

RECIPE FOR CHANGE

By Jordan W. Mora, Abram W. Kaplan, Laura M. Wies, and Meredith A. Atwood

BUILDING A LEADERSHIP CULTURE AT THE U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Fostering an employee culture that is flexible and adaptable, alert to new circumstances, able to shift gears, skilled in team building, and capable of cross-disciplinary communication is challenging for any organization. Federal agencies, in particular, face the prospect of broadening missions and added duties with fewer staff and tighter budgets.

This state of affairs puts a very high premium on organizational leadership. The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) established a national leadership program as a critical feature of its strategic planning process.



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The USGS Leadership Program uses a nomination process

Although leadership workshops are widely recognized for their potential, one question still remains: How do we know if they are successful? Uncertainty about effectiveness is a result of the inability of traditional evaluation models to access the views of co-workers. This is where 360-degree feedback becomes useful.

Walden Consulting has used 360-degree feedback to evaluate the USGS Leadership Program for seven of the last nine years since the leadership program was introduced. Its observations take into account both participant and co-worker perspectives, and offer many lessons in culture change, leadership-building opportunities, and program evaluation.

PATHWAYS TO CULTURE CHANGE

The inspiration for the USGS Leadership Program emerged in 1998 from a group of USGS senior managers who recognized the critical need to develop leaders. In 1999, an agency-wide survey confirmed the need for the program when more than 50 percent of USGS employees responded negatively to a question asking whether the USGS promoted leadership.

To counteract this negative attitude, the agency created an innovative program that involves employees in leadership building. The USGS Leadership Program uses a nomination process to select future leaders from all 10,000 employees.

The program involves two week-long courses. The first course, Leadership 101, incorporates practical information concerning communication, leading change, core principles, and negotiation skills. The second course, Leadership 201, which occurs approximately two years later, applies concepts from the first course to situations USGS leaders typically face. Participants learn through problem-solving exercises in an interactive teamwork setting in both courses.

After the courses were designed Walden Consulting stepped in to evaluate the program. The most challenging facet of the evaluation was determining how the program affected the USGS organization as a whole, while also addressing the widely accepted four levels of evaluation developed by Donald Kirkpatrick.

Level 1, reaction, is assessed by scoring the general course evaluations, which are administered at the end of each course. The learning and application and behavior measured at Level 2 and Level 3, use pre-course surveys for the two classes.

to select future leaders from all 10,000 employees

Most training evaluations end here, forgoing measurement of the fourth level, results. To assess the impact the USGS Leadership Program has on the organization's culture, Walden Consulting conducts a 360-degree assessment. This sort of examination enables USGS to measure the diffusion of leadership material from the participants to co-workers.

A 360-degree evaluation involves gathering data from co-workers not enrolled in the leadership program. Participants must ask eight to 10 co-workers to evaluate their leadership skills prior to each course.

A unique element to the USGS evaluation is that the co-workers also conduct a self-evaluation concerning their own leadership behavior and cultural perception of the work environment. These assessments are used to measure the degree to which the USGS has generated a culture that fosters leadership development.

If the leadership culture is improving, there will be high scores for responses regarding leadership behavior, such as the likeliness of staff to volunteer for a leadership role and support a team-oriented environment.

In a series of exercises used in the courses, each participant works through the feedback the co-workers provide in the 360-degree evaluation. This information helps participants determine which leadership skills require additional study.

Conversely, co-workers' self-assessment is critical to the leadership analysis procedure because it provides an opportunity to track the diffusion of leadership skills from the participants to the general work environment over time.

ANALYZING 360

Before delving into 360-degree findings, it is wise to examine a brief summary of the survey variables. Comparisons of the Leadership 101 and Leadership 201 course surveys against the assessments taken before the courses uncover changes across two fundamental measures: familiarity and behavior.

Familiarity relates to a participant's level of comfort and confidence with new knowledge and experience from leadership training. Behavior measures the assimilation of leadership skills through changes in actions at work.

Research has shown a reliable causal link between familiarity and behavior, indicating that comfort leads to the adoption of new behaviors. In other words, behavior change occurs most effectively when learners reach a point in which they are comfortable with the material and are confident to put it into practice.

From self-reported data, co-workers are categorized according to their exposure to the USGS Leadership Program. The 360-degree results from the co-workers show that those who have more exposure to the program's lessons exhibit higher leadership skills.

Consequently, it is safe to conclude that this increase is a result of course participants returning to the work environment with improved leadership behaviors and sharing these behaviors with other employees. Most interesting is that co-workers whose only connection with the course material is through interaction with participants are the people an organization typically wants to experience a shift in behavior.

Analyses of the co-workers' responses also reveal a difference between how participants view themselves and how they are viewed by others. Participants tend to rate themselves lower than their peers do. Clearly, although participants are not aware of their heightened leadership skills after attending the courses, their co-workers acknowledge the new behaviors.

The lack of assurance in leadership skills from the participants' self-perception may be due to their complete immersion within the complex course materials. However, this phenomenon further strengthens the argument for acquiring the perspective of co-workers.

A 360-degree feedback provides a critical step between what participants perceive and what colleagues perceive. A co-worker's acknowledgement of improvement in a participant's leadership skills that the participant fails to realize is integral for the evaluation team to be able to accurately assess the program.

Programs in which participants represent the sole means for assessment are likely to offer incomplete results. Co-workers offer a more precise, objective perception of their peers at work.

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With the information derived from the participant and co-worker survey responses, Walden Consulting can show clear, statistical improvement in leadership capacity among participants of the USGS Leadership Program, as well as the impact of the program on other USGS employees. Through the 360-degree evaluation, USGS is able to see how the whole organization is transformed with heightened leadership skills.

SAMPLE SURVEY QUESTIONS

PARTICIPANT ASSESSMENT

The following questions are about the person you are evaluating. Please answer as honestly as you can. If you are completely unfamiliar with an item, please leave it blank.

1. When working with other people, how likely is the person to:

- a. Communicate effectively with colleagues?
- b. Volunteer for a leadership role?

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

Please help us understand the effectiveness of the Leadership Program courses. The following questions are about you. Please answer as honestly as possible.

1. How interested are you in the following activities:

- a. Taking a leadership role within the organization?
- b. Interacting with co-workers in a team setting?

Co-workers who have more exposure to the leadership program show elevated leadership behaviors. Also, co-workers are rating participants higher than the participant's self-evaluation. Without a 360-degree feedback assessment, these crucial findings would not be uncovered.

The most frustrating aspect of implementing a leadership course within an organization tends to be the low receptiveness of co-workers to the new information. The USGS Leadership Program offers an unusual example of leadership evaluation methods, which measure the success of a program not only on the direct graduates of the program, but also in the surrounding workforce population.

Measuring culture change within the work environment is difficult, but this unique implementation of the 360-degree assessment detects changes in general attitudes and work ethic. The results can provide important information



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about the success of any program in relation to participant behavior, as well as assess the likeliness that the performance of other employees is improving.

If a program's goal is wide-spread culture change, participant responses are valuable, but the responses received from their co-worker are vital.

How can other organizations make use of this approach? There are four critical steps. First, training managers should find every opportunity to piggyback program evaluations on existing measurement tools, such as interviews, surveys, observations, course evaluation forms, and assessment instruments.

Additionally, following the development trajectory of co-workers is essential to fully evaluate the impact of any program. Finally, the enhanced 360-degree assessment provides a unique opportunity for any training program to observe organizational culture change through systematic measures.

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The excellence witnessed in the U.S. Geological Survey's Leadership Program provides examples other organizations might follow. **T+D**

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