Emerging Leaders: Building the Organization’s Future Talent Pipeline

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Background Information
The City of Gainesville was incorporated in 1869 and provides many of the traditional services of a local government, police, fire, road maintenance, parks, recreation and cultural affairs as well as a regional transit service. We also own the fifth largest municipal utility in Florida. Gainesville Regional Utilities (GRU) provides Electric, Gas, Water/Wastewater and Telecommunications services.

The City of Gainesville is a mid-sized city with about 125,000 citizens and employs about 2200 employees between General Government and GRU.

Program Development
Three years ago, the City of Gainesville was facing two major challenges; 1) a large percentage of the workforce could potentially retire in the next 3 to 5 years and 2) there were some critical, high-level leadership positions that became vacant unexpectedly. In both cases, we quickly realized we did not have internal candidates who were ready to compete for these vacancies. These two challenges forced us to look more closely at talent management and succession planning.

One of the strategies we implemented to address these challenges is our Emerging Leaders Development Program. This two year program is designed to help the participants in the development of their knowledge and skills to further their career and be competitive for positions in the organization while assisting the organization in retaining its top performers.

The participants were chosen by a selection committee based on the following criteria:
- Potential to fill organization at risk positions
- Behaves consistently with organization values
- Demonstrates Service Excellence
- Achieves Results/No Performance Deficiencies
- Leadership Capability
- Takes Initiative/Change Agent
- Desire to learn more about the organization
- Career Goals Defined
- Interpersonal Skills

Our pilot program began with 30 participants.

Key Program Elements
There are several key elements of the program:
- **360 Assessment**
  Each participant completes a 360 Assessment at the beginning of the program to determine strengths and development needs. This information is utilized to develop their Individual Development Plan (IDP) in conjunction with their career goals. They also complete the same 360 evaluation at the end of the program to measure growth and progress on their goals.
• **Mentoring**
  Another key element is the mentoring component. We recruit professionals, managers and executive team members from our organization and specifically match them with participants based on career experience, strengths and organizational role. We also pair participants with mentors that are from completely different areas of the organization so the participant can gain additional organizational awareness and get out of their comfort zone.

• **It Takes a Team**
  Emerging Leaders participants are guided through their two year journey with the help of their manager, mentor and a coach from our Learning and Organizational Development division of Human Resources. This group works together throughout the course of the program to make sure the participant receives guidance they need to be successful. Each member of the team brings an unique perspective about the participant and uses that to help them grow and develop.

• **Group and Individual Development**
  This program also includes group development sessions to focus on needs identified for the entire group as well as courses available through our corporate university, Gainesville Corporate University (GCU), to help address individual needs of the participant.

• **Organizational Awareness**
  Another key element in our program is organizational awareness. There are many ways we provide this, including department presentations and tours of various operating areas. Participants also spend time in three key “core” business areas, including Human Resources/Organizational Development, Budget and Finance and Information Technology. Participants have the option to pursue additional job shadowing assignments based on their career goals and special assignment/acting assignments and project lead opportunities are offered as appropriate.

To successfully complete the program each participant must maintain performance standards/goals as outlined by their direct supervisor, fully participate in all key elements of the program, complete an end of program assignment and panel interview. Due to the rigors of the program, each participant earns one year of supervisory experience upon successful completion of the program.

**Successes**
The results of the pilot program have been positive, with 77% of participants successfully completing the program. There were additional tangible and intangible successes for our pilot program. Fifty percent of the Emerging Leaders participants have either been promoted or have served in an acting assignment. Nine of the participants were involved in one of three special projects for the organization. Six of our program graduates have volunteered to be a mentor for our new group of Emerging Leaders. They felt so strongly about what they received from the program and wanted to pay it forward to one of their peers. We will continue to monitor our pilot program graduates’ careers throughout their employment.
In addition, the relationships that were built amongst these future leaders are incredibly strong and will last them their entire career. These relationships have also helped to improve communication and collaboration across the organization.

Lessons Learned
There were a few lessons learned along the way as well. One of the things we learned is that having 30 participants was too large of a group. We knew going into the pilot that it was going to be a challenge however the needs of the organization outweighed the concern. We also had two different selection processes that were used to select the group that would participate. This presented challenges throughout the program that we had to mitigate. Another lesson we learned was about the structure of the program. We designed our program to be very flexible and customizable so that each participant could get what they needed to be successful in their next position(s) however what we learned is that we need to have more of a balance of structure and flexibility. The structure is important, especially at the beginning of the program, to build the foundation and expectations. We also found that our participants, managers and mentors would have liked more structure at the beginning to assist them in the process.

Next Steps
One of the reasons we believe we were successful is that we asked for feedback throughout the two year program from our participants, managers, mentors and other key people who were involved in the program.

We have just begun our second cohort of the program and have made some adjustments based on what we learned. We utilized one selection process for the entire organization; this is a crucial piece for consistency and commitment to the entire program. In our pilot program, we only had one opportunity to evaluate the potential participants through a written nomination process so we added a panel interview for this round, which included executive team members, managers and Emerging Leader Development Program graduates. The panel interviewed each potential participant and was asked to narrow the group to no more than 12 participants. The interviews assisted the panels in getting to know the candidates on a deeper level and it also showed the continued support from our leadership for the program to the potential participants. We have 11 Emerging Leaders participants in our latest cohort and we are very excited about assisting them in growing in their careers.

While we are still facing a majority of our workforce retiring in the next few years, we feel that by building Emerging Leaders, our talent pipeline is growing and we are better prepared as an organization to face this challenge.