

Improving Work Life

At Ithaca College, your ability to lead doesn't depend on your job title.

By Dan Sussman

IF YOU WANT TO IDENTIFY the potential leaders in your organization in order to nurture and make use of their natural abilities, don't confine your search to those individuals occupying administrative offices or holding the most impressive titles, says Ithaca College's Mary Tomaselli. Your organization's most dynamic, valuable leaders may turn out to be facilities attendants, furniture movers, and administrative assistants.

That's the guiding philosophy behind LeaderShip, the program founded by Tomaselli, staff development manager at the 6,500-student college in Ithaca, N.Y. Since holding its first sessions in 2002, LeaderShip has trained approximately 100 people from all levels of the college, and there's a list of others eager to get in. In addition, the college has begun receiving a return on its training investment by enlisting LeaderShip graduates for projects to make use of their talents.

"We've been doing this for two-and-half years, and they say it takes five to be successful, so we're halfway there as far as changing the culture at Ithaca," says Tomaselli.

The U.S. Army is among the organizations that have taken notice of the LeaderShip program. A representative of the Army's Directorate of Leadership Development spent three days at the college looking into the program with an eye on instituting similar methods in the military.

The seeds for LeaderShip were planted in the late 1990s, when the college began developing its institutional plan. "One of the goals," says Tomaselli, "was to improve the quality of work life and the development of employees, so they



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created a position of staff development and training and promoted me into it."

The initial intent was to provide training to employees at supervisory training programs, but, in benchmarking programs at numerous other colleges, she discovered that almost all were limited to executive and supervisory personnel only.

"As green as I was at this, it was hard for me to see why leadership skills were being reserved for high-level people only," says Tomaselli, a former industrial engineer. "Doesn't everyone want to enhance these skills, and couldn't everyone benefit from education in these areas?"

A 16-member advisory committee steering the effort agreed with her, so Tomaselli and a consultant, Suzanne Forsyth, began making plans. The program, which has changed little since it was introduced, consists of about a dozen off-site workshops covering such core skills as emotional intelligence, conflict management, communication skills, humor in the workplace, reflective self-awareness, and others. Rather than a concentrated, multiday training regimen, LeaderShip classes meet over a year for daylong workshops, inter-



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persed with Web-based discussions and small-group assignments.

While Tomaselli was on hand at all sessions to provide continuity and facilitate, each workshop was led by an outside subject expert. For example, the conflict management workshop has been led by the executive director of the Ithaca Community Dispute Resolution Center, and the director of the Leadership Fellows Program at Cornell University's Johnson Graduate School of Management has taught

Photos: Ithaca College

No Squirt Flowers

Ithaca College President Boosts Humor in the Workplace

Ithaca College President Peggy Williams doesn't wear squirting flowers and big floppy shoes. Oh, she's funny, she says. Just not that kind of funny.

"I just find a lot of things funny that other people don't. I simply try to have that enjoyment as part of who I am," says Williams.

For the past few years, however, she's been trying to help other people discover enjoyment in the workplace as well by teaching the Leadership program's Humor in the Workplace workshop.

"There's probably no better way to get permission to allow humor to be part of your life than to have it come from the president of the college," says Williams, who joined Ithaca College seven years ago.

"Victor Borge once said that laughter is the shortest distance between two people. It's a real connector," says Williams. "There's lots of research about it being a stress-relieving tool. If you let people at a meeting get a little crazy, that's where you're going to get some

of your best, most creative ideas."

As for that floppy-shoe thing, Williams says humor in the workplace doesn't—and probably shouldn't—mean employees should feel pressure to perform for one another. However, effective managers should create a comfortable atmosphere for people to express their natural humor.

"You might have someone on your team who's just naturally funny, and I'd argue that you should just sit back and let [her] be, because everyone benefits from the energy that that person can bring to a group. We should be serious about our work, but we shouldn't

take ourselves too seriously," she says.

Williams says that even though she's president of the college—and she can't issue an edict mandating humor—she tries to convey the message through her own actions and attitudes.

"When I'm at a faculty or staff meeting, I find a way to introduce humor into it. We all know we're here to do important work, but we don't have to sit here and pretend we're not allowed to crack a smile," she says.



and another recent Leadership graduate, has similar sentiments. "I walked into Leadership, and I saw people whom I didn't know personally, but who I recognized—housekeeping workers, physical plant workers. I knew their faces, but I didn't know who they were. Now I do," she says.

Initially, there were questions about how useful it would be to combine people from all levels of the college in workshops. One observer told Tomaselli that high-ranking college officials would wind up intimidating classmates lower in the college pecking order. He also questioned whether the general nature of the course material would sufficiently challenge high-level employees and serve their direct needs. Ultimately, the fears were unfounded, says Tomaselli.

"Interestingly enough, the diversity has been a strength of our program. Everyone comes to know one another as people. They check their positions at the door," she says. "When our participants come in, we don't introduce them by position level."

Peter Block, a partner in the consulting firm Designed Learning and the author of a number of books on creating outstanding workplaces and communities,

says mixing people from all levels can be an effective strategy.

"It overcomes the social distance and the classes that exist in an organization—especially a university," says Block. "Also, when you're in a room with people across levels, they can't complain about each other. Normally, when you limit these workshops to one class of people, they complain about the groups who aren't in the room. But when everyone's in the room, it inoculates them against that kind of avoidance of responsibility."

Parker Palmer, author of *The Courage To Teach*, and numerous other books on inspirational and ethical teaching, says that Ithaca College is sending an important

coaching and team building skills.

The decision to stretch the class over a year rather than provide several consecutive days of training was somewhat controversial, but has proven effective.

Sense of community

One of the program's goals is to foster a sense of community among college employees, and meeting intermittently over a year has served that purpose well, says Tomaselli. "If participants took the whole course in a week, they'd be done in a week. But if we did it month after month, year after year, we felt we'd have greater success in the relationship building," she says.

Mason Swanhart's experiences attest

to that success. Swanhart, a furniture mover in the college's Residential Life office, says his participation in last year's Leadership course enabled him to establish relationships with Ithaca College co-workers he wouldn't have encountered otherwise.

"In our class, we had one woman from human resources who had been here for a few years, but she's tied to her office, so she's never really seen the rest of the campus," says Swanhart. "So, we made an appointment, and I took her on a tour. Sometimes some of us get together for lunch or just to talk."

Dayna Shrekengost, an administrative assistant in the Office of Alumni Affairs

message to its student body. By opening LeaderShip to all employees, students see that the college honors and respects all of its employees' work.

To emphasize that point, he relates the story of a college nursing instructor who based 10 percent of a final exam grade on her students' ability to provide the name of the person who mops the building's floor every night.

"When challenged about the nature of the question, the instructor replied, 'Look, someday you folks are going to wind up working in a health care system where the people who mop the floors have as much to do with keeping the place as disease-free as you do. If you don't regard them enough to know their names, it's going to bounce back on you and your patients in some very unfortunate ways,'" Palmer recalls.

Challenging attitudes

While the college has not performed a formal assessment of LeaderShip's effectiveness, Tomaselli points to numerous anecdotal instances of the ways in which the program has changed peoples' attitudes and behaviors, both on and off the job.

Jackie Hopkins, a design assistant with the college's division of construction planning and design, says that, despite her initial reticence to participate in the program, it has helped raise her level of confidence in her own decision-making capabilities. "What I learned in the program has let me take control and say, 'I'm making a decision,' and I know I'll have the backing to do that. I got that confidence from my participation in LeaderShip," she says.

Schrekengost says LeaderShip's most important lessons concerned ways to improve interactions with others—a skill that has helped her at home too. "My husband and I are very different types of people, and we're not always on the same wavelength. He'd get impatient because he wouldn't understand how I go through my thought processes, but I didn't understand what he would go through to come to a conclusion," says Schrekengost. "As a result of my involvement in LeaderShip, we discussed the



Dayna Schrekengost, an administrative assistant, says the program has helped in conflict resolution situations away from work.

issue, and now we can come to common ground to lessen some of the strife."

Tomaselli gives credit to Ithaca College President Peggy Williams, who has been a champion of the program from the outset. (She even teaches the workshop module on humor in the workplace.) At twice annual all-staff meetings, which approximately 700 Ithaca College employees attend, Williams reinforces LeaderShip and asks program participants to stand and be recognized.

While the LeaderShip program represents a commitment by the college to its people, Williams says she's looking for ways for Ithaca to benefit from its investment. In one instance, LeaderShip graduates were called on to run focus groups as part of the Communication School's long-range planning efforts.

"In addition, Ithaca College is getting ready for upcoming accreditation. We haven't put the structure in place yet, but we're already talking about how LeaderShip grads can serve as a resource in the college life conversations," says Williams.

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