

## STAFF DEVELOPMENT

## Developing an In-House Approach to Leadership

*When the state's Department of Administrative Services discontinued its Executive Management Development Program, the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) decided to develop its own program. The ConnDOT Leadership Program uses an in-house curriculum designed to advance the critical skills and abilities needed for effective leadership within the Department. The decision to implement the program coincided with the state's early retirement incentive program, which anticipated the loss of ConnDOT's institutional memory. Over the past five years, more than 100 employees have graduated and assumed new roles and responsibilities in the Department.*

For almost 15 years, state agencies took advantage of a Department of Administrative Services Connecticut Executive Management Program to develop future leaders. In 1996, budgetary cutbacks caused Administrative Services to discontinue this training function. Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) officials, however, believed that identifying and developing leaders was important if the Department was to meet future transportation challenges. As if to underscore this need, the end of the Executive Management Program coincided with the state's early retirement incentive program, which threatened the Department with the loss of its institutional memory. Department officials realized they needed to assume the responsibility and prepare employees to assume leadership positions. And they needed to do it quickly.

The task of developing the program fell to the ConnDOT Office of Training and Staff Development. Training Office staff offered supervisory courses, but officials concluded that they needed to identify a broader, more aggressive program. ConnDOT officials first looked to private sector resources but soon realized that available college courses and MBA programs couldn't meet their specific goals. The solution was to develop the curriculum in-house.

To identify program content, training staff met with the ConnDOT Commissioner and the five Bureau Chiefs for Engineering and Highway Operations, Finance and Administration, Policy and Planning, Public Transportation, and Aviation and Ports. They also interviewed former Executive Management Program graduates. With information from these interviews, trainers identified approximately 20 topics that encompass the skills crucial to the successful management of the Department (see sidebar).

### ConnDOT Leadership Program Topics

- Understanding Your Leadership Styles
- Business Writing
- Media Relations
- Presentation Skills
- Interpersonal Effectiveness
- Transportation Financing
- Interviewing Skills
- Coaching to Improve Employee Performance
- Time Management
- Reading Skills for the Busy Professional
- Gender-Based Communications
- Team Building
- Labor Relations
- Project Management
- Continuous Improvement
- Tools for Analyzing and Presenting Data
- EEO/Affirmative Action
- Office of Personnel Roles and Responsibilities
- Contract Administration and Negotiations
- Legislative Process



## *Identifying Future ConnDOT Leaders*

The Leadership Program is currently an 18-month curriculum. Candidate selection occurs over the summer. Classes begin in January and conclude with graduation in May the following year. While class does not meet over the summer months, participants are expected to begin work on their individual innovation projects.

To begin the candidate selection process, the ConnDOT Office of Training and Staff Development forwards a letter to each of the five Bureau Chiefs advising them of the intent of the program and suggesting criteria for candidate nomination. According to Joseph Kanachovski, Director of Staff Development in ConnDOT's Office of Training and Staff Development, "The Leadership Program is designed for managerial employees and senior-level supervisors. Our Bureau Chiefs best know the employees in their bureaus who demonstrate leadership capabilities and who have the potential to assume leadership positions."

Another reason to involve the Bureau Chiefs is to ensure they understand the purpose of the Program is to prepare future Department leaders.

Each Leadership Program class involves approximately 30 participants. Each Bureau Chief develops and prioritizes a list of potential participants and forwards it to the Office of Training and Staff Development, which reviews the nominations, selects the class, and sends the list to the Commissioner for final approval. Every effort is made to include a representative cross section of the five bureaus. The program has become so popular that some employees now actively lobby their Bureau Chiefs for nomination to the program.

Phil Zoppi is a maintenance general supervisor and a 2001 program graduate. He feels he's been fortunate to have supervisors who mentored him throughout his career. "I saw them going through this program," he says, "and I wanted to participate. I put in a request for consideration and then didn't hear anything for about a year and a half. I didn't get discouraged because I knew management supported me, and I was thrilled when I was accepted."

## *Leaders Commitment to Future Leaders*

The success of the program depends on the commitment of the Department's upper management and class participants. ConnDOT Commissioner James Sullivan sets the tone for the program on the first day of class when he welcomes participants, explains why they were selected, and what he expects from them. He also underscores the importance of the mutual responsibility of the Department and the participants to the program. "It's our unwritten commitment," says Commissioner Sullivan, "but I tell the participants that if they are willing to give the time to this program, we'll give them time to get the most from the experience."

The Leadership Program group meets twice monthly, twenty-two times over the 18-month period. Classes are scheduled for Wednesdays so that participants can plan their work schedules. Attendance is very good, although there are the occasional calls to supervisors to reinforce the importance of an employee's attending class. Additionally, participants must make up missed classes.

## *Of Courses*

As Joe Kanachovski observes, "The Commissioner gives us 30 employees; it's our job to make

sure that the time is well spent."

All indications from the first four classes are that the time is definitely well spent. The Department uses a variety of instructional methods to train participants, and the intent is to serve as a bridge between the knowledge and skills gained in the classroom and real-life situations. Program participants focus on developing their own leadership skills and styles at the same time they learn more about the Department and its operation.

A real "eye opener" for the group is when the Bureau Chiefs and other senior agency staff participate. They discuss their roles and responsibilities in ConnDOT address agency goals, objectives, responsibilities, and review current and planned projects. This facet of the program gives participants a new perspective on Department operations and challenges that leaders confront in their daily jobs.

Colleen Kissane is a Transportation Supervisory Maintenance Planner who completed the Leadership Program in 1998. She, like most participants, found the sessions with the Bureau Chiefs to be invaluable. "You tend to already know the people who work in your own bureau," she says, "so it was a great opportunity to have relatively informal information sessions with the other Bureau Chiefs. We learned firsthand exactly what they do and we could ask questions. It was also a great way for them and us to put names with faces. I also learned things about my own bureau that I didn't realize before."

ConnDOT training staff and subject matter experts from the Department's human resources unit and finance, purchasing, contracts, and legislative offices conduct sessions. Speakers from other state agencies and consultants also teach the courses, so the timing and sequence can depend on instructor availability.

The Team Building course is always one of the first to be offered. The course takes place off site, usually in an outdoor setting. Joe Kanakovski notes that Team Building is where the group becomes cohesive as participants interact on tasks that have little to do with transportation issues. “Rather,” he says, “it’s an opportunity for participants to have fun, learn team-building skills, and begin to establish the relationships that will continue through the rest of the program, and throughout their careers.”

The team-building experience was a highlight for Phil Zoppi. His class spent a day at a park upstate. “It was a fun day and we had a great time working and getting to know each other,” he says. “You really don’t realize how much you learn about yourself and your classmates until later. I loved it!”

Certain courses, such as Personnel Roles and Responsibilities, Labor Relations, and Coaching logically follow each other. The Media Relations course involves a local news reporter and a national media consultant who help participants learn the dos and don’ts of dealing with various media, understanding the news cycle, and the types of stories that interest viewers and readers.

Joe Kanachovski acknowledges the difficulty of designing and presenting courses to participants who represent a broad range of experience and skills. “We have mixed reactions,” he says, “because a course that presents new information or procedures to some participants may be just a review for others.”

The Leadership Program was originally planned as a yearlong effort, with selection over the summer and classes from September to May. In 2000, the program expanded to 18 months. The expanded schedule allows participants to supplement program

## A Future Leader’s Perspective

I’ve worked in maintenance with ConnDOT for 21 years. When I was selected for the Leadership Program I was the only one from maintenance, so I felt honored.

One of the most important things that I took away from the experience was a new perspective on the Department. ConnDOT is a big organization. Naturally, I always thought that mine was the biggest and the best bureau. I know now that it takes all five bureaus working together, supporting each other for us to be successful.

The Leadership Program taught me new skills. I’ve been with the Department a long time and now I know that there are better ways to manage. I learned to motivate people, reduce controversy, and get the work done faster and better.

For me, the Leadership Program was a good experience. The instructors, from the Department and outside consultants, were so good. I met a lot of people from all around the Department. They all really inspired me. In fact, the experience has propelled me to ‘get off my butt’ and start a college degree program. It’s something I’ve always meant to do but just never got around to doing. It’s a five-year commitment, two courses every semester, but my kids are proud of me. I am too.

Phil Zoppi  
Maintenance General Supervisor  
ConnDOT District 3  
2001 Leadership Program Graduate

course topics with six to eight elective courses from ConnDOT’s Office of Training and Staff Development roster. Many participants choose computer-oriented learning such as PowerPoint, Excel, Access, and other database or presentation media—courses that improve their individual professional competencies.

## Presenting Yourself

Presentation Skills is an important course and a recurring facet of the program. Participants are required to give various short presentations because employees’ effectiveness on the job depends on their ability to communicate effectively with staff and managers, in public meetings, and at legislative hearings.

Commissioner James Sullivan reinforces the importance of making

good presentations. “We’re in the business of dealing with the public,” he says. “The presentation component of the Leadership Program helps ConnDOT employees polish their skills and gives them confidence to present information to groups of people clearly and thoughtfully. Along the way, they learn what I’ve learned over the years—that the fear is worse than the doing.”

All participants must present an informal speech, demonstrate something, and persuade the audience to a point of view. These presentations don’t necessarily have to involve transportation.

Colleen Kissane felt that the emphasis on learning to present information was one of the most important aspects of the entire program. “At first I was terrified that I would have to get up in front

of a group and speak. The good thing is they ease you into it. For my first presentation,” she says, “I told the group how to make ice. Of course, at the time I was driving a Zamboni for a local ice rink as a part-time job. The first one was pretty easy, but it got harder.”

### *The Innovation Project*

Each participant must research a job-related innovative project and at graduation present the findings to classmates, supervisors, and leaders in the Department. The range of projects reflects the professional diversity of program participants. For example:

- An employee in the Research Division studied a better way to disseminate information by streaming video and audio media over the Department’s Intranet.
- A project concept engineer developed an informational brochure to distribute at public hearings. The publication contains answers to many of the most commonly asked questions about transportation projects and planning.
- A transportation planner studied the potential for diverting truck traffic from congested highways to rail and waterways.

Phil Zoppi manages a busy section of the I-95 Turnpike near Darien. His department uses sodium chloride—salt—on the roadway in winter, and his research was on alternative methods of snow and ice control. The purpose was to identify ways to get a longer life out of the salt. As a result, he notes, “the state’s currently experimenting with a couple of options, including using liquid calcium as a spreading agent.”

### *The Cost of Leadership*

The cost to ConnDOT for each Leadership Program class is approximately \$15,000, which is less than \$500 per participant and much less than \$1,500 per participant cost of

the previous Executive Management Development course. The figure does not include the “hidden costs” of salary and staff development time and administration costs.

Joe Kanachovski thinks that preparing for class, working with instructors, coaching participants, and “doing anything and everything to make sure the program is the best that we can make it” consumes approximately 500 hours of his and his staff’s time.

### *Successful Leadership*

The Leadership Programs’ graduation ceremony is held in May. The last day of the program includes a program evaluation where participants review the different courses and evaluate the value of each to the program. This is also ConnDOT’s opportunity to learn what staff can do to improve the program, which instructors are better received, and gain insights into what participants believe will help develop more effective leaders.

As of May 2001, many of the 118 program graduates have assumed new roles and responsibilities in the agency, and virtually all have become more effective supervisors. Of additional value are the leadership skills gained and the relations with classmates and instructors that will serve them throughout their professional careers. One of the benefits of the program was underscored when the first class graduation happened to coincide with the last early retirement program.

Colleen Kissane values the courses that help her deal with employees. “The program gave me the confidence to be able to listen to all sides of an issue and make a thoughtful decision, regardless of personalities. I’m also more confident,” she continues, “because I feel that if your supervisors select you for the program, they think that you have leadership potential. I hope to advance in my career, but right now, as a first-level manager for only

a year, I’m content to learn this job.”

Phil Zoppi sees the program benefiting in his management style. “In addition to the contacts and friends, the program taught me new skills that have made me a better supervisor. I’ve changed my style over the years,” he admits, “the program helped me learn how to work smarter, I get more done on the job with less stress. It taught me how to deal with employees better, and to control my emotions.”

Both the participants and the agency benefit from the Leadership Program. Commissioner Sullivan sees the program as a way to develop future ConnDOT leaders. “It’s not a criterion for leadership, but some of our principal managers graduated from the program. It has borne a lot of fruit for the Department. The Leadership Program is designed to meet our business needs and it’s proved an ideal mechanism for developing a solid management culture.”

“I’ve learned what talented employees work for this Department,” concludes Joe Kanachovski. “The Leadership Program is an opportunity for the Department to learn more about employees’ professional skills, but it’s also a way for participants to demonstrate their level of commitment to their jobs and this agency. It’s a privilege for all of us who are part of this initiative.”

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