LeaderLab – Center for Creative Leadership (CCL)

Beginning in 1991, the Center for Creative Leadership launched a program called LeaderLab, which endeavors to help individuals become more effective leaders. The program focuses on enhancing emotional competencies such as self-awareness, leadership, accurate self-assessment, initiative and innovation, achievement drive, change catalyst, and team capabilities. LeaderLab is an open enrollment program designed for upper-level managers and executives.

The LeaderLab program is implemented over a six-month period, beginning with an initial six-day session at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), followed three months later by a four-day session. Before the first session begins, participants complete several self-assessment instruments, receive evaluations from co-workers, and perform an audit of their current work situation. Each participant also is assigned to a Process Advisor who serves as a personal coach throughout the program's evolution. Process Advisors are carefully selected, highly trained professionals who typically work in an adjunct role with the Center for Creative Leadership. They have a wide variety of backgrounds including clinical psychology, counseling, organizational development, career counseling, and leadership development. During the first session the participants also join a group of change partners, which gives them practice in involving others in their leadership improvement process. These small groups are designed with the intention of creating as much diversity as possible so that participants can maximize their learning from one another.

Participants receive global, anonymous feedback regarding their individual assessments in the first week of class. The individual data are given back to the clients privately through meetings with their Process Advisors. For instance, the Process Advisor will call the client before he or she begins the program to process the assessment instruments together in a safe and supportive environment. They may go out for dinner and discuss the various elements of the data so that strengths, weaknesses, learning style, and goals can be elucidated. The goal of these feedback sessions is to help the client understand what he or she can do with this data so that appropriate action plans can be created and implemented.

The first session engages the participant in a wide variety of ways – both intrapersonally with reflective journals and written in-class assignments and interpersonally through presentations, discussions, role-plays, and nontraditional activities. Reflective journals stimulate the individual's reflective thinking skills, promote learning of important lessons, and challenge the participant to engage in self-analysis throughout the LeaderLab program. The visioning process evolves by using techniques such as guided visualizations to encourage participants to picture their ideal leadership situation. The nontraditional aspects of the LeaderLab program involve various experiential activities such as acting, artistic work, and three-dimensional problem solving. For example, "Three-D problem solving is facilitated by a person with special training in group work that involves the expression of emotion in nonverbal ways. Participants physically represent problems or issues by arranging, or sculpting, the group to demonstrate relationships, communication, and so forth. They then re-sculpt the group to represent the resolution of the problem. The activity is conducted silently, providing another avenue for nonverbal expression and learning" (Young & Dixon, 1996, p. 22).

LeaderLab endeavors to challenge its participants to step out of their "comfort zones" in order to take personal risks that promote powerful learning experiences.

By the end of the first week, the participants develop an action plan for a self-directed change process, which is to occur over the next three months in the back-home setting. The action plan typically includes several concrete short- and long-term goals that facilitate the individual's path of action towards the attainment of successful leadership goals. Action plans incorporate the participant's personal values, beliefs, and vision, along with any relevant learning up to that point, into a coherent plan for success to be taken back home on the job.

While implementing their action plans back at their work settings during the interim three months, the participants maintain a learning journal and communicate at least once a month with their process advisors to ensure they are being appropriately challenged. The participants are also encouraged to create change partner groups at the back home setting

After three months elapse, participants return to CCL for a four-day session of classroom activities, experiential exercises, and a re-evaluation of their action plans. One purpose of the second week is to provide the participants with an opportunity to evaluate their progress on the various goals and objectives they developed during the first session. After these additional activities, participants return to the back-home work setting and implement a revised action plan. During this time they are encouraged to take advantage of their new change partners and their process advisors in order to reflect on their progress.

After two-and-a-half more months in the back-home setting, participants finish the six-month program by writing an in-depth summary of their experience and having a final conversation with their process advisors about the impact of the program. Alumni of the LeaderLab program are invited back once a year for a network meeting that also serves as a source of continued support and learning.

The program has been evaluated in a number of ways. One of the studies employed a retrospective methodology and used an "impact questionnaire" that was completed by both the participants and their co-workers. The impact questionnaire, a 92 item survey clustered into 14 categories related to the various competencies addressed by LeaderLab's training, served as the quantitative outcome measure. It asked the respondents to assess the participant in three ways: 1) his or her behavior one year ago; 2) his or her behavior now; and 3) if there is a difference between the two, the impact of the change on the person's effectiveness. People who had been accepted into the program but had not yet attended it also received the impact questionnaire and thereby served as a control group.

Telephone interviews were used as a qualitative measure for gathering action-planning data with the participants, their co-workers, and PAs, three to four months after they completed the program. The interviews investigated how the participants used the action plans after they had been revised following the second session of the program. The data received through this interview process were content analyzed.

Another set of telephone interviews were conducted three to five months following the program. Participants were questioned about many aspects of their action plans. For instance, they asked how helpful it was to have change partners and Process

Advisors in relation to taking appropriate action steps. Once again, answers to this set of telephone interview questions were content analyzed.

A comparison of participants and controls on the Impact Questionnaire showed that participants significantly improved in eight of the fourteen competencies assessed. These competencies were self-assessment, subordinate development, listening, coping with emotional disequilibrium, interpersonal relationships, flexibility, organizational awareness, and tradeoffs. For each of these competencies the difference between the participants and the controls was significant with $p<.01$. The most significant differences were on interpersonal relationships, tradeoffs, and self-assessment.

For more information, see:

Young, D. P. & Dixon, N. M. (1996). Helping Leaders Take Effective Action: A Program Evaluation. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.

Burnside, Robert M. & Gutherie, Victoria A. (1992). Training for Action: A new approach to Executive Development. A Center for Creative Leadership Report. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.