



SOUTHERN AREA CONSORTIUM OF HUMAN SERVICES

Design, Implementation, and Evaluation of a Leadership Development Initiative

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ABSTRACT: A nine-day leadership development initiative, including 360-degree feedback and action learning projects, was designed by a consortium of nine county human service agencies and delivered to 24 managers. Competencies based on the literature and input from agency managers guided curriculum development. Evaluations reflected high perceived value to the agencies.

Background

In human service organizations, the importance of leadership is clear (Elpers & Westhuis, 2005; Mary, 2005), and the need for highly skilled leaders is acute (Rank & Hutchison, 2000). In the past year, the directors of county human service agencies in Southern California noted this need with reference to a particular concern affecting all of their agencies: succession planning. Each agency was facing the retirements of many of their executive level staff, and the directors did not see in their own agencies the executive talent in their management ranks which could provide competent replacements for retiring executives. These directors comprise the membership of the Southern Area Consortium of Human Services (SACHS), a group which serves as “a forum for County Directors to explore and exchange ideas and information on issues facing public human services to develop strategies for addressing these issues” (Coloma, 2005). This collaboration had two points of origin. First, the Academy for Professional Excellence, a program of the School of Social Work at San Diego State University, was developed by the Southern Region Public Child Welfare Training Academy, which included five of the SACHS counties and had provided training for county staff for nine years through Social Security Act Title IV-E funding. Second, the directors of the involved counties had been meeting informally to discuss county issues, exchange ideas, and offer colleague support. For four years, SACHS directors have met quarterly at sessions to discuss current issues and suggest research and strategies to address them. Regarding leadership development, the directors commissioned SACHS staff to prepare a custom-designed

executive development process which would enhance the skills of their existing managers who could then successfully be promoted into executive positions. After a review of existing executive development programs (e.g., Giber, Carter, & Goldsmith, 2000; Schwartz, Axtman, & Freeman, 1998), the directors of the SACHS counties decided to support the development of a program uniquely designed for their particular needs. Consortium staff and a faculty consultant, with input from other experts, designed the program, implemented in 2005 with 24 participants. This paper will review the design process used, the key aspects of the program, how it is being evaluated, and evaluation results. While it builds upon best practices in leadership development, and in particular a similar program with nine years of experience (Austin, Weisner, Schrandt, Glezos-Bell, Murtaza, in press), several aspects of this venture represent notable innovations.

Program Design

The program design began with the directors brainstorming important leadership skills, prioritizing management competencies relevant to human service organizations based on a literature review (e.g., Menefee, 2000; Giber, Carter, & Goldsmith, 2000; Wimpfheimer, 2004), and discussion of program design considerations. Staff conducted four focus groups with 45 managers of the involved agencies, with participants describing gaps in existing executive development programs, essential leadership skills, desired program outcomes, and preferred learning methods. Thirty-three competencies resulted from this assessment process and the literature review (see Table 1). These competencies matched almost entirely with the competencies in the assessment tool used for the 360-degree assessment process described below (see Table 2). (As will be discussed below, this tool was used because it closely matched competencies identified by the directors and their staffs and also allowed easy on-line administration and report generation for feedback.) The 33 competencies are clustered into four

categories. *Performance leadership* includes areas such as visionary leadership, focusing on results, technology, financial management, and political leadership. *Change leadership* includes entrepreneurial leadership, driving strategic direction, and innovation and change. *Interpersonal leadership* covers areas including building strategic relationships, empowerment, team building, and influence. *Personal leadership* addresses self-development, adaptability, and trust. (See Table 2 for a full description of the competencies).

Core elements identified for the development process included workshops featuring both professional trainers and local experts (e.g., department directors), varied learning methods with an emphasis on participant interaction, 360-degree feedback (London, 2002), individual development plans, and group action learning projects (explained below).

Site visits were held with executive teams in the counties to generate interest in and commitment to the program, discuss expectations and the need for agency support of participants, and set the stage for selection of participants. It was important at this point that the directors clearly and strongly showed their interest in and support for the project, since it was understood that the time demands placed on the participants and their supervisors would compete with the demands of other ongoing agency projects and activities. One strategy for “selling” agency executives on this was to present the program as an investment in human resources which would pay off later through an expanded pool of executive talent.

The curriculum was developed by staff, assisted by consultants with human services and executive development expertise. Early on, valuable consultation was provided by staff of the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (Austin, Weisner, Schrandt, Glezos-Bell, Murtaza, in press), which had conducted their own executive development program for nine years. Many of their program elements were adapted here. The final program included three 3-day blocks of training, delivered over a period of

four months. Topics included vision and purpose, judgment and values, personal style, influence, decision making, coaching, managing accountability and results, strategic management, financial management, political savvy, and organizational change. The topics for Year 2 of LIA are included in the session schedule in Table 3.

Participants

Each participating agency director nominated staff whom they and their executives saw as having executive potential and being able to benefit from additional development. (One county did not participate because it had its own county-wide executive development program.) From a group of thirty three nominees, twenty four participants from eight agencies were selected. Selection factors included allocations based on agency size and diversity in demographics and program areas of participants. Fifty-four percent of participants were female, 46% were male. Twenty-one percent were African American, 4% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 29% were Latino, and 46% were White/Caucasian. All but one participant had a bachelor's degree, and 58% had a master's degree. The group chosen represented a variety of program areas, including Child Welfare, Welfare to Work, Aging & Adult Services, Indigent Services, Community Relations, and Administration. Eighteen participants (75%) were mid-level managers, five participants (21%) were upper level managers, and one participant (4%) was a support staff. On average participants had 11 years of management experience, with 19% having 5 years or less, 57% having 6-10 years, 10% having 10-20 years , and 14% having more than 20 years management experience. Fifty-four percent of participants were responsible for up to 50 employees, 21% were responsible for 51-100 employees, 13% were responsible for 101-250 employees, 8% were responsible for 251-500, and 4% were responsible for 501-1,000 employees.

Program Implementation

Prior to the sessions, each of the participants and their supervisor, peers, and subordinates completed a 360-degree feedback instrument (London, 2002). Staff had selected a 360-degree feedback tool which closely matched the program's identified competencies (Consulting Tools, 2004). In addition to being a good match with competencies identified for this initiative, the tool had the advantages of convenient on-line administration and detailed report generation. Collated results were shared by consultants with participants in individual feedback sessions. After these sessions, participants completed individual development plans (see Table 4) in consultation with their supervisors.

A particularly impactful aspect of collaboration was the use of current and former agency directors and other executives as trainers. These executives volunteered to lead segments of the workshops based on their particular interests. They were encouraged to share their practice wisdom, illustrated with case examples, in the context of the learning objectives of the modules. As will be seen in the discussion below regarding evaluation, the presentations by the directors and other executives were the most highly rated component of the program.

The first three-day training block opened with an introduction and orientation meeting and dinner the night before the sessions. Three agency directors offered energetic welcomes to participants, outlining the origins and visions for the project. Participants also reviewed their 360-degree feedback results and individual development plans (see Table 4) to set the stage for how the sessions would address these. Participants were paired into learning dyads (Jones & Jones, 1973), and time was scheduled for them to meet briefly during most daily sessions to discuss integration and application of learning and to support and challenge each other regarding their own development.

Another unique aspect of this model was the use of action learning projects. The agency directors developed a list of key current policy and program issues for which they needed analysis and action

proposals, and participants formed groups to address them. Issues included child welfare systems improvement, independent living programs, Medicaid redesign, homeless programs and TANF sanctions. These reports were presented at the final session to the directors and the participants' supervisors. Later, several participants reported the application of aspects of their reports in their agencies.

Extensive research was conducted early on to assess how the Leaders in Action program design and delivery could be tailored to the needs of the involved agencies. While all pieces of this system except, perhaps, the action learning projects, existed somewhere prior to inclusion here, these elements were customized to the collective needs of the counties served, as was the specific content of the program. This represents Senge's (1990) definition of innovation: "component technologies" coming together to form an "ensemble of technologies that are critical to each others' success" (p. 6). Innovations in this process included the combination of literature and client input to develop desired competencies to address local director and department needs, connecting session presentations by directors with research and theory, cross-function and cross-department groups at sessions, daily dyads and oral debriefings, and the use of action learning projects. Buy-in and support for the program from agency leadership (the county social service directors and other executives) allowed successful integration of the program with existing training structures within the counties.

Evaluation Findings

This initiative will eventually be evaluated on four levels (Kirkpatrick, 1996): trainee reactions, knowledge and skills gain, graduates' behavior changes in the work setting, and performance in program or work areas under the responsibility of graduates. Evaluation methods used during this first year were primarily formative: activities undertaken to furnish information to guide program improvement. The evaluation methods included individual session evaluations (including oral feedback) and follow up

focus groups and questionnaires with participants and their supervisors two months after the completion of the program. Detailed evaluation findings have been reported by Packard, Tucker-Tatlow, Waechter, Rahiser, and Dudley (in press).

Participants reported generally high satisfaction with program components (e.g., the 360 assessment, action learning projects and individual training modules and trainers, usually with ratings of “very useful” or “excellent.” They offered useful suggestions for improving specific components of the program. These were typically suggested refinements rather than large changes, e.g., providing more structure on the processes for individual development plans and action learning projects. Curriculum feedback resulted in adding a day to the program for the current year, allowing for more time on strategic planning and a session on presentations to elected officials. Participants also made helpful suggestions for enhancing the transfer of learning to their jobs, including better orientation of their supervisors and managers regarding the program and increased development opportunities such as high-profile committee work.

In the focus groups held shortly after the completion of training, both participants and their supervisors identified ways in which the program had impacted their performance in the work setting. Participants reported being more careful about political implications of their actions/decisions, more confident in handling conflict, more inclusive of subordinates in decision-making, and more self-aware.

Supervisors observed their subordinates as being more confident and self-aware, with broader perspectives and increased involvement in leadership.

A more comprehensive evaluation is being planned for year two. There will be less emphasis on formative issues, since feedback for the first cycle provided thorough input on improvements which

could be made to the program. More attention will be paid to actual changes in the workplace, if possible looking at performance of programs or projects for which graduates are responsible.

One final indicator of success from the point of view of the directors and executive staff is that they nominated forty three managers for participation in the second program cycle in the coming year. Based on the directors' satisfaction and continuing interest in the program, thirty one participants (seven more than in the first cycle) have been selected for the second cycle.

One especially important and successful aspect of this has been the hands-on involvement of the directors throughout the project. They were essential to the development of desired competencies and selection of program content, provided leadership in their agencies to support the project, served as trainers, designated action learning projects to help in their agencies' current operations, and celebrated participants and their supervisors at a graduation ceremony.

Implications for Social Work Education

This project has several implications for social work education. First, it advances knowledge for social work administration practice through generating detail on specific competencies needed in public human service organizations and how their development can be advanced and measured. The need for leadership and management education in MSW programs is clear (Rank & Hutchison, 2000; Preston, 2005)); and this program, based on actual agency needs and current literature, offers suggestions for curriculum content and teaching methods. Second, the extensive, ongoing interactions with practicing administrators (both agency executives and middle managers in training) provides up-to-date information on the state of administrative practice and organizational life for a large part of the profession – public human services. This knowledge enriches the teaching of social work administration by providing relevant current examples and serves as a “reality check” to ensure that curriculum content is relevant to

actual practice. Finally, this project strengthens town-gown relations through opportunities for joint action research. Faculty involvement in curriculum design and training advances the use of evidence-based practice in agencies; and faculty involvement in needs assessment helps ensure that graduating MSWs are prepared to enter this challenging and important practice arena.

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TABLE 1: LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT COMPETENCIES IDENTIFIED BY DIRECTORS

<p>▶ Leadership: communicate vision and direction reward and celebrate achievement build relationships promote ethical behavior</p> <p>▶ Personal Effectiveness: use sound judgment in decision making adapt and develop oneself know the organization and business confidence self-responsibility</p> <p>▶ Performance: establish plans manage execution influence others drive for results</p> <p>▶ Interpersonal skills: empowering developing modeling communication conflict management</p>	<p>▶ Innovation: systems thinking innovating championing change</p> <p>▶ Teaming: managing meetings coalition building team building problem solving</p> <p>▶ Futuring: reading the environment strategic thinking and planning budgeting change leadership</p> <p>▶ Boundary Spanning: managing relationships networking collaborating</p>
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TABLE 2: EXECUTIVE VIEW 360 COMPETENCIES
(Adapted from Consulting Tools, Inc. Executive View 360.
<http://www.consultingtoolsusa.com/products/Executives.asp>)

Performance Leadership

Visionary Leadership

- ◆ Has a compelling and clear picture for the future of the business and organization.
- ◆ Effectively articulates a clear purpose and mission that inspires the imagination of others.
- ◆ Communicates a vision of the organizational future and inspires commitment and support towards this vision from others.

Drive for Results

- ◆ Develops results-oriented strategies to achieve and maintain competitive advantage.
- ◆ Sets and pursues aggressive business goals and targets.
- ◆ Regularly monitors and corrects sources of lagging individual, team and organizational performance.

Technological Leadership

- ◆ Articulates a compelling strategy for integrating technology into the strategic plan.
- ◆ Stays informed about innovations and new technologies to ensure competitive advantage.
- ◆ Supports and champions sufficient financial and human resources for technology.

Financial Leadership

- ◆ Identifies key issues in budgets, profit and loss statements, and other financial indicators.
- ◆ Effectively manages the overall financial health of the organization.
- ◆ Effectively allocates financial resources to meet business objectives.

Cross-Functional Versatility

- ◆ Demonstrates a depth and breadth of understanding of key operations and departments within the organization.
- ◆ Involves multiple departments and functions when developing strategic plans and implementing change initiatives.
- ◆ Aligns organizational structure, systems, processes and talent to achieve desired results across the organization

Depth of Industry Knowledge

- ◆ Has a deep knowledge of industry's history, patterns, and future trends.
- ◆ Demonstrates awareness of the strengths, weaknesses, and strategies of industry competitors.
- ◆ Implements "best practices" from other industry experience to be successful

Political Leadership

- ◆ Effectively utilizes positional power to drive key initiatives and strategies. .
- ◆ Effectively interacts with strategic internal and external stakeholders to influence strategy decisions.
- ◆ Fosters internal negotiation and effective conflict resolution with others.

Strategic Problem Analysis

- ◆ Anticipates potential and future problems.
- ◆ Gathers and utilizes available information in order to understand and solve organizational issues and problems.
- ◆ Generates and considers multiple solutions to a problem.

Decision Making

- ◆ Makes timely decisions based on adequate data and information.
- ◆ Makes decisions confidently and quickly when necessary.
- ◆ Gathers enough information and *data* before making a decision.

Interpersonal Leadership

Building Strategic Relationships

- ◆ Effectively initiates and cultivates strategic internal alliances with board members, senior managers and employees within the organization.
- ◆ Effectively builds relationships with key community members and partnerships with others outside the organization.
- ◆ Develops and maintains a broad base of support among key internal and external stakeholders.

Empowering Others

- ◆ Allows people to manage his or her own project, department, business unit or function with autonomy.
- ◆ Involves others in problem solving, decision making and planning processes.
- ◆ Transfers the necessary authority to others to ensure completion of delegated tasks, assignments, and projects.

Team Building

- ◆ Encourages a climate of trust, honesty and openness with others.
- ◆ Attracts and builds a high performing senior management team.
- ◆ Promotes collaboration and removes obstacles to teamwork across the organization.

Interpersonal Effectiveness

- ◆ Ability to effectively manage interpersonal relations in a cooperative, sensitive and collaborative manner.
- ◆ Seeks to actively listen and understand diverse points of view.
- ◆ Expresses sensitivity and empathy towards others.

Oral Communication/Presentation

- ◆ Delivers oral presentations that are persuasive, clear, and logically organized.
- ◆ Handles questions in meetings and presentations in a responsive and diplomatic manner.
- ◆ Writes in a clear, direct and concise manner.

Influence/Negotiation

- ◆ Allows for disagreements to emerge and to be discussed openly.
- ◆ Effectively negotiates "win-win" solutions.
- ◆ Communicates and expresses ideas in a manner that persuades and influences others.

Coaching/Talent Development

- ◆ Selects the best talent for key positions and assignments.
- ◆ Establishes a plan and process for developing successors.
- ◆ Provides timely, clear and constructive performance and developmental feedback.
- ◆ Provides ongoing career coaching, mentoring and guidance
- ◆ Demonstrates sensitivity towards and actively promotes diversity in the workforce.

Personal Leadership

Self Development

- ◆ Seeks and applies feedback and constructive criticism.
- ◆ Pursues continuous learning and self-development by exposure to new ideas and perspectives.
- ◆ Realistically appraises own strengths and development areas.

Adaptability/Flexibility

- ◆ Maintains a realistic outlook in the face of challenge and change.
- ◆ Responds constructively to ambiguity, change, obstacles, and challenges.
- ◆ Demonstrates emotional control and patience under pressure and stress.

Engenders Trust

- ◆ Demonstrates high standards of personal and professional integrity.
- ◆ Maintains open, honest and non-defensive relationships.
- ◆ Demonstrates consistency between actions and words.

Change Leadership

Entrepreneurial Leadership

- ◆ Seeks and creates opportunities to add value within the marketplace.
- ◆ Creates a vision for realizing new business ventures.
- ◆ Seeks and develops entrepreneurial opportunities and ventures.

Driving Strategic Direction

- ◆ Identifies, directs and focuses the organization's performance on high priority strategic goals initiatives.
- ◆ Identifies potential risks, contingency plans and drives achievement of those plans.
- ◆ Effectively allocates human and financial resources necessary to achieve strategic objectives.

Driving Change

- ◆ Orchestrates change efforts across functions, departments, business units and teams.
- ◆ Inspires and supports risk taking, change, creativity and innovation by others.
- ◆ Initiates and promotes continuous learning and improvement efforts throughout the organization.

TABLE 3: LEADERS IN ACTION TRAINING SCHEDULE

BLOCK 1: Internal Reflection and Self Development	
Topic and/or Activity	
DAY 1:	
<i>Welcome/Introductions</i>	
* Icebreaker	
*Ground Rules	
*Individual Development Plans	
*Journaling	
*Pre-training Survey	
Book Club Discussion	
Action Learning Project Teams (action plan)	
DAY 2:	
Book Club Reports	
Leadership 1—Vision & Purpose/Judgment & Values	
Leadership 2—Personal Style & Influencing Others	
Individual Development Plan	
DAY 3:	
Book Club Reports	
Essential Critical Thinking Skills and Processes for Executives (Decision-making, Problem Solving and Conflict Resolution)	
Action Learning Project Meeting (action plan)	
DAY 4:	
Book Club Reports	
Essential Critical Thinking Skills and Processes for Executives (Decision-making, Problem Solving and Conflict Resolution)	

BLOCK 2: Driving for Results: Performance Leadership for Individuals and Teams
Topic and/or Activity
DAY 1:
Hot Topics
Managing Accountability
Knowledge Management
DAY 2:
Action Learning Project Teams
Strategic Management
DAY 3:
Financial Management
Communication
Presentations Skills
DAY 4:
Action Learning Project Teams
Collaboration
External/Internal
Political Savvy
DAY 5:
Intergovernmental Relations
Board of Supervisors Discussion

BLOCK 3: Organizational Change & Transformational Leadership
Topic and/or Activity
DAY 1:
Hot Topics
Action Learning Projects
DAY 2:
Organizational Change
DAY 3:
Board of Supervisor Mock Panel
Critical Issues on the Horizon: Agency/State Forecasting
DAY 4:
Action Learning Project Presentations
Graduation
Directors' Luncheon

TABLE 4: INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN (IDP)

Name: _____ Title: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____ Supervisor/Mentor: _____

Dates reviewed: _____ (After Block 1) _____ (Midpoint) _____ (After Graduation)

<p>Competency Area: <i>(choose 1 and use additional pages for other competency areas)</i></p> <p> <input type="checkbox"/> Performance Leadership <input type="checkbox"/> Change Leadership <input type="checkbox"/> Interpersonal Leadership <input type="checkbox"/> Personal Leadership </p>	
Goal/Desired Outcome (relating to the 1 competency area indicated above)— <i>achievable within 6 months</i>	Due Date
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
Activities to Work Toward Goal	Due Date
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
<p>Support/Resources Needed</p>	
<p>Evidence of New/Increased Skills or Knowledge</p>	

Mentor/Supervisor Sign Off: _____