

CASE STUDY

City of Alexandria Center for Economic Support

Challenge

Organizations traditionally have well-designed approaches in place for onboarding individuals, but onboarding a new team can be more complex. It requires a strategic focus on building new relationships among current and new leaders in a way that also establishes excitement for a common vision.

This was the core challenge Lesa Gilbert, the Director of the City of Alexandria's Center for Economic Support (CES), considered as she assumed her new role with the agency in 2016. CES is a division of the Department of Human and Community Services (DHCS), and it provides Public Benefits, Community Services, and Employment and Training services to Alexandria residents.

Solution

Gilbert worked closely with the DHCS Director of Organizational Development and Equity, Allyson Coleman, and Waterford's Beth Offenbacher to craft a comprehensive program focused on developing effective working relationships across the Center's new leadership team. A systems-thinking orientation was a guiding emphasis of this organizational and leadership development project.

The project goals included:

- Build and support a cohesive, high-performing leadership team;
- Develop a leadership philosophy reflective of the mission and vision of the organization, and 3) Integrate services and programs across the Center and the Department.

The CES project elements consisted of:

- Multiple planning sessions between Gilbert, Coleman, and Offenbacher, focusing on project strategy, session design, and progress assessment as the project proceeded
- Five 90-minute leadership workshops for CES leaders, complete with learning games and interactive exercises
- One-on-one coaching sessions with leadership team members
- Each leadership team member prepared an individual Leadership Philosophy
- Collective work on a team contract to guide the team's future work together
- Creation of a shared leadership philosophy
- Short pre-test and post-test surveys tracked key metrics, indicating areas of progress and areas where more emphasis might be needed in the future

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Examples of the strategic questions that Gilbert, Coleman, and Offenbacher addressed in planning sessions throughout the project included:

- What makes a team an Effective Team?
- The unique context of the work that CES does with its clients as a City agency, and how that shapes the leadership focus of the Center
- How systems thinking and relationship intelligence benefits individuals, teams, and the organization
- What strategies and tools provide the best mix for building productive engagement in the workshops?
- The three-way connection between an individual's own leadership philosophy, the Center's measures of success, and productive job performance

Results

This six-month consulting engagement successfully achieved the stated goals of the project, with data showing improvements on 5 of 10 indicators measured.

The CES indicators measured also were reflective of existing DCHS core competencies and behavioral anchors, and included statements such as, "I am a key part of making our Center vision happen" and "I can count on my colleagues in the Center when I need help."

Leadership team members subsequently telescoped key strategies, tools, and insights gained from this project across CES' three program areas, which further enhanced team cohesion in support of the CES mission and vision.

Working with Waterford's Beth Offenbacher

"The CES leadership team had an amazing transformational experience working with Beth. We learned about each other as individuals and how to work together as a team to achieve common goals. Still today, four years later, we continue to build on the structure that Beth helped us lift. The Philosophy is the North Star for how we engage and execute within the Center for Economic Support. Beth's collaborative approach to the project helped me develop critical leadership skills, which enhanced my confidence to trust my instincts and take risk. I will be forever grateful to Beth for sharing her time and talents with us." - Lesa Gilbert, City of Alexandria Center for Economic Support