

The Future Of Public Sector Leadership
Richard F. Callahan
University of Southern California
In
Innovations in Public Sector Leadership

“I brought hope and a vision back to my organization”
Sierra Health Foundation Leadership program participant

Introduction

Bringing “hope and vision” back to an organization is an outcome of each of the programs USC delivers. How to deliver leadership training programs that have impact not only on the participants but also on the communities they serve and the organizations they lead is the question addressed in this chapter. The transformation of the public sector calls for growing leaders who can thrive in ambiguity and work across the public, nonprofit, and for-profit sectors to lead effective change (National Academy of Public Administration, 2005; 5).

This question of how to grow leaders is addressed by drawing on my personal experience designing and delivering leadership programs at the national, state, regional, county, and local government levels, as well as for a foundation in the nonprofit health sector. In the past year, USC’s work has been with over 600 professionals at all levels of public service and in health nonprofits. Over 2,000 participants have engaged in this leadership training over the past five years. Participants have been from a wide range of professional fields.

The design and delivery lessons are drawn from a rich set of observations, including formal program evaluation, focus group interviews with program graduates, pre- and post-leadership assessment tests, narrative inquiry, end of program interviews, alumni observation and interviews, daily feedback forms (thousands of these), debriefing of presenters, individual conversations with participants during and after programs, and discussion with program sponsors. This data collection has occurred over the past seven years.

Drawing on these observations and experiences in designing and delivering programs, this chapter seeks to facilitate the following outcomes for the reader:

- 1) Increased ability to design and deliver effective leadership programs;
- 2) Knowledge to design and implement training to push out ineffective and toxic leadership (Reed, 2004)
- 3) Competencies to stimulate leadership conversations, creating tipping points (Gladwell, 2002) of core-value driven leadership practices and impacts.

Epistemological Primacy

“The door to novelty is always slightly ajar; many pass it by with barely a glance, some peek inside but choose not to enter, others dash in and dash out again; while a few drawn by curiosity, boredom, or rebellion, or circumstances, venture so deep or wander around in there so long that they can never find their way back out”

Tom Robbins, *Villa Incognito*

Profound challenges are involved in designing and delivering leadership programs. First and foremost is the challenge best described as the assertion of epistemological primacy. No one

uses those words, outside of the halls of philosophy. In the professional world the challenge is stated in varied ways always to the effect that one's own profession is uniquely situated, with specific demands. The implication of this assertion is that leadership practices can only be taught—or at the least—best be taught—by trainers and faculty from that world. This concern finds knowledge unique to a professional field, or even a particular agency, as precluding the possibility of learning from other fields.

In drilling down on this concern, the root appears to be previous bad training experience. The occasions when a faculty member from a different academic discipline has been irrelevant to the professional practice of the participants profoundly affect future willingness to invite outside perspectives in training. In addition, the profound challenges faced in the public and nonprofit sector, often with life and death consequences, fosters a sense that few can understand the daily pressures experienced in working in a particular profession. Past bad training experiences only reinforce this perception.

Since learning can only occur by invitation—recall the story of Confucius pouring tea till it is overflowing and telling the young man he cannot learn until he empties his cup—offering a leadership program must initially address the assertion of epistemological primacy.

This challenge is less acute in leadership programs designed for participants from across different fields, as opposed to a program offered exclusively to participants from one profession. But even then, say at the state government level, the challenge lurks. Sometimes in the form of profound skepticism that lessons can be learned from outside the level of government or outside the sector, e.g. nonprofit sector.

Focus Groups

The design of leadership curriculum can address this issue through a focus group process. Pulling together leading professionals in the field to discuss the leadership challenges allows two important processes to emerge. First, the focus groups discuss the leadership processes needed and the priority in that field or sector, e.g. skills needed for creating an improved organizational culture. Second, the focus groups also raises the content areas specific to the field, knowledge of which is essential for emerging leaders, for example new legislation or funding guidelines specific to the field. The focus group process allows for development of the balance in the curriculum between the amount of time spent teaching leadership processes that are not specific to the participants' professional field and the amount of content specific to the profession of the participants.

Engaging in this focus group process results in two critical outcomes. The first result is a curriculum to be tailored to the specific professional leadership processes. The focus group process allows participants to know that the curriculum is designed for them, not the imposition of topics important to outside faculty or trainers.

The second important outcome is buy-in from the leaders in the professional field who helped design the curriculum. The leadership program becomes credible because of their participation in the design. Most importantly, this allows established leaders to become champions for the program. They can identify and recommend staff to attend the leadership program. These leaders become vested in the program's success in developing leaders.

Addressing the assertion of epistemological primacy through focus groups of professional leaders allows the design not simply to overcome potential participant resistance; more significantly, it facilitates offering a program that can draw across academic disciplines and

professional fields. For example, consider drawing on public management and business administration in a program for mental health executives or drawing on corporate strategy models for nonprofit health directors.

An interdisciplinary approach advances leadership as essentially a creative act. This approach trains leaders to engage in interdisciplinary problem solving approaches to generate new solutions to complex problems. This moves beyond simply teaching best practices to delivering a program that deliberately sparks creativity through the connection of previously separate domains (Johansson, 2004). The conclusions reached by Malcolm Gladwell's *Tipping Point* (2002) suggest the value of reaching across disciplines and professional fields to both understand the dynamics of social change and the potential for leaders as connectors to create positive social epidemics.

Finally, to overcome aversion to reaching- out for leadership training note that the focus-group process models two important leadership practices. First, is customer-focused leadership. As stated well by a remarkably successful university president, USC's Steve Sample, this involves working for the people who are working for you (2002). The process models engaging the professionals closest to a challenge in crafting approaches to address that challenge. Second, the process also models leadership as inquiry. As succinctly stated by long-time leadership trainer, Laree Kiely, leadership is developed most effectively around questions, not certainty. The focus group process models leadership as asking the right questions.

Curriculum Drivers

“Wooden-headedness, the source of self-deception, is a factor that plays a remarkably large role in government. Wooden-headedness is also the refusal to benefit from experience.”

Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly* (1984; 7)

Leadership training builds on the premise of leadership as learned mastery, neither inherited nor accidental. The insight developed by Bennis and Thomas (2002) on a crucible experience not merely shaping the leader but as essential to becoming a leader strongly supports the possibility of learning leadership skills. Likewise, Perkins' research on “leadership at the edge” (2002) finds challenging circumstances calling forth extraordinary leadership. Leadership training builds on this seminal role of experience in developing leadership skills. Trapping aspiring public sector leaders in the Antarctic ice like Ernest Shackleton (Perkins) is not a realistic possibility.

The importance of experience in developing leadership skills strongly suggests that the right type of experiential exercises in a leadership program can develop a participant's leadership skills, capacity, and impact. Typically, well-designed simulations, role-playing games, group exercises, negotiation practices are among the various experiential learning incorporated into leadership programs. Reading, analyzing, and developing recommendations based on the study of others experiences and fact situations in the form of case studies is also suggested as a form of experiential learning.

In the design and delivery of curriculum three features can amplify leadership skill development:

- 1) delivery over several months;
- 2) participant reflections;

- 3) group projects;
- 4) designed re-entry of participants.

Program Delivery

Offering a leadership program over a six-month period offers a range of advantages. The most overwhelming learning impact is the ability to assimilate and apply learnings at work between sessions. Second, the participants can bring back questions and insights for the trainers and for their colleagues in the program. Third, the participants can model for each other the assimilation and application of the leadership practices.

The application of leadership for colleagues in the program is an enormously powerful mechanism for leadership programs. Trying new leadership approaches initially learned in a leadership program exemplifies the most important of principles: leading by examples. These examples also develop an expectation that the concepts and practices from the training are designed for applications at work. The examples by participants, the questions, the successes and the failures also invite accountability to each other for applying the leadership principles. Finally, allowing time for participants to bring back application between sessions demonstrate that leadership is possible.

Participant Reflections

Leadership reflections by participants during the program become an important mechanism for leadership development. Initially, reflections discussed at the start of each day practice the leadership skill that Warren Bennis (1989) describes as one of the most important functions of leaders: creating shared meaning. The reflections by participants create shared meaning about their learning in the program, about the challenges of applying new leadership practices, and about their aspirations.

In his most recently published research on leadership, Marcus Buckingham (2005) concludes after interviewing hundreds of leaders that the most important practice shared by successful leaders is taking time to reflect on their experiences. Structuring such reflections in a leadership program allows participants to practice the skill, experience its benefit, and learn how to bring practices of learning through reflection back to their organization. This practice facilitates participants' personal development and their development of their agency as a learning organization.

Group Projects

The design of group projects into leadership programs offers considerable challenge. Not the least of the potential objections of participants is that there is no time for an additional overlay of work on top of an existing job and that excessive time taken from work and family to participate in program requirements. Participant reluctance to engage with group projects calls for careful design of the project process and a clear nexus to personal leadership development.

Clarity about the process and the outcomes for group projects allows participants to move from feeling overwhelmed to seeing an opportunity for personal and professional contributions. Presenting the group project process as a chance to practice leadership skills during the course of the program helps participants to find a clear connections with leadership development. Clearly outlining the expectation that the presentation of the group project is as much about reflections on the leadership processes used (e.g. forming teams, communications, negotiations) as it is on

the outcome encourages participants to view the process as opportunities outside the workplace to try new leadership practices and develop their skills.

Presenting projects as an opportunity to contribute to a community good also can connect leadership participants with the projects as opportunities to make a difference—the core value of contribution. Projects can be developed by nominations from outside groups, program sponsors, and the participants. Allowing participants to voluntarily select—as opposed to being assigned—the project each will work on further addresses an initial reluctance for added work.

Offering expert consulting at the start of the process and throughout allows participants to focus on a set of skills that will readily transfer back to the work place. Typically, the learning from the project consultant includes a process for moving from problem to proposal, recognizing the importance of scoping a project, presentation practice, and how to design a problem-solving network. Typically, when reflecting on the group project process, each of these items looms large as an important impact of the process.

Designed Re-entry

Drawing on a metaphor from the NASA space experience describes well the experience of leadership program participants returning to work. Once leaving and returning to earth's orbit, on re-entry the Apollo astronauts faced the challenge of successfully moving through the earth's atmosphere. Entering the earth's atmosphere at too sharp an angle would cause the Apollo capsule to create so much friction that the ship would incinerate. Entering at too shallow an angle would cause the capsule to bounce off the Earth's atmosphere into deep space, never to return. Similarly, a leader returning at with too sharp an entry risks burning up quickly within an atmosphere that has not changed. Likewise, a leader returning with too shallow an approach risks not getting through and having no impact.

A well-designed leadership program can address these sets of issues through a number of mechanisms. Acknowledging to participants the reality of the re-entry challenge is an important first step. Encouraging participants to tell their colleagues at work that the leadership program has encouraged them to try new leadership practices and skills offers an initial license to try new practices on reentry to their workplace. Using the structured reflections of participants in class to talk through ways the participants are introducing new practices between sessions both models successful practices and allows debriefing on less than successful attempts. Including group projects offers an intermediary place to practice new skills outside of the classroom but not yet at work. And, finally, meetings with alumni help participants calibrate their re-entry actions.

Leadership Drivers

“This transformation will take time, and the difficulty of changing a decades-old culture in the second largest bureaucracy in the federal government should not be underestimated”

Dr. Kenneth W. Kizer, *Vision For Change* (1995; 7)

The design and implementation of leadership programs arrive at developing leadership skills from a variety of directions, but they need to converge around a fundamental question: How to develop the capacity in individuals to move forward into profound uncertainty. By definition leaders go where the road has not been paved or perhaps even surveyed. Leaders are not following others. Fundamentally, leaders chart new courses rather than navigate following

the fixed directions of others.

Nothing is wrong with following or with mastering processes that have been developed. However, that is not leadership; it is management. Strong management skills are needed in the public and nonprofit sectors. But leadership is fundamentally more. Leaders move forward, and they do so deliberately into the unknown. The fundamental skill that sets leaders apart is the ability to bring clarity where there is uncertainty (Buckingham, 2005).

Leaders intentionally invite change. Again, if an individual is improving on existing processes, refining current practices, or following an established direction that has been proven successful, that person is practicing management. That is a needed and vital skill set. However, managing existing processes is not leadership. By definition, leaders are moving an organization in a direction that is different than the one currently being followed. That invited change is not by accident but by design (for recent examples see Dahle, 2005.)

The challenge for leadership programs becomes preparing individuals to operate in arenas where the outcome is not certain, where success is not guaranteed, and where there are followers expecting clarity and who are only comfortable with certainty. At their essential core, leadership programs develop individual capacity to intentionally design change and then the ability to make change stick.

Designing Change

Three processes prepare participants for leading change: identifying strategy, embracing dissent; and designing networks.

The role of intentionality in leadership needs to be learned. Being at cause rather than being caused is a more abstract way of conceptualizing this skill set. In the world of leadership practices, this is the skill set of strategy. The development of such skill is not the same as teaching strategic planning. Rather, this is learning an applied strategy model: developing the capacity of leaders to be at cause for measurable outcomes that have sufficient assets realized through targeted behaviors to achieve those outcomes (Logan and King, 2001; Logan, 2006). Leaders move into profound uncertainty through the application of a strategy model that takes into account all that is known and creates accountability in the leader for achieving outcomes. Strategy facilitates a leader overcoming the natural resistance to change by marshalling assets, instituting behaviors committed to change (NAPA, 6).

The second important process for moving into “swampy conditions” is to invite dissenting views (Biller, 2005). The fear of change – or stated another way, the fear of “dropping your tools” (Weick, 1996)— profoundly shapes how a leader is received. The insight on which leadership programs can build is facilitation of skills that first allow a leader to recognize this fear and then skills needed to seek out and embrace dissent—early and often.

The third leadership process that facilitates moving into profound uncertainty is the deliberate design of personal and inter-organizational networks. The design of networks is different than simply the admonition to get to know powerful people through networking. The first leadership difference is recognizing networks as a significant problem-solving tool, with an understanding of how fundamentally networks change the capacity to move information (Barabasi, 2003) and to move people (Gladwell, 2002). This recognition builds on the insight developed by Chester Newland of the seminal value of connectedness through the core values of rule of law and respect for human dignity for advancing public administration. The second difference is value of mapping networks between organizations. Clearly understanding the

varied ways organizations are connected through referrals, resources, and other factors, and mapping the intensity of connections (Provan and Milward, 1995) develops leadership capacity for deliberately designing more effective inter-organizational networks. Teaching the skill of connecting individuals around what they care most about—their core values—into three-way relationships that are the building blocks of individual networks, builds leadership capacity for having the relationships needed as assets in strategy to move forward into uncertainty.

Making Change Stick

In leading organizational change for the largest health-care provider in the United States, The Veterans Health Administration, Dr. Kenneth Kizer noted that beyond the challenge of introducing change was the challenge of getting change to stick in a “decades-old culture” (1995, 7). Kizer observes that change involves much more than reorganizing structure. The challenge for leadership development is how to make change stick through changing organizational culture: creation of effective organizational culture. A 2005 symposium on leadership by the National Academy of Public Administration describes this leadership that “...embed the values in the organization” (NAPA, 10).

The fundamental assumption is that strategy is not sufficient. Leadership training can focus on developing the skills to find leverage points in moving from diagnosis of organizational culture to changing the culture. One approach builds leadership capacity through coaching individuals in changing the types of conversations within the organization (Logan and King, 2001). This approach to leadership development builds on the seminal insights of Burns (1978) where a leader elevates an organization as a teacher. Also, training builds on Bennis’ insight of the leader’s role as shared meaning (1989). In practice, leaders develop skills to move conversations in an organization from self-focused to team focused and from ineffective to vital (Logan and King, 2001).

The training of a leader to move organizational culture calls for creating shared meaning around core values. Developing the leadership skills to move strategy forward driven by core values fundamentally addresses the problem of resistance by connecting to what individuals care most about, their core values. In effect it is “...revealing what is good in them and ultimately giving them hope” (O’Toole, 1995; 10). In the example of Dr. Kenneth Kizer leading change at the Veterans Health Administration, he appealed to the core value of compassion through quality care for veterans and the core value of contribution through improved access and patient centered care for veterans (p. 8). That shifted the focus shifts from the bureaucracy to the patients; from structure and entrenched culture to the values of public and health service.

Leading from core values calls for developing powerful listening (p. 29) and the ability to relate core value stories. Leadership programs developing these capacities allow leaders to create vital organizational cultures through core-value-driven conversations, pushing out gossip, toxic conversations, and self-promotional toxic leadership (Reed, 2004). Organizational culture is changed through core-value driven conversation.

Levels of Leadership

“Have you forgotten that life is a treasure, not a trial?”

Jimmie Dale Gilmore

Leading from core values can span the complex and varied approaches to leadership that are apparent from any walk down the aisle of a bookstore or quick google of the topic. What is

needed is a way to sort through the bewildering arrays of suggestions for leaders that are found in books as biographies, metaphors, survey research, literature reviews, and from large data set analysis. A comprehensive leadership model suggested by Van Wart starts with the observation that “First, the sheer number of competencies required of leaders is daunting” (2004; 175).

To bring clarity to the daunting array of leadership suggestions, the design and delivery of leadership training can be organized around the suggestions of Nobel prizewinner Herbert Simon who outlined five levels of society (1952). A systematic approach to leadership development that recognizes complexity but does not overwhelm participants can be developed around the following levels: individual, group, organizational, community, and institutional (Simon, 1952). This framework offers a coherent approach and suggests the close connection of each level, which Simon describes as a set of boxes within larger boxes, touching on all sides. Most importantly, this approach starts with two important premises: one, a movement from the heroic leadership genre where individual level skills and personal attributes are presented as sufficient for all leadership challenges and two, understanding that different circumstances call for different types of leadership skills.

Levels of leadership development can be organized around the following:

Individual: leading through core values, decision-making styles, communication techniques, interpersonal designed network, Meyers-Briggs and other instruments;

Group: forming high performing teams- roles, negotiation, customer focused approaches, with instruments such as Leadership Effectiveness Assessment;

Organization: changing structure, culture and symbols, human resources, and political frames (Bolman and Deal, 2003), systems thinking, finance, and inter-organizational networks;

Community: working with a board of directors, strategic planning, creating public value (Moore, 1995) and fund development;

Institutions: influencing the “rules of the game” (North, 1990) through advocacy, working with legislative representatives, initiatives, and the courts (Garrett, 1997).

The sequence in delivering training at varied levels allows participants to move from the most familiar (i.e. personal level skills) to the more abstract (i.e. organizational and institutional level skills). Focusing a session, typically over two days, each level facilitates the participants seeing the distinctions related to that level.

The individual and group levels are always the easiest for participants to relate to in training. These levels are tangible, with participants being able to see themselves and each other as individuals and teams. The community level is typically easy to relate to in both nonprofit programs (as clients) and in government programs (as constituents). Also, sequencing a program to go from the individual, to group, to community level facilitates starting with levels that more easily resonant with participants, and it then allows the organizational level training to focus on how to better connect the organization to constituent or community considerations. Likewise with the institutional level, training on legislative advocacy works better when leadership processes for accessing the needs of the community or constituents have been developed in previous sessions.

Leadership Outcomes

Designing and delivering leadership programs around varied levels allows participants to develop both the skill set needed at a particular moment, and other skills that they may need later in their careers: in the language of a proverb, digging wells before being thirsty. An outcome of this approach is twofold: first, an appreciation of the varied skills needed at different times to achieve different outcomes, and second, an improved ability of participants to create future leaders.

Designing leadership programs around outcomes models the practices being taught in leadership strategy. These outcomes can range from reinvigorating participants' commitments to public or nonprofit service to designing networks that break down the silos between different public agencies. However, the metric of leaders creating other leaders as an outcome of any program becomes the basis of transformational leadership (O'Toole, 11). This outcome metric facilitates participants looking backward to mentors in their own leadership and how opportunities for leadership were created for them, as well as looking forward to design their legacy for impacts as leaders.

An outcome from the design and delivery of leadership programs of creating future leaders becomes the basis for an epidemic of leadership that advances varied social goods driven by core value leadership. In training programs the challenge is to shift the focus from the individual to the outcome the individual can create. Designing leadership programs to address different skills sets at different levels allows for a vibrant heterodoxy in the curriculum, calling on participants to actively shaped their learning and applications of the learning. Designing leadership programs around the expected outcomes of leaders creating leaders aligns the curriculum with impacts beyond the individual; it facilitates leadership skills that work for the community. In an era of working not only in the public or nonprofit sector, but with the need for skills to work across sectors (NAPA, 6; Salamon, 2005), developing leadership capacities through multi-layered, experiential learning prepares participants to have impact in serving their varied communities by interacting across the nonprofit, for profit, and public sectors. Developing core-value-driven leaders allows communities to connect across sectors about which they care most. Connectedness through core values can define the legacy of a successful leadership program.

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