

Bridging the Gap: Responding to the Leadership Deficit

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As Paul C. Light writes in *The Health of the Human Services Workforce* (2003), “Nearly 3 million human service employees carry the weight of the nation’s children and families on their shoulders. These employees are a linchpin in honoring America’s promise to help its most vulnerable citizens ... a nation that truly wants no child left behind must make sure that workers have the motivation, resources, and support to succeed.”

Like human service agencies across the country, Lutheran Services in Iowa’s (LSI) 900 statewide staff members coordinate family-focused community prevention programs, protect children from abuse and neglect, provide alternatives for troubled juveniles, ensure a welcoming home for refugees, and protect the self-sufficiency of senior adults.

The growing needs of consumers, employees, and agencies like LSI contradict one another. At the same time that demand for services is increasing, nonprofit agencies struggle to keep pace in light of dwindling revenue sources and shrinking candidates. An agency’s limited budget, already stretched with trying to do more with less, is not enough to achieve equilibrium between today’s need for managers and tomorrow’s need for leaders.

In 2005, LSI realized that to become a results-first agency that models the way in leadership practices, we must not only accept, but also embrace, an investment in a culture that promotes leadership at every level. Despite limited resources, LSI’s efforts to build capacity through two leadership development programs, Leadership Academy and Emerging Leaders, have created a new dimension in personal and professional development for the nonprofit social service sector.

To be accepted for the 12-month Leadership Academy program or its accelerated four-week version called Emerging Leaders, employees are self-selected or nominated by a peer, with involvement authorized and supported by their supervisor. Leadership Academy meets one day every month, and the content in the accelerated format is delivered through two three-day retreats separated by four weeks of online discussion and the implementation of a strategic leadership project.

Based on international best-selling curriculum *The Leadership Challenge*, topics include behavior's impact on leadership, values-based leadership, the power of positive relationships, managing consensus and making decisions, leading change at every level, sustaining a leadership culture, using language to lead, managing conflict and crisis, and the opportunities and challenges of diversity.

Employees who are prepared to accept the invitation to lead, no matter their job title, are more effective in meeting job-related demands; create higher-performing teams; foster renewed loyalty and commitment; increase motivation levels and willingness to work hard; and reduce absenteeism and turnover, according to the evidence of James Kouzes and Barry Posner, authors of *The Leadership Challenge*.

Consistent with experiential-based adult learning theory, instructional methods in both Leadership Academy and Emerging Leaders include self-assessments, group discussion, guided self-reflection, experiential games and activities, and individual coaching. Through an evidence-based 360-degree Leadership Practices Inventory, participants receive a candid evaluation of their leadership behaviors and use the feedback to create a leadership development plan, presented as part of the closing ceremony.

Since 2005, close to 100 employees have completed Leadership Academy or Emerging Leaders, and both programs have recently been expanded to allow employees outside LSI to participate.

Invigorated to apply new meaning through their mission-driven work, these leaders seek innovative opportunities to make a difference in the lives of the children and families served through their agencies. As a result of their vision and leadership skills, consumers benefit from new services such as a financial literacy program for people with mental retardation, a circle of volunteer community support for refugees called "Circle of Friends," an independent living program for children in transition from foster care to adult independence; faith-based servant leadership devotionals; and a youth leadership academy.

Outcomes of improved leadership competency, personal mastery and self awareness, effectiveness within the organization, and effectiveness within the community are measured through written evaluations rating each of 31 specific competencies on a four-point scale from 1 = no effect to 4 = high effect. The overall effectiveness of LSI's leadership development programs on these outcomes to date is 3.4 on a four-point scale.

An unanticipated result has been the benefit of the program for employees nominated by their supervisors to overcome negative behaviors impacting performance. According to a supervisor, "We have seen a complete turn-around in [the employee's] attitude and overall work performance since she has attended the Leadership Academy. She now has the ability to think as a leader, understanding and accepting change. In the past, she was not approachable and very negative in every meeting. Now she is seen as a leader and even a cheerleader at times. Staff see her as a mentor and she can now communicate effectively with others... Leadership Academy made a difference." The difference was not only evident to her supervisor and coworkers, but also through her direct work with the people who receive services.

Now enrolling the fourth Leadership Academy group and third Emerging Leaders retreat, the impact of LSI's leadership development initiatives is best expressed in the voice of those who have experienced it first-hand: "We learned to be our best selves by forming compelling relationships with people from a variety of behavioral styles. We gained the ability to share, become vulnerable, and celebrate progress as well as perfection. We learned that leadership applies to all aspects of our lives, and as a result have become more curious and purposeful in our endeavors. We have learned the importance of self-reflection, benefited from the wisdom of our peers, and are inspired to model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart."