



Emerging Senior Leader Program: Ensuring Our Future

Abstract of the Program

A component of Chesterfield County's Talent Management initiative is the development of leaders for future positions. Creating learning opportunities geared towards mid to upper level leaders is also a critical element in maximizing our Talent Management and succession efforts. Using focus group responses of previously assessed leaders, content areas were identified and approved by county leadership that include Strategic Thinking, Budgeting tied to Strategic Planning, Emotional and Social Intelligence, Succeeding in a Political Environment, Developing Workforce Talent, Conveying Information and Organizational Messages Effectively and Understanding Local Government Operations. Realizing the current financial challenges, internal learning consultants of Chesterfield University worked collaboratively to create the *Emerging Senior Leader Program*, a unique year-long learning experience for leaders who aspire to obtain an assistant director or director level position. Interested leaders completed an application for selection to this cohort style program that required a monthly commitment as well as personal development and study outside of his or her normal job duties.

Following an initial 360 Assessment based on the county's core competencies, individual learning plans are developed and monitored throughout the year. Additionally, participants prepared for each session by completing monthly assignments that included readings, videos and other social media, content assessments, and other forms of dynamic learning. Classroom time is designed to offer maximum student engagement through facilitation by internal and

external subject matter experts. Each month's topic offered theory and practical application in a local government setting. Participants are invited to participate in key meetings throughout the year to better understand government operations. These included Leadership Team, Agenda Review, Divisional Director, and Board of Supervisor meetings. Participants also embarked on a cohort project focused on creating an organizational strategy to prepare for changing county demographics with findings being presented to the county's Leadership Team.

The Problem/Need for the Program

In support of the county's decade long Talent Management efforts, internally offered leadership development was missing for mid to upper level leaders aspiring to assistant director and director positions within the county. Known for our focus on leadership development at the frontline and supervisory levels, Chesterfield County had never intentionally focused on development for this level of leader. Having successfully completed several talent assessments of the top 200 leaders, the need to offer an effective learning program to further invest in these leaders was profoundly voiced. Following several years of unfunded budget requests due to the economic down turn, Chesterfield University staff took the lead to develop a program based on acknowledged competencies and topics gleaned from focus group discussions.

As many local government organizations are experiencing, seasoned talent is exiting in greater numbers as boomers retire and external opportunities become more attractive for those who have been waiting for advancement and a new challenge. This was true for Chesterfield County who has experienced increased retirements of key leaders and opportunities for career growth. To combat this challenge, creating a leadership pipeline through assessments and individual learning are central to ensuring that talent remains

positioned for the success of Chesterfield County government. The practical application was highlighted by classroom discussions led by county leaders which offered participants exposure to key organizational leaders and issues.

Description of the Program

The Emerging Senior Leaders Program begins with an application process where interested leaders share their educational accomplishments, describe their current positional responsibilities including number of employees, budget oversight, and their function and service delivery. A leader's civic and professional or community involvement as well as honors, awards and appointments are also considered in addition to a 400 word essay on why they desire to participate in the program along with expected outcomes. Eighteen to twenty applicants are selected based on a number of demographics such as division, position, diversity, gender, and performance, to ensure a good cross section of county leaders is selected. The vetting process includes conversations with individual department directors, deputy county administrators, with final approval by the county administrator.

Each cohort begins by completing the county's core competency based 360° Assessment which serves as the foundation for which to build the leader's individual development plan. Leaders meet with performance consultants to finalize a plan and identify learning opportunities to strengthen assessment results. Initially, each cohort is launched with an orientation session that includes participant's supervisors and a half day high ropes challenge course experience. This experience brings about team characteristics quickly and is used for future learning during the year.

The initial cohort met on the first Thursday of each month from 8:30 until 5pm with each month's curriculum focused on a specific topic. A homework assignment was provided each month that might include the reading of several articles, a book in either electronic or hard bound, viewing of a video, or completion of an assignment from our SkillSoft Leadership Advantage series. These activities provide the foundational elements of the curriculum and allow participants to be engage the topic prior to the classroom session.

With financial support limited for this program, the majority of the curriculum was delivered by senior learning professionals of Chesterfield University or members of the county's leadership team. Using the principles of Ed Betof's book, Leaders as Teachers, county executives were asked to facilitate full or half-day sessions each month. The value of having learners hear and engage current leaders in discussions on topics of interest provided the perfect environment for applicable learning. By products of these sessions were better understanding of county leaders and enhanced relationships...all important elements of effective servant leadership. A variety of learning strategies were used throughout the year which included a panel of retired leaders, table and large group discussions, individual and group exercises, personal assessments, worksheets, and case studies. Two external consultants were sourced to offer half-day presentations in the area of communication and conflict management with the afternoon sessions requiring leaders to apply their new knowledge to county situations and its culture.

A panel of retired leaders and a presentation by the County Attorney and County Administrator took top reviews for the year. The selected panelists were highly regarded leaders who had recently retired and were comfortable in speaking honestly and openly about

their leadership and actions to be successful in this political environment of Chesterfield County. The most informing session was led by the County Attorney in “How to Succeed in a Political Environment”. This learning provided insights to the thinking and perceptions of elected officials and how best to work in concert with each. Other highlights included a culminating day-long case study that required participants work through several departmental and organizational issues as the newly selected department director. This activity offered valuable exchange between participants in how to best resolve issues and lead effective change in the department.

A major component of the program included an “Action Learning” assignment where participants were provided a current project or issue that needed to be completed to support the organization. The topic selected focused on the well documented demographic shift (graying of our citizens and workforce) that is currently underway both locally and nationally that is intended to drastically alter Chesterfield County’s mode of operation within the next 10 years. Realizing this shift, the necessary resources, programs and services, supportive infrastructure, and a well prepared workforce must be available for Chesterfield County to meet the needs and desires of the community. Students were asked to research the issues, determine best practices, and prepare recommendations to prepare for this upcoming tidal wave of change and were given six months to wrestle with the issue. Participant feedback indicated that the project was too broad, nebulous and brought much difficulty and angst in bringing it into focus. From a development perspective, the wrangling and group effort to clarify and design the final product was valuable learning not often felt by this group of leaders, but a reality in many senior level positions.

This program offered participants application of what might be considered “new technology” or social media. While this group of leaders was not trail blazers in using social media or the latest technology gadgets, they were willing to explore and try some new concepts. The first session required students to download an e-book from Amazon to prepare for our leadership discussion. Providing detailed instructions on how to maneuver the sight and obtain the required reading was positively received as evidenced by the discussion and commentary. As a way to keep the group connected, a Wiki was created to server as a learning management system where monthly assignments were posted and discussions occurred throughout the month on their learning, experiences and reflections. To allow for learning following graduation, a private group was established using LinkedIn to allow for further discussion and sharing of information. All of these items are now tools for learning in Chesterfield but have proven successful in their intended application.

Financial and Staffing

As previously mentioned, the need for this program was identified in 2007 after holding several focus groups with assessed leaders about the county’s Talent Management initiative. It was clear that these leaders sought further development related to leadership, several core competencies, and internal workings of the organization. Realizing that development at this level is often more costly when external facilitators and subject matter experts are sought, additional funding budget requests were submitted to fund such a program in 2007 and 2008. The reality of the declining economic backdrop and the fact that we had to lay off four positions within our department didn’t give much hope for additional funding for such a program.

After three budget cycles without identified funding, we realized we needed to shift our perspective on how to accomplish this identified learning need. Using concepts mentioned earlier from the book Leaders as Teachers, staff configured a strategy to involve Chesterfield University staff and members of the county's leadership team to provide the facilitation and leadership needed. Looking back, it was a much more powerful program that generated strong relationships between county leaders than "buying" subject matter experts to deliver each session. In tracking expenditures, the program cost approximately \$9000 with the largest expenditure being the two consultants that were hired for two half-day sessions. Other costs incurred were for several assessments, online learning licenses for the Leadership Advantage, and several books.

The Results/Success of the Program

The success of this program can be seen in the actions of our senior leaders as well as our recent graduates. Certainly a new appreciation has been gained for the role and depth of issues that county leaders manage on a day to day basis. As participants shadowed senior leaders on several occasions, a better understanding of roles, responsibilities, and challenges became most evident. It also allowed the senior leaders to obtain greater insights into each of the strengths and opportunities of these leaders which will be beneficial as we embark on an upcoming Talent Assessment.

While the participants found the experience to be positive, they most often stated that the ability to create relationships with senior leaders and their peer participants was a most valuable element of this program. Knowing individuals, their strengths, and areas of expertise will prove helpful in the future when assistance is needed. Participants also valued the

individual time and conversations with the county's senior leaders and county administrator who found this program very beneficial in furthering his relationship and knowledge of each participant. The most obvious success of this program came in the form of promotions for two of the participants during the year-long program. One individual was promoted to Director of Internal Audit and a second individual was promoted to Assistant Director of Building Inspections. Seeing peers selected for promotion was reason to celebrate and realizing it is possible for others as well.

Throughout the year-long program, intentional evaluation occurred on a quarterly basis. Quarterly surveys were completed by participants asking Kirkpatrick level 1, 2, and 3 evaluation questions about what they liked about each monthly session, what they learned, and how it was applied on the job. Realizing immediate application wasn't always available, future surveying and evaluation will continue throughout the next year to see the impact of this curriculum on this cohort of identified leaders.

Worthiness of an Award

Chesterfield County has demonstrated that it values the development of its leaders and their careers through the creation of the *Emerging Senior Leader Program*. With this innovative and cost effective approach to leadership development, Chesterfield County serves as a model for local governments committed to creating opportunities for developing and retaining leaders. We believe it is award worthy and could easily be replicated by other government organizations that are facing similar challenges.