

## FROM THE FIELD

### Organizational Learning: It's Not Just for Big Business

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What do you do if you're a former gang member or recovering drug addict living in the toughest part of the inner city—and you want to help at-risk young people in your neighborhood? Three years ago, the DeVos family of foundations, based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, set out to address this question. The group launched the DeVos Urban Leadership Initiative, which features an innovative 14-month curriculum designed to train youth leaders in several of this nation's most troubled cities.

The initiative aims to teach organizational learning and systems thinking tools and principles to youth leaders (many of whom come from rough backgrounds themselves) in faith-based urban settings. These leaders then use what they've learned to mentor disadvantaged neighborhood kids, providing them with the self-confidence, optimism, and skills that they'll need to meet the challenges of life. In so doing, the initiative founders hope, participants in the program will "train up" new generations of community leaders.

The whole idea was born in 1996, when the senior members of the DeVos family decided to choose a philanthropic project that would unite the various foundations in a shared area of interest. The family knew they wanted to work with needy children, but they were eager to do more than just throw money at the problem. After holding focus groups in four U.S. cities, the family became excited about providing training for individuals—pastors and other local community leaders—who were already working with at-risk kids.

With the help of consultant Peter O'Donnell, of the Toronto-based firm Healthy Futures Group, the DeVoses designed a tentative curriculum. The goal was to provide not just management training, but to apply leading-edge organizational theory to small, inner-city youth agencies. Such agencies are typically passionate about their mission but struggle with isolation and lack of funding.

#### A Rigorous Curriculum

After much fine-tuning, the foundations settled on a curriculum that in 1998 would be offered to small groups of youth leaders (8–12 individuals) in four U.S. cities: Grand Rapids, Michigan; Orlando, Florida; Boston, Massachusetts; and Phoenix, Arizona.

The curriculum consists of five workshops, conducted in the actual neighborhoods, and two national conferences. In the first workshop, participants focus on assessment—they take stock of the strengths and weaknesses of their own leadership style and of their organization, whether it's a ministry, a YMCA branch, or another kind of faith-based youth organization.

Next, participants attend the first national conference. At this gathering, they clarify their understanding of the program's five core values—accountability, balance, interdependence, empowerment, and leverage—and how those values apply to their work.

The second workshop centers on community capacity building and development. Attendees explore the various ways a child is affected by family, neighborhood, and community. Moreover, they engage in "asset mapping." In this activity, they assess the resources that their community *does* have available, rather than dwelling on what's missing.

In the third workshop, the groups do scenario planning. This well-known organizational learning technique requires participants to envision various developments that may unfold within their communities and to design high-leverage responses to all of them.

Now comes the second national conference, which focuses on systems thinking and organizational learning.

## LEVERAGE POINTS

### MAKING ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING RELEVANT

- Make the principles and tools fun to learn about and use—for example, through dramatizations (including costumes!) or other engaging formats.
- Present information through as many media as possible, such as videos and interactive games or exercises.
- Use executive summaries if participants prefer not to read long books.
- Frame subject matter so that participants can relate to it. For instance, if you're using a book or other tool that describes the "Ladder of Inference" in business terminology, depending on the audience, replace that context with relevant examples of neighborhood problems or family dynamics.

This is followed by the fourth workshop, on resource networking (strategies for mobilizing volunteers, fund raising, and so forth), their community, which is critiqued by fellow attendees. Finally, at the fifth workshop, participants present an action plan for

### **Costumes and Comedy: Using the Tools**

The Urban Leadership Initiative's designers have assembled a colorful array of tools and materials used in the curriculum. Assigned reading includes selections from *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (by Peter Senge et al.), *First Things First* (by Steven Covey), and the Pegasus Communications learning fables *Outlearning the Wolves* (on organizational learning) and *Shadows of the Neanderthal* (on mental models, or the assumptions we hold about how the world works). Other tools include videotapes, interactive exercises from *The Systems Thinking Playbook* (by adult-education specialist Linda Booth Sweeney and system dynamicist Dennis Meadows), and a "nonalcoholic" version of *The Beer Distribution Game*, designed by system dynamicist John Sterman.

However, because many participants come from rough backgrounds and may not be experienced readers, the instructors have found other, ingenious ways to get the concepts across (see "Making Organizational Learning Relevant"). In some cases, for example, they use executive summaries of the longer publications. With *The Beer Distribution Game*, which teaches players that they can't control decisions that others are making, the game revolves around

the manufacture and distribution of study bibles rather than cases of beer.

But perhaps the most entertaining learning experience has involved mental models. Here, participants really "live" the concepts in the book *Shadows of the Neanderthal* by dressing up as the main characters of the book (cavepeople) and dramatizing the story. This approach has sparked lively group discussion in which participants apply mental-model concepts and tools (such as the Ladder of Inference) to issues of racial diversity and urban life.

### **Challenges and Successes**

What's the prognosis for this innovative curriculum? As Eileen Kooreman, coordinator of the initiative, explains, time has yet to reveal how effective the program will be. It will take several more years to see whether the newly trained youth leaders are in fact mentoring a whole new generation of leaders—which is a main goal of the program.

To be sure, the program leaders face numerous challenges. Translating academic ideas about organizational success into terms that program participants can relate to and apply in practical ways is one major hurdle. And in helping participants through the curriculum, instructors are constantly racing against time. As a result of the strain that comes with juggling administrative demands and "putting out fires," youth leaders typically burn out in a mere 1.2 years.

However, anecdotal evidence suggests some exciting developments. Kooreman cites numerous examples of youth leaders who have found creative ways to build mentoring relationships with kids. One leader, for instance, helped students

to set up a snack shop in a middle school. The experience taught the youths much about how to run a business. Another leader started up a garden club in the city—something that most urban kids have scant opportunity to learn about. Yet another leader owns a music recording studio, and uses it to teach members of a local choir about the recording business. All of these efforts engage kids *and* prepare them for life as adults in a difficult world.

As the Urban Leadership Initiative suggests, organizational learning is not just for big business anymore. It's also for passionate, dedicated young leaders who want to help kids figure out the best possible way to play the difficult hand that life has dealt them. The designers of the DeVos initiative—and the early rounds of participants—are pioneers in the most profound sense of the word.