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A Blueprint For Building the Leadership Pipeline

The cascading impact that retirements have on leadership succession, the rising expectations among employees for development opportunities, and the need for increased leadership competencies at all levels of organizations are just some of the management challenges looming in the decade ahead. So where do you start to handle these challenges? Are better recruitment strategies the answer? Perhaps. But maybe the picture is not as bleak as it first appears, and you have more to work with than you realize.

When a team of Durham, North Carolina, city employees began drafting a “blueprint” to build the city’s leadership pipeline, the team was pleased to learn of the many opportunities for development already in place within the organization. The creation of Durham’s blueprint takes an integrated approach to professional growth and is helping team members describe the opportunities available, connecting existing employees with development options, and launching initiatives to close gaps and create new opportunities for leadership development.

Two years ago, in the September 2005 issue of *PM*, Lynne Lancaster and David Stillman presented “If I Pass the Baton, Who Will Grab It?” Since then, ICMA, state associations, and local governments have devoted time and energy to the succession-planning question. Much of the focus has been on how to attract the Next Generation (“Next Gen”) talent to the profession of local government management.

City College

Although recruitment is indeed an important part of human resource management, Lancaster and Stillman suggest in their subtitle that “creating bench strength” is a viable strategy, and they offer several value propositions that must be understood and addressed in order to create the kind of workplace and organization that will appeal to staff in both Generation X and the Millennial Generation. Additional insight may be gained by referring to “A Gathering Storm: Succession Planning in the Public Sector,” released in June 2007 and available on the ICMA Web site, Next Generation, at icma.org/main/ns.asp?nsid=3218&hsid=9.

Durham’s blueprint shows employees how they can take charge of their own careers and professional development, and it gives management a practical tool for building the leadership pipeline necessary to develop a workforce for the years ahead.

INCEPTION AND RESULT

A team of five employees¹ from different departments in Durham, with a charge from the city manager, chose a project to identify resources for leadership development. They understood that leadership development is paramount in the face of upcoming retirements of top-level managers and is important to retention and recruitment. Creating a plan or blueprint and initiating an informal mentoring pilot were chosen as the goals. This project is built upon “Leadership at All Levels,” a core value of Durham’s workforce.

Durham’s *Blueprint for the Leadership Pipeline* can be found on the city’s Web site at www.durhamnc.gov/departments/manager/blueprint. Copies also are distributed to employees without intranet access.

The blueprint document is divided into seven major sections:

- Engaging leaders at all levels.
- Getting people in the right places.
- Development programs and training.
- Getting the right experience.
- Owning your own development.

Description: This program focuses on employees understanding Durham’s products and services, developing networking skills, and preparing them to be ambassadors for the city:

- Learning about the city organization.
- Making connections with people in other departments.
- Familiarity with all city departments and services.
- Visits to city operations sites.
- Department employment opportunities and requirements.

Target audience: Frontline employees through department directors.

Time frame: One day per month (5 months).

Faculty and format: Faculty includes directors, assistant directors, and managers from within various city departments. Content is delivered through a variety of methods, including presentations, discussions, and tours.

Primary lead partner: Organizational development, city manager’s office.

What’s happening now and what’s needed? Two City Colleges are held each year, with approximately 20 participants in each session.

The first annual alumni event was held in 2006. This event brought graduates from all City Colleges together to build new relationships across departments, provide departmental updates, and enhance skills as ambassadors.

This is an extremely successful program that is strongly supported by the city manager. All employees are encouraged to place their names on the waiting list and supervisors are urged by the manager’s office to support participation.

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- Supplementing the pipeline.
- Strategic talent management.

Within the sections, a description of each program is provided, followed by the target audience and the typical time frame. The format tells how a class is taught or a function carried out. The primary lead partner identifies who is responsible or seems most likely to sponsor an

initiative. What’s happening now and what’s needed gives an overview of current efforts and missing pieces of the pipeline.

Sections conclude with contact information and the invitation to contribute ideas and energy. Employees are encouraged to get involved in helping to build out incomplete pieces of the pipeline. Here are examples of programs from each section.

City College. City College—a cross-departmental orientation program—is designed to familiarize employees with services and to prepare them to be ambassadors for the city. It is similar to programs that educate citizens about the community. Street cleaners and department directors learn side by side in these sessions. Tours of water plants, demonstrations of equip-

“I would have loved to have something like this when I was a new employee. With the blueprint, employees have a place to start, a map along the way. They don’t have to figure it all out on their own.”

—Acting assistant department director

"I successfully competed for an entry-level position and for a senior position two years later in the department offering the developmental assignment. I truly enjoy this work and intend to finish my career with the city in this department."

—*Developmental assignment participant*

ment, and interactive activities are a part of the training.

Another explicit goal of City College is to inform employees of career options in other departments. So, in addition to preparing employees to represent the city, the city is attempting to prevent talented employees from leaving. Durham's managers believe that turnover can be reduced by providing employees with information on new and challenging opportunities in other departments, sometimes in surprising places.

Building on strengths. Durham's approach focuses on identifying and using the different strengths that employees bring to the workplace in order to create high levels of engagement. Research by the Gallup Organization demonstrates that people who use their strengths nearly every day at work are much more likely to be and remain engaged employees. According to Gallup, engaged employees "work with passion and feel a profound connection with their company. They drive innovation and move the organization forward."²

Strengths assessment is a regular feature of Durham's leadership training, and it is beginning to be used with existing teams. A recent session with the public works survey team identified an employee with a pattern of strengths ideal for training new employees. This individual is excited by the prospect of adding training to his role. The city's goal is to use strengths assessments to help employees find the opportunities and places in the organization where they can be most successful.

Management Academy. The Management Academy was created with succession planning in mind, and it shows the city's commitment to the training and development of emerging leaders. Because the city's goal is to promote from inside the organization whenever possible, leaders must prepare to assume higher-level positions.

Management Academy participants are drawn from the middle tier of the organization—supervisors and employees with broad responsibilities in the organization or in key relationships with the community. They participate in project teams with employees from other departments, develop relationships across the organization, increase their self-awareness, and expand their leadership and influencing skills.

Executive Leadership Institute. The Executive Leadership Institute is designed to provide training and development to the highest tier of current managers. The program is based on the Center for Creative Leadership's Developing Successful Executives, and it includes lectures, self assessment, multi-rater feedback, team projects, and executive coaching.

In an effort to deal with competing priorities and limited funding, staff members continually seek creative ways to build this capacity by using internal employees and opportunities. Leadership training is centered on action-learning projects. These projects put theory into immediate applied learning.

There are multiple benefits to this approach. Employees experience themselves leading positive changes and feeling empowered to make a difference. Organizational alignment and cross-departmental relationships are strengthened by sharing methods, working on problems for shared outcomes, and using organizational values to stay on track—thus moving from the perspective of the departmental silo to the broader organizational vision, mission, and values.

For those who anticipate organizational resistance to this approach, another benefit is that things get done

that might not otherwise happen. Managers are encouraged to nominate projects for consideration by the project teams. Some teams have chosen specific components of the blueprint to build out their projects, thus expanding Durham's capacity for development.

Developmental assignments. Developmental assignments allow employees to experience a temporary job in another department. Typical assignments last for a few months. The "lending department" continues to pay the employee's salary as it would for any other development opportunity. Unfortunately, some interested employees do not have the chance to participate because of budget constraints.

Sometimes, however, when an employee is lent to a developmental assignment, it creates an opportunity in the lending department for another employee to cover the temporarily absent employee's duties through a similar stretch or developmental assignment within the department—a kind of domino effect. Still in the concept phase is a plan to find resources to expand this program by hiring temporary employees to fill the gap left by the lent employee.

Developmental assignments have multiple benefits. Employees expand their skill sets and experience new employment possibilities, while departments benefit from fresh perspectives and employees with broader knowledge. The organization benefits from more knowledgeable employees with an allegiance to the entire organization. This program has the dual benefit of developing employees by placing them outside of their current positions

Management Academy has given me the motivation to leave my comfort zone and stretch myself with challenges I would never have considered. All of its alumni continue to encourage one another toward excellence.

—*Inaugural Management Academy alumnus*

and by exposing them to promotional opportunities in other parts of local government administration.

Durham officials hope that more employees will remain as city staff as they realize opportunities for professional development or advancement within the broader organization.

Informal mentoring pilot (under construction). Informal mentoring develops as a natural person-to-person match as opposed to formal mentoring programs that match mentor and mentee and oversee their interactions. Research has shown that informal mentoring is more successful than formal mentoring programs.

Informal mentoring is generally done in one-on-one meetings in casual settings, sometimes over lunch or dinner. There are no requirements about how often the pair meets or for how long. The mentor shares opinions, offers advice on decisions, and makes frequent suggestions for career development.

To pilot the informal mentoring plan, employees who had already shown their interest in development were invited to join; they were identified through their participation in one of the sessions of the Executive Leadership Institute, Management Academy, or City College. A get-acquainted session was held (it was based on the speed-dating concept), and it allowed mentors and mentees to self-select on the basis of their similar responses. Quarterly follow-up meetings are held to support the participants, and the staff will evaluate the initiative after one year.

35 under 35 network (in design phase). Focusing on the blueprint helped the staff see some of the places where more work is needed. When staff members discovered the Web site www.young-feds.org, they realized the city needed something like “35 under 35” to create special opportunities for networking and development for young professionals to increase and support their interest in local government. In the future, a city group of under-35s will decide what they most want and need

City College was a double-win situation for me. It enabled me to make lasting relationships with other city employees, social as well as professional relationships that have repeatedly proved to be valuable.

—City College graduate

to support their professional development. How to support young professionals in creating their own program is currently being explored.

Internship program and retiree employment program. Looking toward both ends of the spectrum, the city realizes that it needs to focus on getting students interested in employment with Durham. A look at ways to entice retirees to consider part-time employment is also needed. The city is definitely organizing and expanding efforts to attract interns to its placements.

The staff also needs to share and coordinate efforts with the entire organization on what individual departments have under way to engage retirees in part-time work. Further, because this community is a high growth area for retirees and second-career professionals, we need to look into how we can take advantage of a broader retiree base.

Learning Advisory Board. The Learning Advisory Board currently makes recommendations about who is admitted to various training programs when demand exceeds supply. The

goal is to expand the board’s responsibilities to more strategic functions, including data-driven measurement of results from the blueprint. We also want to strengthen the board’s role in recommending pipeline-building priorities as they culminate in developing our staff to meet the challenges of 21st century communities.

A BLUEPRINT OF YOUR OWN

Development is more than training. There probably are opportunities you can take advantage of right now, including informal mentoring, projects that can provide learning as well as organizational benefits, short-term job exchanges that can serve developmental purposes, and other situations that can foster learning.

Taking an inventory of what you already have is a great place to start, and it can help create your organization’s own blueprint to build a leadership pipeline. **PM**

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²*Gallup Management Journal*, January 12, 2006.

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Look to ICMA

“Building the Leadership Pipeline,” an ICMA *IQ Report*, presents case studies of practical and effective leadership development practices. Based on a study of leading-edge programs in governments at all levels, it covers the integration of theory and practice through action learning and other “real-life” projects; succession planning; rotational and/or developmental assignments; internships; data-driven development (based on assessments, feedback, and other sources); senior leaders’ involvement; and structured relationship building.

Download this 16-page *IQ Report* instantly for only \$14.95. Visit http://bookstore.icma.org/Building_the_Leadership_Pipeli_P1704C23.cfm.