, so this smaller turnout was not problematic or unexpected. This cohort offered an entirely revised set of readings and revamped the content to almost completely remove the Skillsoft components, substituting instead a number of articles that covered the same topics, but were more up-to-date and less focused on corporate settings. Although the materials changed radically for the topics, the content did not change of the initial session as described above.

The fall cohort program participants were also surveyed, and four of the six responded. This time, the selection of reading materials was received much better, with 75 percent finding them “mostly useful” and 25 percent finding them “useful.” Generally, reactions to the program were similar among the cohorts, with the majority of participants finding the program useful and deeming it worthy of recommendation to others. Interestingly, the most popular topic among all cohorts was emotional intelligence, which suggests that further training opportunities in this area might be warranted.

Additionally, one of the summer 2007 cohorts continued to meet occasionally during the fall, having group discussions on various topics in leadership and organizational culture. Several members shared interesting readings that sparked discussion. A session on organizational burnout was publicized to all the summer 2007 participants, and eight people attended that discussion.

Program Evaluation

In a program such as the one described here it can prove difficult to point to quantitative measures of change or short-term evaluative outcomes as a result of the leadership development program. We do not, for example, have statistics reflecting the number of personnel who immediately stepped up to a leadership role on a project as a direct result of their completing the leadership program. As a result of this difficulty we turned to a more qualitative process to measure the effects of the program. Our main source of qualitative data was the survey described earlier. We were very encouraged to see that 87.5 percent of respondents indicated that they would recommend the program to colleagues. This one metric indicates that we are at least on the right track to forming a cogent, cohesive program that has the potential to make a difference in our organization.

The exit survey also uncovered an unintended, but very welcome, outcome of the program. Program designers attempted to group cohorts so that there would be a fairly diverse cross section of library departments in every cohort. As a result of the cohort groupings the program was able to be not only a learning experience for individuals but also serve as a team-building experience. Several survey respondents specifically noted the camaraderie and understanding that emerged as a result of this program,

and the value of library staff being able to discuss universal workplace realities in a welcoming environment.

Next Steps

The task force plans to solidify this program as a regular annual offering. Although initial demand was high, some leveling of interest may be expected, so the program might be considered a practical success if one cohort was trained per year. The task force will also sponsor events, such as the special discussion group noted above, and will continue engagement with all of the cohort “alumni.” There will be continued assessment of the program, and adjustments based on those results will be made to the materials and content as necessary. For example, several participants noted that they would have liked more contact with their cohorts in between meetings, and others noted that online contact instead of face-to-face meetings would have been beneficial. This suggests that a Web-based learning environment to facilitate blended learning might be an effective next step.

The program has been beneficial for a number of staff and faculty librarians, and the task force feels it will continue to have a positive impact on organizational culture. It allows the library to focus on the need for leadership and to realize employee development and our commitment to increasing participation across the organization.

References and Notes

1. John P. Kotter, *John P. Kotter on What Leaders Really Do* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999): 71-73.
2. New Members Round Table, American Library Association, *Ladders to Leadership: Self-Assessment*, www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/rts/nmrt/initiatives/ladders/self-assess/selfassess.cfm (accessed Dec. 8, 2007).
3. Rosenberg Center for Student Involvement, University of Baltimore. “Leadership Skills Inventory—Before Certification,” www.ubalt.edu/template.cfm?page=877 (accessed Dec. 8, 2007).
4. See for example, Sharan B. Merriam, “Andragogy and Self-Directed Learning: Pillars of Adult Learning Theory,” in *The New Update on Adult Learning Theory*, ed. Sharan B. Merriam (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001); Sharan B. Merriam and Rosemary S. Caffarella, *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide*, 2nd ed., (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999); Kathleen Taylor, “Autonomy and Self-Directed Learning: A Developmental Journey,” in *Handbook of Adult Development and Learning*, ed. Carol Hoare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Adult Learner. A Neglected Species*, 4th ed. (Houston: Gulf Publishing, 1990) ; and Malcolm S. Knowles, *Self-Directed Learning* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1975).