

Leadership Development in Organizations

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At the 1998 Leaders/Scholars Association conference in Los Angeles, California, we presented a concurrent session titled “Leadership Development in Organizations.” The session summarized some lessons learned via our experience, as associates of the Institute for the Advancement of Leadership (IAL) in San Diego, California, in delivering educational leadership seminars to three clients. Each intervention represented varying levels of success based on established objectives and mutual expectations. The levels of success in each seminar were described as: (1) surpassing expectations; (2) moderately successful; and (3) woefully lacking. Based on IAL’s mission “to transform people and organizations through collaborative leadership,” Institute associates developed each of these leadership seminars to address specific organizational issues and challenges using the collaborative leadership construct to develop leadership practices in organizations.

The essence of these practices are based on the definition of collaborative leadership as derived by Joseph C. Rost, Ph.D., in his book *Leadership for the Twenty-first Century* (Praeger, 1991). The definition is that “Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and collaborators who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes.” From this definition, there are four essential elements that must be present if leadership is taking place in an organization.

1. The leaders-collaborators relationship is based on influence.
2. Leaders and collaborators are the people in this relationship.
3. The leaders and collaborators intend real changes.

4. The leaders and collaborators' intended changes reflect their mutual purposes. After learning about the paradigm shift from the traditional "great man" theories of leadership that dominated the Industrial Era, seminar participants initially discovered the potential of collaborative leadership through experiential exercises and case study simulations.

In addition to the leadership interventions described being differentiated by their relative success, these clients were from three different professions: private business, education and government. While each case study presented had its own unique set of circumstances, the following is a synthesis of the lessons learned from all three interventions. These somewhat universal lessons will inform future intervention design.

Lessons Learned:

1. **Commitment.** We can't over emphasize the importance of attaining a commitment of the customer's material resources and psychic energy sufficient enough to result in making substantive changes. The primary dimensions in this commitment must include openness to change and an investment of time by a "critical mass" of designated individuals. These individuals must be able to grasp the potential of collaborative leadership in shaping the culture and the future of an organization. Then in turn, they are expected to leverage that potential through influence behaviors and relationships to effect real intended change based on identified mutual purposes.

2. **Practical experience and ordinary language.** Based on client feedback and our own reflective awareness, seminar materials and presentation in some areas were perceived to be too academic. This is a judgement call in that audiences need sufficient grounding in establishing a theoretical foundation prior to bridging that information into practice, thus avoiding the ready-fire-aim syndrome. The best way to manage this dilemma is to follow limited content presentations with experiential exercises and/or simulations that allow participants to satisfy their

need to take action while addressing their “real world” issues. By using the participants’ natural action biases, this methodology provides “leadership moments” in immediately bridging leadership theory to practice.

3. **Adult learning model.** The optimum learning environment is based on experiential adult learning model and collective discovery. We use experiential exercises, simulations, case study analysis and learning team discussions to promote individual and group learning. Our perception has been that participants in the long run learn more from one another in setting the necessary precedence for and enacting change. This is another reason why our seminars are designed to work with a designated “critical mass” of participants from the single client organization.

4. **Addressing client needs and expectations.** In carrying out the initial agreements and contract specifications with the client organization, we have found it necessary to address and manage the clients evolving needs and expectations on a just-in-time basis. Due to the dynamic nature of the subject matter learning objectives, the outcomes need to be updated and managed through an ongoing dialogue and a feedback process that is equally dynamic in allowing for continuous adjustment and growth. This process promotes buy-in, commitment to substantive change and systemic transformation among both the sponsoring organization and individual participants.

5. **Resistance to change.** IAL associates have learned to better anticipate the inevitable resistance to change. Whether the resistance is based on established comfort or the challenges associated with new thinking, active players in this potential change dynamic must acknowledge the presence of that resistance and deal with its ramifications. As presenters, we have the opportunity to “walk our own talk” in collaborating amongst our colleagues and ultimately with

participants in deriving strategies that will constructively address such resistance and result in substantive changes taking place.

6. **Cultural awareness.** A critical part of the seminar planning process and the evolution of the seminar itself is an analysis and understanding of the client's culture in relation to their stated needs, issues and objectives. This basic understanding in turn drives certain design aspects such as participant selection, the incorporation of experiential exercises and the tailoring of simulations.

Each of the three leadership seminars addressed some aspect of these lessons learned. Following our presentations, the second half of the session was open to further discussion of the cases presented and/or other situations involving leadership education and the associated lessons learned. The ensuing dialogue with session participants clarified certain aspects of our experience and generated other possibilities in establishing client rapport and ultimately improving intervention designs.

In our estimation, the presentation and discussion met the stated purpose of the Leaders/Scholars Association conference: *A meeting of the minds between those who study leadership and those who practice it.* Associates with the Institute for the Advancement of Leadership support and encourage an ongoing dialogue in which theory informs practice and vice-versa. While the conference represented a significant contribution to this interface, practitioners and scholars alike must continue to build on these initiatives and create new ways to sustain a progressive dialogue that simultaneously cultivates continuous improvement and breakthrough thinking in addressing the challenges of a new era.

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