TITLE: *Mentoring the Mentors: A Program to Prepare and Support Mentors*
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ABSTRACT *250 WORDS*

Everett Community College has created and sustained a highly effective program offered to all employees: the Leadership Academy, launched eight years ago. This in-house professional development initiative, designed for employees seeking to increase their leadership skills and visibility, takes place from October through May with monthly sessions focused on specific topics. In addition and core to the program is a small-group project in which each team designs and completes a project to positively influence and impact the college. The group project process is the most challenging and rewarding aspect of the Leadership Academy. In the past, mentors have been assigned to each group without significant guidance or supervision. Some feedback reflected that the mentors weren't very present or helpful. In the 2014 – 2015 academic year, in an effort to redesign the structure of Leadership Academy, a mentor to the mentors was assigned and this role provided ongoing guidance, training, and support. Starting off the year with face-to-face meetings and a Canvas site dedicated solely to the mentors with resources and information, a valuable mentoring presence was established for the mentors. Mentors receive an opportunity to use their leadership skills procured from their recent experience as a participant. We have provided a system for mentors to feel powerful and supported and this change has helped the institution further understand the power and role of mentorship. This presentation will explore why we need mentors in our places of work, as well as what types of activities inspire and motivate our mentors.

Everett Community College's Leadership Academy is a program offered to all employees, staff or faculty, to take part in a seven-month cohort experience. Each cohort typically has fifteen participants, and is divided into three groups, approximately five people per group. The end goal and result of the Leadership Academy is to complete a project. Because the project is the most challenging and difficult aspect of the Leadership Academy, a mentor is assigned to each group. This mentorship relationship is different from most standard mentorships, in that the mentor is assigned to the entire group to guide them through the process of the group project. Each mentor is chosen from the previous cohort of graduates, with the opportunity to continue their growth and process in leadership at Everett Community College. A new angle to the mentoring process was implemented this past year, to provide a mentor to the mentors. This addition allowed mentors to seek guidance, ask questions, have continual support, and receive trainings. In previous years, the mentors were not given much guidance or any training, and the program creators were influenced to make changes in the program. In this paper, I will detail the Leadership Academy program, the process of mentoring the mentors, and highlight the benefits of mentoring the mentors in an organization.

The Leadership Academy at Everett Community College was launched in 2007. Over one hundred and twenty employees have participated in a Leadership Academy cohort. All employees are welcome to participate in the program, and we always have a mix of classified, exempt, and faculty staff as participants. One of the most common and positive themes of feedback is that it gives employees a chance to get to know a group of coworkers, which goes beyond just a person to say hello to in the hallway. The participants share a common bond, whether they were in the same group or not, of their cohort experience.

The program runs from October through May each academic year, and participants meet twice a month on Fridays. When participants are signed up in Leadership Academy, they have already spoken with their bosses to have permission to participate and be away from their offices. Leadership Academy does require a large time investment, since outside of the two meetings per month, once the projects are underway, groups need to meet multiple times to work on the projects.

In the 2014 – 2015 academic year, we made significant changes to the program. We created specific themes for each meeting and tied in principles of leadership by using a workbook (Kouzes, 2006). While in previous years we focused on outside speakers, we changed the program to highlight speakers from within our organization, from our instructional designer giving a workshop about team communication, to our Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning giving a presentation on the Plus Delta assessment. Previously in most years, a book or workbook was not used or given to participants. With the program redesign and a clear pathway of teaching leadership skills, we then were able to add the element of a mentor to the mentors. The structure of previous cohorts of Leadership Academy were well received, yet we felt that this redesign was crucial to the future cohorts where skills and leadership characteristics are taught, modeled, and run fluidly in the program.

The first three months of the program on Friday afternoons focus on learning various aspects of leadership skills, workshops designed to guide group communication and leadership style or a personal skills inventory, and to prepare the cohort for the group project. The groups are revealed by the second meeting, and they have two months to get to know each other in a different context from working right away on the project that often becomes intense. After the first three months, the project information is revealed. With the redesign from the 2014 – 2015 academic year, each group was assigned to a Vice President of the College. Applying the

principles of design thinking, the groups are asked to set up a time to interview the Vice President as if he or she is their client. They are encouraged to ask the Vice President to identify three projects or ideas they have that this group could resolve or work toward a solution. After the initial interview, the team is encouraged to continue the design thinking process and work on a problem statement. From the formation of the problem statement, the team continues along on the journey of creating a project that addresses the issue the Vice President laid out.

The design thinking process for the group project is led by Jeanne Leader, one of the two founders of Leadership Academy. Using Stanford's school of design workbook, she teaches the process of design thinking and why it is important. One of the goals of design thinking is to emphasize not jumping right in and deciding what the project is. There is a process for talking with the client about the project, from creating the problem statement, and to addressing what needs the client has, and how they will go about to address the need. The five phases of the design process as created by the Stanford's school of design are: Discovery, interpretation, ideation, experimentation, and evolution (dschool.stanford.edu). This model has proved to be a successful and interesting approach to the group process and project.

The group project is the most challenging aspect of Leadership Academy. Participants are assigned to a group with varying personalities, work styles, and job positions in the college. Although this process is difficult, it is imperative to the Leadership Academy experience. It fosters teamwork, problem solving skills, and the newly acquired leadership skills. The workshops throughout the beginning of the Leadership Academy are meant to prepare the participants with problem solving and group communication skills. The co-founders of Leadership Academy had the idea for mentors to the groups to guide them through the process, but they lacked time to invest in training and support. Pat Sisneros's main focus is on securing the speakers and planning the sessions, and Jeanne Leader's main focus is on guiding the teams through the design thinking process. Bringing me to the team helped bridge the gap to a much needed support system for the mentors.

While the mentoring relationship is important throughout the entire year, it is extremely important in the beginning of the design thinking stage to guide them and be there to support them as they begin the process. In May, a graduation ceremony is hosted and each group presents in front of their supervisors, the President, and the board of trustees. The President as well as supervisors, and employees on campus have witnessed the impact the Leadership Academy has on the college. An example of a few benefits and impacts on the college are: relationship building, legacy projects, creating and sustaining collegiality among departments and coworkers, and employee visibility and development.

A website has been created and maintained with participants' names, and details of their final projects and presentations. The cohort of 2014 – 2015 represented a wide variety of departments, from Information Technology (IT), Aviation, the Business and Applied Technology division, the library, and the accounting office (www.everettcc.edu/leadershipacademy). The diversity of departments represented is a large strength of Leadership Academy.

My experience with Leadership Academy began in 2012 as a participant. I was asked to serve as a mentor the following year in 2013. As it was my first professional mentor experience, I jumped into the role even though I hadn't received much guidance in terms of expectations and I created my own job description. This model without training doesn't always function for everyone, and because of this, the redesign was instituted. This past academic year, I became the mentor to the mentors and designed, researched, and delivered training and support to the

mentors throughout the seven month program. I was also present at every Friday session to establish my role and presence for the participants.

The mentors from the 2014 -2015 Leadership Academy cohort were chosen from the previous year's cohort of participants. Mentors were chosen based on their initiative and willingness to help, as well as to continue to foster their leadership potential. Serving as a Leadership Academy Mentor is a way for three past participants to strengthen their leadership and to experience a new role at Everett Community College. One of the components of choosing the mentors is that each person represents a different group from the previous year. Having one person from every group then leads to a more diverse group of mentors, highlighting each group's unique characteristics.

In the mentor training, I encourage conversations about the experience each of the mentors had with their group mentor. We discuss what worked and didn't work in terms of support. Each mentor not only brings a different group experience to the table, but also a different mentor experience. When I served as a mentor, I reflected on how my group was supported by our mentor, and what I would have liked to change. I also reflected on the group dynamic to see how I could apply my personal group experience to the group that I was mentoring. It was also important for me to not overly emphasize my experiences, whether positive or negative, and to let the group have their own experience without overshadowing it with my stories of my group interactions. Instead of outwardly talking about my experiences, I tried to gauge what advice was needed and pull an anecdote or two out to share with the group. Influencing the group by sharing stories, bad or good, doesn't seem to accomplish much. By having mentors that each experienced something differently, even without necessarily sharing their story, the groups are able to in turn get a different experience. By training the mentors together, and with their varying mentorship and group experiences, we are able to combine all of their perspectives to create the mentoring plan for the year.

In the 2014- 2015 school year, we chose three mentors from various departments on campus. We had two female and one male mentors, one was from the IT department, another from the International Education department, and the other from the Student LIFE department. All of them had diverse experiences as participants and had significant recommendations for how a mentor should show support. Previous to this program year, we chose mentors, gave them a small description of expectations, and sent them out without further follow up. This led to some mentors rarely checking in and not establishing their presence to the group. As a mentor in this type of style, without any type of mentorship training or any direction, I took charge and did my best job that I could do, by constantly providing support, checking in to make sure they were on track, and being their biggest cheerleader. Feedback from other groups in the past revealed that their mentors didn't fulfill the expected role of mentor.

The restructure of the Leadership Academy for the school year of 2014 – 2015 was initiated by the founders of Leadership Academy at Everett Community College, Pat Sisneros, the Vice President of College Services, and Jeanne Leader, the Dean of Arts and Learning Resources. Jeanne and Pat asked for my involvement in planning the upcoming year, and because of my work in the previous year as a mentor, wanted to explore having a mentor to the mentors, where training, support, and guidance would be provided to the group of mentors. I was also brought in as a third team member to plan the curriculum, activities, and workshops. My first step in creating resources for the mentors was to create a Canvas (a Learning Management System) course for the mentors. I started with listing the main issues that mentors come across, from conflict, to difficult team members, to positive features where the team agrees

on everything (which was my experience as a mentor). Based on the Canvas course, I then planned and instituted a face to face training. Because the mentorship process for Leadership Academy is so unique and different from most mentorship programs, I had to design most of my resources and training to apply to a group mentorship process versus a one on one employee process. Applying the major themes of mentoring, I established a job description for the mentors.

Once the training was complete, it was time for the mentors to learn who their groups were. At the second meeting of Leadership Academy, we unveiled to all who was part of which group, and which mentor was assigned. We then had the mentors lead an icebreaker to get to know their groups a little better, and start the process of getting to know their groups.

Because we had not previously employed this model of a mentor to the mentors, we are unable to compare to previous years. However, feedback from past participants revealed that some were unsatisfied with their mentor's role. Mentorship seems straightforward to many, but without any guidance or expectations, it can be daunting. One of the common comments from participants is that the mentor was not present to check in or even just be available. Even though participants may tell a mentor that they are doing just fine and don't need anything, it is important for the mentors to make their presence known and let them know that they are there if they ever need anything. I took my role as mentor to the mentors very seriously, and applied the same tactics to mentoring the mentors as I had in my mentor role with a Leadership Academy group. My method is of continual check-in, just to make sure all is going well. I also had a face to face meeting with each mentor half way through the program to see how things were going. A tricky component of the mentor to the groups is that we don't want them to see themselves as a part of the team. We want the groups to see them as their confidant, as their cheerleader, and someone who will question them but always provide support. The mentorship role doesn't provide an opportunity to tell them they disagree with their idea, or to give them many other ideas. Guiding the team along is the main objective, and this can be hard for some mentors to understand.

In the training, I established three categories of mentor objectives. These categories were: time commitment, team involvement, and mentoring. An example of one of the objectives for time commitment is to "Introduce yourself and get to know the team members". Team involvement objectives include "Be a good listener and focus on being a guide versus telling them exactly what you think they should do." From the mentoring category, "be observant and step in when you need to. The team may not realize they do indeed need your insight." These objectives were posted in the Canvas course and delivered in the first mentor training.

Feedback from this past year's participants in Leadership Academy indicated that the mentors impacted the groups in a positive way. "The mentor was an amazing idea (when they understand their role). We were able to bring our mentor in every now and then to run ideas and ask about their experience" (Anonymous, personal communication, June 10, 2015).

Reflecting upon my first year of the mentoring the mentors, I realize that I will need to emphasize some points more clearly. Conveying the ground rules and objectives as clearly as possible in the first training should help sort out some of the possible issues. Feedback solicited from the mentors was overall positive and they felt that the extra support I provided was worthwhile and helpful. One comment about group buy-in was particularly interesting, in that the mentor revealed that she had a hard time at first working with the group. The group seemed hesitant to let her in, and as she worked harder and harder to establish a connection with the group, and by emphasizing that she was there to help and be there for them, she was able to

break down some of those barriers. This is something we will definitely consider for next year's programming. We will need to emphasize that the mentor is in place for a reason, and to let them in.

A mentor to the mentors is extremely important and necessary. Mentors carry a large responsibility and at times they may need to get advice or ask for support. It is a similar comparison to counselors who go to counselors themselves. For those who are working hard to support others, they often times need support, whether they acknowledge it or not. While I am still confident that the mentors would have done a good job without my support, I also think that without any type of guidance, objectives or steering in any direction, they may have been involved in more situations that needed support. As I mentioned earlier, we see the appointment of mentors as a continuation of the leadership process. The mentors were chosen based on their potential to guide a team, but also for their potential to keep growing in leadership skills. Our institution relies upon reflection quite often, and highlights the importance to not only guide your mentees to reflect, but for the mentors to reflect, as well.

When asked how the mentors felt about having a mentor, one of the mentors responded that "it would have been a bit more challenging if we didn't have a mentor. Knowing that we could go to our mentor with questions and having the meetings in the beginning really helped me with the whole process" (A. Fame, personal communication, June 20, 2015). Another of the mentors shared that "I feel as though I would have been able to fulfill the role without a mentor, but I appreciated and felt like I was able to do my job more confidently by having the support and feedback of someone there as a resource if necessary"(L. Wasson, personal communication, June 20, 2015). The third mentor shared that "It was very helpful to have someone to talk to, when I ran into difficulties with my group. I feel that having a mentor available for the mentors, at least first time mentors, also helps with creating and maintaining consistency between the mentors, when dealing with their groups, so all of the groups should have a similar experience and level of support"(T. Dunn, personal communication, June 20, 2015).

The final quote from the third mentor demonstrates exactly what our hope was for the program. We wanted to give that support and the consistency factor is an important part. Before the mentor to the mentor program was established, there wasn't much consistency between mentors. There will probably most likely still be variations within the participants' experience with the mentors, but hopefully since they were all trained and started on the same page, this variation of experience will be less significant.

In an article addressing mentorship programs in an organization, it was concluded that "a formal program is only as good as the mentor it produces. Formal programs may therefore be effective to the extent that they recruit skilled and motivated mentors, train the participants, and create an organizational environment that fosters the development of satisfying mentoring relationships" (Ragins, 2000). Our training process is important, and hopefully makes the difference to steer the mentors toward the right direction to effective mentorships.

There is a lack of research on the topic of mentoring groups, suggesting that our type of mentoring process is highly uncommon. Providing mentorships is beneficial, especially in the situation of a challenging group project. In a website with definitions of various mentorship relationships, it is stated that "Group projects linked to group mentoring enhance the learning of participants and develop an understanding of how teams operate" ("What is Group Mentoring?" n.d.). Research revealed that group mentoring occurs in workplaces, but is generally contained to a mentor assigned to multiple employees instead of mentoring one on one. This process, while closer to our program, is still not an exact match. Mentoring for a specific project remains

a unique process. The above research cites that group projects enhance the mentoring experience, while our main focus is solely the group project.

Having a high level of support in place makes the entire process of a program much smoother. We see mentors in our institution as a way to guide, support, and influence those we mentor. We want participants in Leadership Academy to have a positive experience and part of the equation is to ensure their mentor is supported in which in turn will ensure their experience is optimal. We plan to keep our mentor to the mentors program in place, and to apply our feedback from the mentors and the Leadership Academy participants so that we provide the best mentorship experience as possible.

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