

Leadership development in health promotion

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Is leadership development just a trendy catchphrase for something that is already commonplace? My view is that active support for the development of leaders at different levels within organisations and among communities has been rare. By focusing on leadership development, we can move from an *ad hoc* situation to a more sustained approach that will be consistent with the latest thinking on capacity building in health promotion.

In seeking information on best practice in leadership development to apply in health promotion, we can draw on much more than just the 'business experience'. Literature reports now include lessons learned from non-profit fields such as health care, education and charitable organisations.¹⁻³

A recent review of leadership development programs suggested that they should take into account learning theory, specific learning objectives, characteristics of the participants, and practical considerations such as constraints and costs in relation to benefits.⁴ The state of knowledge does not provide precise conditions, but key findings from research in the field suggest guidelines for successful leadership development programs.⁴

The Western Australian Health Promotion Foundation (Healthway), as part of its Strategic Plan 2000-03, identified leadership development within its role of building capacity in health promotion. The Healthway Leadership in Health Promotion Program (HLHPP), launched as a pilot program in May 2002, draws on the experiences of other programs from the literature as well as past and present programs undertaken in WA.⁵ The distinguishing feature of the program is that funding is provided by Healthway and participation is open to health promotion practitioners working in non-government and government agencies throughout Western Australia.

The leadership competencies the program seeks to develop include:⁶

Vision – the ability to consider current events and possibilities from multiple perspectives and develop future-oriented scenarios.

Strategic planning – the ability to plan ahead, set long-term goals and objectives, and work ahead towards their achievement while ensuring that short-term goals are met.

Integrity – the ability to maintain, promote and develop ethical, social and organisational standards and values in all activities.

Self-awareness – of personal strengths, needs and limitations and the part they play in effective leadership.

Interpersonal relations – the ability to relate to colleagues in a considerate manner that shows dignity, respect and understanding, and to be able to respond appropriately to colleagues' needs.

Teamwork – the ability to lead a team and act co-operatively to achieve results in an environment of mutual respect; and the ability to appropriately assume responsibility and/or refer problems or activities to others for effective action.

Developing others – the ability to develop and acknowledge colleagues' competence by planning effective experiences related to current and future jobs, in light of the motivation, interests and current work situations of these colleagues.

Communication – the ability to communicate effectively both in writing and orally, using appropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviour to reinforce the content of the message.

Decisiveness – the ability to take a proactive role and exhibit a readiness to make informed decisions, render judgements, take purposeful action or commit oneself and take risks.

Adaptability – the ability to maintain effectiveness in varying work environments where circumstances and priorities are changing; and the ability to recognise opportunities, be flexible, innovative and change-oriented.

Recruitment to the program involved an extensive selection process that started with a shortlist of 10 candidates from 22 written applications. A developmental assessment process was then undertaken to elicit information about behaviour and skills, which was integrated with candidates' background and experiences to provide a picture of the person's strengths, weaknesses and potential. In addition, each candidate completed a Margerison McCann profile and questionnaires were completed by a manager or colleague at the candidate's workplace. Candidates received detailed reports as feedback and the interview also provided an opportunity to express their motivations and career aspirations.

Eight participants were selected from a range of government and non-government agencies (six metropolitan, two from Kalgoorlie). In July 2002, an orientation activity was held, followed by a two-day leadership seminar that combined theory and practical application of leadership skills. Using this information and their experiences from the developmental assessment process, participants created an individual development plan in consultation with the HLHPP co-ordinator. The goals in the plan will be met through activities in the program, including a workplace project (either within their own organisation or on placement to another organisation), matching with a mentor, group leadership seminar and workshops, and interaction with the other participants.

The workplace projects were designed by the participants in conjunction with their organisations and the HLHPP

co-ordinator, taking into consideration the features of experiential programs that have been identified as effective:⁷

- Careful selection of learning projects, which should be learning experiences for the individual and their organisation.
- Clear definition of objectives and outcomes.
- Multiple opportunities for reflective learning and feedback.
- Support from senior management in the organisation, including interest and commitment, adequate resources provided, and outcomes valued.
- Expert facilitation and coaching.
- Long-term follow-up through implementation phase and/or post-implementation debriefing.

While the HLHPP has as its focus the enhancement of leadership skills and opportunities among individuals selected for the program, enhancing their organisation's capacity to support leadership development is also being addressed. The program offers funds to the participant's organisation to help in meeting relevant priorities identified within the organisation.

A strong feature of the program is the flexibility for participants to identify priority areas for workshops, planning their project, and nominating preferences for mentors. Responses from the participants have been very enthusiastic. Early in the program they reported raised levels of awareness about their leadership styles and positive responses to the use of their enhanced leadership skills. The HLHPP will draw to a close in May 2003, although some aspects, such as the mentoring component, will continue after this date.

The flexible nature of the program also means that it could be applied in a variety of situations, such as sponsorship of leadership development by professional or philanthropic bodies or in specific workplaces. The advantages of drawing together a group of participants from a range of organisations include the sharing of diverse experiences, the formation of a network of new contacts, and the freedom (supported by confidentiality agreements) to communicate openly about work and personal

issues. The level of funding required for the program is substantial and this may be a barrier for widespread application. Smaller non-government organisations with participants in the program have been very enthusiastic about the opportunity for staff development that is outside their usual funding capabilities.

By adopting best practices and harnessing the enthusiasm among participants, their organisations and mentors, the Healthway leadership program has provided a pathway for emerging leaders in health promotion⁸ and is a model that other organisations could consider.

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