

THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE results

Transforming Lackluster Leadership to High Performance in Public Service: The Power of The Leadership Challenge to Create Change at Houston's Municipal Courts

Less progressive communication and management styles, a highly diverse and discontented staff, and all the myriad challenges that come with stepping in to address a decade's worth of short-tenured leadership and an organization focused solely on output vs. knowledge development. Faced with just such a situation as the newly appointed Director and Chief Clerk of the Houston Municipal Courts, I was up to the task with much help from my trusted consultant colleagues, Cloud Rainosek and Associates (CRA), and the powerful tools of The Leadership Challenge.

Appointed by Houston Mayor Bill White in January 2007, I became the Director and Chief Clerk of the largest fine-only and paperless court in America, and the largest Municipal Court in the State of Texas: annually processing over 1.1M violations, generating over \$60M in State and City fine payment revenues, and servicing over six to eight thousand customers daily at 19 courts. At the time of my arrival, the department consisted of over 300 team members, approximately 80% female, with an average of eight years of experience. Seventy-five percent (75%) had only high school or Junior College education and there were well over 12 different cultures and languages represented.

Based on Employee Survey Results from 2005 and 2006, it was evident that staff had not been provided with professional training for a significant period of time, and that a leadership development program for all leaders had never been offered. It was very apparent that the organization focused solely on production, using a top-down style of communication between management and staff. Quality assurance was non-existent. There was very little effort to build knowledge or to holistically tie the goals of the organization to those of each team member. Survey results also showed that the relationship and communication between staff and management was very poor, generally flowing only one way: from managers and supervisors and eventually to staff. Overall employee morale was extremely low. Within the community, Houston Municipal Courts had a reputation for providing less-than-stellar customer service to the public.

As I assessed my new role within the first few weeks, I could not help but realize the challenge I was facing. I knew that in order for the organization to succeed we would need a complete metamorphosis, one that would begin from the inside out starting with the Executive Leadership. As I mapped out a five-to-eight year transformational plan, I knew I needed help. Having first worked with Cloud Rainosek and Associates (CRA) when I was Deputy Director of Library Administration to introduce diversity and social justice training at the Houston Public Library, I once again turned to Jackalyn and Liz at CRA for their guidance on this transformational journey. I shared with them my assessment thus far and my ideas on how to move the organization from a Production Base to a Knowledge Base and, ultimately, to a High Performance Base Organization. I was concerned about how to most effectively do this, while ensuring that the process was meaningful and not just another training program reduced to a manual collecting dust on my shelf. I knew we needed a program that we could truly 'live'—one that we could see and apply every day to make the changes needed to pull the organization up from where we were.

Immediately, Jackalyn and Liz introduced us to The Leadership Challenge and the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) tools. I was instantly struck by the program's simplicity yet the depth of information the

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program was able to deliver. Within weeks, we began the first LPI training session with all seven members of the Executive Management Team, including myself. At its conclusion, the leadership team was in full agreement that the program was credible, simple to understand, and easy to apply on-the-job with consistency. More importantly, the LPI aligned well with the new vision and direction I had for the organization. Specifically, my vision was to:

- Create an organizational culture and environment that demonstrates progressiveness, professionalism, and integrity, and advocates a passion for service excellence and high performance.

From Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process to Enable Others to Act and Encourage the Heart, our leadership team was moved with passion and the resonating message that the program was speaking directly to us and what we needed to do. Within six months, the team made several important decisions: we wanted each and every one of our managers and supervisors to experience the benefits we were deriving from the program; based on how easily the program had been presented to us and how quickly we began to apply what we learned, we would advocate for the program by our actions in how we were living differently as leaders. During this process, and with assistance from CRA, our executives prepared a new Leadership Ethics Statement that we all signed and shared with our direct reports and all other supervisors and managers. We developed new organizational values, PRIDE, which stands for:

- **Professionalism** -- Striving for Perfection, Quality and Excellence in our Commitment to Public Service
- **Respect** -- Respect for Human Dignity and the Value of Every Person
- **Integrity** -- Honest, Open and Fair in the Performance of our Duties
- **Diversity** -- The Strength of our Team Comes from Individuals with Different Experiences and Perspectives
- **Empowerment** -- Fostering Confidence, Responsibility and Trust

We engaged all team members throughout the organization and at the first Employee Recognition Program to be held in over five years revealed the winner of a new logo competition. I introduced quarterly Employee Forums with all non-management team members to hear their concerns, issues and solutions, to share information about the organization, and to apply the principles we learned from the LPI experience. (Management forums are held separately.) Open communication and collaboration is further promoted by other members of the Executive Management Team as they conduct similar meetings, monthly or quarterly, with their division team, good news celebrations to recognize team members for their special contributions, as well as weekly or bi-weekly “one-on-one” meetings with all direct reports—all have become standard practice for us. We have implemented pay for performance measures for individual, division, and department goals and objectives; when met, all eligible team members receive a one-time payout incentive each fiscal year. An established department goal, implemented for 2008 and 2009, ensures that every team member receive a minimum 4 hours of customer service or technical job skills training per year. Thus far, approximately 95% of all team members have received a minimum of 4 hours of training per year.

While this may sound like the process was without complications, it wasn't. Anytime major organizational changes are made via Executive Leaders, it is important to take ownership for the process—even when it gets difficult—and to turn lessons learned into best practices.

The expertise from CRA was extremely beneficial in holding me and the executive leaders accountable for this process. The pre-LPI work CRA did with us in our leadership program gave us opportunities to accelerate our listening skills, identify our own blocks to change as well as blocking behaviors and habits which get in the way of our personal leadership development. Jackalyn and Liz also spent a significant amount of time explaining each step in the process to us. They prepared us for the initial LPI Inventory,

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our observer presentations, and they attended each of the executive leaders' presentational meetings. They truly helped us to Challenge the Process.

Results: From January 2007 to August 2009, over 84% of our organization's leaders have received training—approximately 40 leaders in all, from Executive Level to front-line supervisors. All remaining leaders are scheduled to begin their LPI experience in mid September 2009.

In a post-evaluation survey of the LPI program and training, 38 out of 40 leaders (95%) responded and over 90% stated the program was effective and needed.

To provide further evidence of the impact the Leadership Challenge Program and LPI experience has had on the Houston Municipal Courts Administration Department, the following offers a comparative look at Employee Survey Results, from prior to 2007 when the LPI experience was first introduced and post implementation years of 2008 and 2009.

| Questions - % Favorable | 2005 | 2006 | 2008 | 2009 |
|---|------|------|------|------|
| Response Rate | 45% | 40% | 35% | 85% |
| Overall department is run well and effective | 26% | 47% | 48% | 66% |
| I feel productivity has improved | 38% | 45% | 59% | 79% |
| My division has high quality | 44% | 55% | 63% | 79% |
| I am comfortable talking with my supervisor | 39% | 52% | 54% | 69% |
| I am satisfied with my job | 50% | 61% | 62% | 70% |
| My supervisor is competent | 38% | 54% | 68% | 75% |
| I understand what is expected of me | N/A | N/A | 61% | 87% |
| I am proud to work at Houston MCA | N/A | N/A | N/A | 83% |
| I am pleased with our Leadership | N/A | N/A | N/A | 82% |
| Overall the Director is doing an effective job | N/A | N/A | N/A | 86% |
| I understand the connection between work I do and the mission and goals of the Houston Municipal Courts | N/A | N/A | N/A | 90%* |
| * Most Favorable Response Rating Received | | | | |

Note: no surveys were conducted in 2007 due to the LPI introductory period and in 2009 the survey monkey tool was introduced which helped to contribute to the significant increase in the survey response rate.

The progress we have made as an Executive Management Team and as an organization in moving forward in our transformation is evident. We are making consistent and significant strides as we enter the third year of our five-to-eight year transformational process. In addition to demonstrated improvements within the organization, external constituents also affirm our efforts to achieve high performance in all we do: 70% of customer survey respondents rated the Houston Municipal Courts Administration Department 'good' to 'excellent' in customer service delivery for 2008 and 2009.

We are excited about the leadership momentum and high performance focus of our team members. We anticipate a continued return on investment of the Leadership Challenge Program as it undoubtedly has been a significant contributor and a value-added program for our current and future success.

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