

Developing Leader Excellence at The City of Burlington

For the City of Burlington, every budget decision must be made with tremendous care, and stand up to intense public scrutiny. Gail Collins, HR Representative, has no problems justifying the city's investment in Performance Coaching Inc.

Background

The City of Burlington ('the City') is a steadily growing municipality with a population of roughly 150,000. In 1998, the city's management committee recognized that their employee demographics were changing: a large number of experienced managers were set to retire in the next few years and a group of top performing, young, ambitious employees needed to be prepared to take on increasingly difficult leadership roles. A design team, headed by Gail, was put together to investigate ways in which the city could re-energize their succession planning process, develop coaching skills, and link these skills to their leadership competencies.

Gail and her team had interviewed several prospective leadership development companies when, in late 1999, she attended a retreat day with the City's Senior Management to hear Performance Coaching Inc. (PCI) founder Dr. Peter Jensen speak on coaching and personal high performance. Impressed by his expertise and captivating presentation style Gail invited PCI to present a proposal for the broader leadership development initiative. In her July 6th, 2000 report to the city's management committee Gail wrote: "The design team approved the work of Peter Jensen's Performance Coaching Inc. after several months of careful examination and the opportunity to interview three other highly reputable organizations." Gail reflects today on her decision "I think that the message and the information that was put together was exactly what we were looking for."

Pilot

Once PCI was chosen to deliver a pilot program, Gail and PCI's Director of Training Peggy Baumgartner began to discuss how to best leverage PCI's flexible suite of programs to meet the city's needs. By combining PCI's **Coaching for High Performance** and **S.W.O.T. Yourself** programs, Gail and Peggy created a three and a half day program that delivered a comprehensive assessment of each participant's leadership and interpersonal traits, tied them to the city's leadership competencies, and taught participants to lead using their strengths through a coaching style of management. "The TAIS [self-awareness instrument] was a huge piece of what we liked about the program ... and then how it wove into the whole program itself, it became a huge learning piece for self-awareness," explains Gail.

Twenty staff attended the pilot and were asked to rigorously evaluate the quality of the program. Evaluations for both presenters were consistently excellent, and all 20 participants rated overall satisfaction with the program 5/5 for all three and a half days.

In Pursuit of Leader Excellence

In response to the feedback from the pilot program, Gail and PCI expanded the session to four and a half days through the addition of PCI's **Coaching Milestone** program, a one-day coaching follow-on program that focuses on confronting skills, and the power of team coaching. As well, they fine-tuned the order of the elements within the program to suit participant needs. "Peggy and Peter were extremely flexible," notes Gail.

As of early 2005, over 150 City of Burlington Managers had participated in the four and a half day course – internally promoted as "In Pursuit of Leader Excellence" – and the feedback has been consistently excellent. A survey taken to measure the impact of the training found that 100% of respondents were using the skills, and seeing positive productivity benefits from using them. "What really makes this program different is that you get nuggets that you can immediately implement" explains Gail. As well, the expertise of the program leaders really makes the message hit home: "Bringing in people who know their stuff means people will listen and can learn from their experiences and background," says Gail, "Peggy really has a way of taking a complex situation or problem that someone is dealing with and make it easy for them to grasp."

In order to ensure that the right managers are taking the courses, the City has an internal application process for those who wish to attend. "The participants know these are high quality programs, they've heard about it and know the buzz," explains Gail. This 'buzz' is aided by the commitment of senior management to the program: Prior to the roll-out of the four and a half day program, PCI designed a highly tailored program for the Executives and Senior level managers that focused on individual assessment, and outlined the core elements of the full program. Currently the city manager has requested 3 spots specifically held for directors who wish to attend the next program offering. "It really demonstrates commitment and sends a huge message when these higher level people are sitting in on the workshops" notes Gail.

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– Gail Collins

On-Going Relationship

With the initial rollout of the program complete, the City has entered into a cycle of offering 1-2 'refresher' programs per year, and running the full program every 2-3 years. "Timing is a huge issue because so many people want to take it – and everyone is on different schedules," explains Gail.

As the City embarks on a new initiative to revamp its leadership competencies, Gail sees PCI as an integral part of their succession planning and talent management strategy. "Our competencies show our managers 'if that's where you want to go, here are the skills and behaviours we expect at that level' – and the PCI programs show individuals how to get there". Gail sees the courses as being more than good for business: "the thing we consistently get back is that they use the skills not just at work, but in the home life as well – it cuts across many different facets of their lives."

In addition to delivering programs, the relationship between the City and PCI is very important. "I feel like I can pick up the phone and call anytime," says Gail "it's a nice feeling."