Peer Learning Crucial to Leadership Development

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A new leadership development program for Ontario public library staff has graduated its first cohort of 16 individuals from 14 public libraries. It was found that one of the most important experiences arising from this program was the creation of a sense of community. Participants believe that this sense of community enabled them to learn important things from one another and encourage each other's growth as leaders. A related finding is that most of the participants report being deeply committed to continuing to keep in touch now that the program has ended, and they see themselves continuing to learn from one another.

In the fall of 2008, the Southern Ontario Library Service (SOLS), an Agency of Ontario's Ministry of Tourism and Culture, launched the Advancing Public Library Leadership (APLL) Institute as a two-year certificate program. The APLL Institute (pronounced 'apple') is a blended learning approach to leadership combining the flexibility of online learning with highly interactive classroom sessions. Over the course of the two year program, participants get together four times for two day 'Intensives' during which they have the opportunity to interact with each other and experts from the public library, not-for-profit and municipal sectors. In between the classroom sessions, participants make their way through 12 online courses, reading, engaging in learning activities and online discussion, and undertaking local library projects.

The APLL online courses, written by individuals with specialized knowledge, complement one another to provide a good foundation in both organizational leadership and leading in the municipal environment. Courses include: Planning, Staff Development, Organizational Culture, Strategic Financial Management, and Succeeding in the Municipal Environment. At the end of the two years, upon completion of all requirements, APLL participants earn a Certificate in Public Library Leadership, jointly awarded by the Southern Ontario Library Service and the University of Waterloo (UW).

A unique partnership between SOLS and UW's Communication, Leadership and Social Innovation Professional Services gives APLL ongoing access to the leadership expertise of UW faculty member, Dr. Diana Denton. Denton also presents workshops for two of the classroom sessions and will assist with the longitudinal evaluation of the program. The partnership also means that the certificate bears the University of Waterloo's logo, as well as that of SOLS. It is hoped that UW's name will give the certificate more credibility, especially with municipal leaders who may not be familiar with SOLS. The partnership will also benefit Denton's research and is expected to lead to further collaboration.
While these are early days for the APLL Institute, initial feedback has been positive. Participants in the first cohort report new behaviours, skills and abilities. In particular, they speak of greater self awareness and confidence as a leader, a willingness to stretch themselves beyond the familiar, an appreciation for the big picture and the importance of strategy, and a broadened understanding of the public library’s role in relation to the municipality. They attribute their learning and development to many factors: the introduction of nine leadership practices that were revisited many times over the two years; access to experts; stimulating course work and relevant readings; projects and activities that stretched their abilities; and, most important of all, a safe learning community.

It was in the context of psychological safety, trust and respect that participants allowed themselves to be challenged and stretched. In what one participant referred to as "a learning community of high performing peers", each emerging leader was both supported and challenged. The safe community of peers was also the place where new leadership behaviours were practiced. It is, therefore, not surprising that the vast majority of participants intend to keep in touch. While a longitudinal evaluation of the participants’ leadership development is not yet possible, it is predicted that the peer learning community will be the program feature with the greatest lasting effect.

\[1\] For more information about SOLS and the APLL Institute, visit [http://www.sols.org](http://www.sols.org).