

LEADERSHIP ORIENTATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Online leadership program shortens the learning curve
for new managers at City of Guelph

Aidan Prince

Knowing that effective and relevant development leads to a high performance workforce, the City of Guelph, Ontario promotes the professional development of employees at all levels of the corporation.

Leaders – a term the city uses in reference to all levels of management – are no exception. A leadership development program is devoted to developing leaders with a series of core competencies specific to each management level. The program brings leaders into the classroom for provocative, interactive sessions up to four times a year. Subject matter ranges from performance management to public relations.

Before they get to that stage, however, new leaders must settle into their roles, get to know their direct reports, understand the organization's leadership philosophy and, perhaps most importantly, learn the nuances of the organization and its culture.

Before 2008, newly-hired managers received an informal, unstructured orientation from their manager or peers. Those who were promoted from within the organization often missed out altogether.

City of Guelph organizational development (OD) practitioner Dave Bush explains, "Developing the capacity of our leaders to execute our strategic objectives, mission, and vision – to be the city that makes a difference – requires an in-



vestment in development. It requires a collaborative management culture that involves sharing information."

Building an Interactive Program

In 2007, Guelph's team of OD specialists began conducting best practices research with respect to leadership orientation. What they discovered was that most cities didn't have formal structures in place, and those that did relied on classroom-based learning. Classroom-based orientation presents several challenges, not least of which is orienting new leaders when they're still, well, *new*, rather than waiting until a large enough number of new leaders join the organization to make a classroom session worthwhile. It was important for Guelph's new orientation program to offer "just in time" training.

The organization's leaders were surveyed and feedback showed support was high for a formalized leadership orien-



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tation program that could give the leadership team common footing, but that wouldn't place excessive strain on their calendars.

Subject-matter experts throughout the organization would be the source of the new program's content. The focus would be city-specific competencies, rather than skills training. Leaders are expected to come to the job with a solid roster of management skills, so the program was not intended as "Leadership 101." Rather, it would focus on topics like corporate values, working with council, and union relations. It would be a compilation of well-organized, thoughtfully developed information about the organization that would be helpful for new leaders.

What came to fruition is the Leadership Orientation Program (LOP) an interactive, online self-study program developed in-house to provide new leaders with consistent information from all areas of the organization. The program features 20 *modules* that, all together, take approximately 25 hours to complete.

There are three target audiences of the LOP: new leaders, existing leaders, and potential leaders. The program allows new leaders to become orientated; existing leaders to become re-acquainted with city programs, policies, and procedures; and non-management employees a chance to grow their knowledge and skills, while working with other managers to develop their own leadership capacity. This last audience is of importance to the organization because it creates a platform from which to approach succession planning with employees who want to learn. In short, it brings employees and leaders together in a coaching and mentoring relationship.

To create the LOP, City of Guelph Business Systems Analyst and eBusiness Webmaster Greg Hahn went looking for a tool that met several criteria. MS SharePoint contains several web parts out of the box that, when combined, provided all the functionality required to develop the LOP application.

Navigating the LOP

When they join the city, all new leaders are now automatically registered for the LOP. Once registered, an individual learning plan is created to allow users to create timelines and track progress.

From the home page, a menu bar and progress section allow users to quickly jump between different points of information. Each page of the LOP features a contact person for more information or assistance – making the program as much about building relationships as conveying information. Users can click on the subject-matter expert's profile to access full contact information, physical location, reporting hierarchy, details about job function, schedule, or to send an email.

Of course, part of the beauty of any e-learning program is that staff can log-on and complete components at any time,

and at their own pace. New leaders are required to complete the program within the first six months of their employment, but can do so when their schedules allow. Existing leaders are completing the program as part of their performance development plans. This also helps to ensure all leaders – whether they've been with the city for six months or 30 years – are managing based on the same foundation.

The Modules

The orientation program covers topics, processes, and leadership expectations for all management levels. Modules include:

- ▶ Union Relations
- ▶ Performance Management
- ▶ Strategic Management
- ▶ Corporate Values
- ▶ Recruitment
- ▶ Working with Council
- ▶ Wellness
- ▶ Attendance Management
- ▶ Learning and Development
- ▶ Performance Development
- ▶ Employee Recognition
- ▶ Compensation
- ▶ Emergency Response Planning
- ▶ Communications
- ▶ Joint Health and Safety Committee
- ▶ Report Writing
- ▶ Safety Resources
- ▶ Searching and Accessing Archived Records
- ▶ Information Technology for Leaders
- ▶ Financial Management

Each of these topics is essential in assisting leaders in growing their understanding of the city and its culture. They create a continuous circle of connectivity in which employees are connected to leaders, who are connected to subject-matter experts, who are connected to employees, and so forth. The topic areas link to development plans, creating an integrated system of training and development that helps foster a collaborative management culture.

The Benefits

Thanks to the LOP, Guelph is finally able to disseminate consistent information to its entire leadership team. It can also help ensure the effective use of corporate resources by having self-serve materials accessible, thereby reducing time spent looking for information.

New leaders have reported the LOP helps reduce anxiety and self-doubt during the probationary period, and helps shorten the learning curve. It also reduces the amount of time new leaders spend in a management role before being able to work at maximum efficiency.

It sheds light on job expectations, and helps reduce

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risk to the organization by enhancing the human resource management capabilities of leaders and ensuring leaders have accurate information with which to make decisions.

Measuring LOP Success

Quantitative and qualitative feedback since the LOP's launch has been positive. The Organizational Development team has placed a measurement mechanism in place so that upon completion of the program, users are automatically sent a link to an online survey. Coming soon is a more extensive evaluative survey to users, hiring managers and sub-

ject matter experts to determine the usefulness and full impact of the program.

Guelph's Director of Human Resources, Mark Amorosi, remarks that in the municipal sphere, where employees are held to an uncompromising standard of scrutiny, leaders play an exceptionally important role. An effective leadership team creates a stirring vision, drives motivation, and inspires action. It creates the future, and provides guidance, direction and inspiration. It empowers people to realize their potential. That was all the convincing the City of Guelph needed to develop a program that helps make sure new leaders start out on the right foot. **MW**

as published in

Municipal World

CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE – SINCE 1891

1-888-368-6125

www.municipalworld.com