

Leading Today's Senior Centers

Leadership Approaches and Best Practices of Delaware's Multifaceted Senior Centers

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The Significance of Senior Center Leadership Practices on Delaware's Aging Population

As this country's senior population continues to grow, it will become important for senior center directors and staff to employ appropriate leadership qualities and organizational best practices. Senior center leaders must recognize their role in promoting mental, physical, and emotional health and well-being among baby boomers (Endres and Holmes, 2006-2007). They also need to understand how to effectively lead people and manage resources, since effective leadership in organizations provides higher-quality, and more efficient, services (Van Wart, 2005).

Effective Leadership Practices: Results from Interviews with Delaware Senior Centers

Approximately 25 of Delaware's senior center executive directors were chosen to participate in a pilot study to determine leadership approaches most commonly employed in carrying out the primary functions of their organizations.

Outreach to Seniors, Employees, and Local Communities

Contemporary senior centers exemplify the need for comprehensive, community-based services that meet the varying needs and consumer demands of the nation's elderly population. In describing their relationships with staff and participants, Delaware senior center directors who were interviewed reported "service to others" as a primary motive for working in their centers.

- In preparing to educate seniors on issues relevant to them, 44% reported that they talk directly to

participants to better understand their concerns and interests.

- 74% of directors interviewed indicated that they contact local agencies that might be the best to serve their participants' interests and to share their respective center's vision.

Supporting Staff, Volunteers, and Participants

Leaders employ a variety of skills to build creative and nurturing work environments. They must work openly and effectively with people in order to foster growth and empowerment among their staff (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2006). Delaware senior center directors identified with the importance of friendly and open work environments.

- 83% consider employee, volunteer, and participant feedback on how they manage and coordinate programs and activities.
- 78% reported that they discuss new program ideas with their employees and volunteers to gain input on the best way of managing a new program or service.
- 78% develop small support networks for idea sharing and connecting with other senior centers.

Balancing Human and Financial Resources

Inevitably, working with volunteers, particularly baby boomers, will be different from working with paid staff. In terms of budget development and financial resource management, Delaware senior center directors recognize the importance of including others in decision-making processes and in determining appropriate funding approaches.

- 91% of directors interviewed reported that they allow volunteers to determine their own work based on their background and experiences and the needs of the center.

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Balancing Human and Financial Resources

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- 68% of directors interviewed reported that they consult with their board of directors and staff to determine the best approaches for funding a new program.
- Approximately 20% indicated that they rely primarily on self-confidence and experience when faced with financial challenges or budget.

Primary Organizational Functions and Best Practices

Before applying appropriate leadership approaches, senior center directors and their staff must recognize the various organizational functions and best practices required to run their centers and manage their resources. The following represent important best practices identified by national organizations, researchers, and senior center directors in Delaware.

Strategic Planning Practices

- Develop mission, goals, objectives, and action plans.
- Ensure that employees and volunteers understand their roles in the center's purpose and mission.
- Follow trends in the aging field through continual learning and connecting with others in the respective community or field.

Program Planning and Evaluation Responsibilities

- Identify the needs and interests of participants through surveys and program evaluations.
- Engage employees and board members in conducting program planning and evaluations.
- Focus on center's mission and goals when creating new programs or services.

Community Advocacy and Outreach Activities

- Meet with other community leaders to discuss the field of aging and trends that are prevalent.
- Market programs and services to the outside community as well as existing senior center participants.
- Create plan for building relationships with local businesses or community organizations.

Governance and Administration

- Establish clear job expectations with staff and volunteers.
- Work with volunteers to accommodate their needs and utilize their skills and experiences.
- Carry out a budget set forth by the director or board of directors that reflects the center's strategic plan.

External Relationship-Building

- Develop support networks with other senior center directors or local community groups.
- Share vision and goals with other organizations and community members.
- Identify how to involve other senior centers, local governments, and businesses in reaching goals.



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DATA SOURCE

Data referenced in this issue brief presents findings from the **Senior Center Leadership Questionnaire** administered by the University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration in the spring of 2007. The survey was part of a larger research project, conducted by IPA and the University of Delaware's Leadership Program, that examined leadership theories, approaches, and models appropriate for community-based organizations that provide services to older adults and their families.

Directors were selected from a sampling frame according to senior center size, service level, and location. The sample size for this pilot study was 23 participants: 8 from New Castle County, 4 from Sussex County, 4 from Kent County, and 9 from the City of Wilmington. More detailed information on survey methodology can be found at www.ipa.udel.edu/3tad/papers/workshop4/O'Hanlon.pdf.

NOTES

Denhardt, R. B. & Denhardt, J. V. (2006). *The Dance of Leadership: the Art of Leading in Business, Government and Society*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.

Endres, T. & Holmes, C. (2006-2007, Winter). RespectAbility in America: Guiding Principles for Civic Engagement Among Adults 55-Plus. *Generations, Journal of the American Society on Aging*, vol. 3, no. 4, 101-108.

Van Wart, M. (2005). *Dynamics of Leadership: Theory and Practice*. Portland, OR: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.