

Category: **Management Innovation – Human Resources**
2009 Entry: **Team Essentials Program**
Leadership Comes From the Flock



Geese migrate in groups that fly in a V formation. At the start of their journey, one goose takes the leadership role and flies at the point of the V. Because of the wind and the rain, it's the toughest position. The business world is the same; those in positions of leadership usually face the toughest challenges.

The V formation of geese teaches us a lot about leadership development. Since geese usually fly long distances in one stretch, the leader gets tired. When that happens, he drops back. Another goose from the back comes up and takes the lead.

Throughout their journey, every goose helps out and takes a turn leading the flock. Flying alone, the geese would never make it. Completing their migration successfully takes the strength of everyone working together.

Management Challenge

Part of the challenge of retaining valued associates includes how to provide everyone within the Virginia Housing Development Authority, regardless of their position, with opportunities to develop critical leadership skills. Looking at wild geese and using their instinct for leadership that evolves from teamwork as a guide, the Organizational Development and Learning (OD&L) division responded to this management challenge by developing an *innovative* variety of leadership development teams.

These teams currently include:

- **The Volunteer Council**, for giving back to the community.
- **The Recognition and Fun Team**, for enhancing associate morale.
- **The Green Team**, for encouraging environmentalism.
- **Special Project Teams**, for enabling authoritywide participation.

Pointing the Way to Leadership Skills

Beginning in 2005, VHDA made a concerted effort to develop associates through teams by restructuring existing teams to include a leadership development component. Each leadership development team is formed when the OD&L sponsor recognizes that reaching an organizational goal will take a group of individuals working together to provide the leadership necessary to move VHDA forward.

Once a leadership development team is created and approved, authoritywide emails announce the team and ask for volunteers. Associates, with their supervisor's approval, can participate on the team that focuses on interests and goals that match their own. Upcoming team events and projects, as well as follow-up success stories, are shared with all associates through authoritywide emails and VHDA's biweekly internal newsletter. In addition, each team has a spot on the home page of VHDA's intranet that features a description of the team's mission and an activity planning calendar.

Because each participant is personally interested in what their team is trying to accomplish, they commit to actively participating in the team's goals. With individuals voluntarily and actively engaged, each team motivates itself and develops skills internally—the proven best way of learning. Participants are able to excel as individuals and as members of a team while developing meeting facilitation, collaboration, problem solving and conflict resolution skills.

These skills lead to *measurable improvement in authority operations* across the board. This can be seen in the successful authoritywide collaboration required for work-related projects, including new product development, such as VHDA's Homebuyer Tax Credit Plus; creative financing strategies, such as our recent Ginnie Mae loan securitization; internal projects, such as our Building for the Future renovation initiative; and handling external challenges, such as the current foreclosure crisis.

Recognizing That None of Us is as Smart as All of Us

The ability to collaborate is valued so highly at VHDA that it is a core performance competency for all associates, and is included in associate objectives. Collaboration centers on the ability to work effectively as part of a team. As with the geese, teamwork is seen primarily as putting egos aside and doing whatever it takes for the good of the team and the authority—following someone else's leadership; leading when it's your turn; and promoting group effort with a positive attitude. VHDA leadership development teams encourage all this, while at the same time providing grassroots opportunities for associates to make a difference.

The Volunteer Council serves as a clearinghouse for volunteer opportunities that support VHDA's mission and the needs of the communities we serve. Team members encourage associates and their families to donate their time, energy and talents to help our less fortunate neighbors all over the Commonwealth. Team efforts include nine home builds for Habitat for Humanity Virginia, 18 ramp builds for Elder Homes, donations to the Central Virginia Food Bank, blood drives for Virginia Blood Services and holiday gifts for the children of Virginia's disadvantaged families through VHDA's Angel Tree. VHDA associates also led the effort to organize and conduct a Habitat for Humanity home build in New Orleans in 2007 by recruiting more than a dozen NCHSA conference attendees from HFAs across the country.

The Recognition and Fun Team (RAFT) works to help associates achieve a healthier, happier work-life balance. To accomplish this mission, the team promotes fellowship among associates by sponsoring team building and social activities. The team's track record of accomplishments includes annual holiday events, associate birthday lunches and a variety of celebrations that recently included Catch a Short Breeze. In addition to an onsite patio cookout, this event featured various games and other team building activities.

The Green Team spearheads authoritywide "green" efforts and tackles sustainability challenges on an ongoing basis. Since it began in July 2008, this team has gotten VHDA's "Go Green" initiative up and running on our intranet. It has also committed to helping associates decrease their carbon footprint and regularly communicates—via our internal electronic newsletter—sustainability suggestions that associates can use to make their work environment, personal life and communities greener.

Special Project Teams, which are traditionally led by members of the three leadership development teams, encourage associates who might not be able to serve on a team full-time to participate in specific projects that interest them. One such example is VHDA's annual Rebuilding Together Richmond effort, which is organized and led by the Volunteer Council. Since 2005, associates have assisted with five Rebuilding Together events. During this year's Rebuilding Together, 30 VHDA volunteers spent two days revitalizing the home of a frail senior citizen. Associates unable to volunteer donated more than \$200 towards the purchase of a much-needed new bed for the homeowner.

Another special project, tackled annually by a VHDA volunteer team, is the Commonwealth of Virginia Campaign (CVC)—a tool similar to United Way that facilitates state employee giving. In 2008, through a variety of fund raising events that supplemented pledges, our associates used their leadership skills to

raise \$103,864 for the CVC. By exceeding our 2007 contribution of \$91,888, special project team associates also helped VHDA earn a CVC 2008 *Shining Star Award*.

These are just two examples of how VHDA leadership development team members willingly commit to action plans and complete the individual actions necessary to help the team reach its goals. Participants choose to engage others in a positive manner to find solutions to issues and challenges impacting their fellow Virginians, as well as those facing themselves or their team. They constantly seek to improve their contributions by engaging in self-development activities such as VHDA's Toastmasters Club, for the benefit of the team. The opportunity to hone these critical leadership skills is made available to all VHDA associates.

Nurturing Environments in Which Teamwork can Thrive

Employees want more than a paycheck. They want to know their work is adding up to something meaningful. Engaged associates are fully involved in, and enthusiastic about, their work. They care about the future of VHDA and want to do their part to help it succeed.

In fact, according to the *Ivey Business Journal*, studies prove that when employees work in teams and have the trust and cooperation of their team members, they outperform individuals and teams lacking true collaboration. Empowered associates are happy associates, and that translates into low turnover. According to industry experts, it costs, on average, \$45,000 to replace a mid-level salaried employee.

The second key issue associated with employee turnover is loss of productivity during the average six months it takes to find and train a replacement. VHDA's average tenure is 10 years—a good example of how well ***benefits outweigh costs*** when it comes to developing and retaining valued associates.

Competency building and management development training provided by VHDA leadership development teams ***demonstrate an effective use of resources*** because:

- Declining budgets make leadership development teams an excellent, yet inexpensive, way to help associates develop mentoring and other leadership skill sets.
- Team leaders are selected from the participant population. Annual elections ensure a consistent opportunity for all members to gain skill development and upward movement within the team.
- A small monetary investment and appropriate use of work time for events and projects enables VHDA to help associates harness their existing interests, talents and desire to make a difference.
- The development of associates' personal and professional growth ensures that every VHDA business unit has a strong bench of players with transferable skills ready to step into new roles.

VHDA now has three leadership development teams, with 23 percent of our associate population currently serving as a team member. Additionally, up to 100 percent of associates become actively involved with Special Project Teams, such as Rebuilding Richmond. As VHDA continues evolving to meet its goals, the future could see the creation of additional teams.

Any HFA can easily ***replicate*** the use of leadership development teams to provide leadership opportunities that empower their associates, regardless of position. Management support and encouragement will result in an engaged and enthusiastic work force.