

This pilot study spanned Aug. 2019 to Feb. 2020

White Paper

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Background

During my first ten years in public service, I noticed a gap in mentorship, coaching, and support for emerging leaders. I was personally not experiencing the level of support I needed coming up through the ranks, and I wondered if others experienced this too. At that point in my career, I had a solid understanding of state government culture because my work experience familiarized me with agencies statewide.

I committed myself upon returning from the Harvard Kennedy School in 2017 to network across state government. The executive education program I had just completed reaffirmed something I had always known – persons who are central in the informal network of an organization have a clear advantage, regardless of their position in the formal hierarchy. The program also taught me the framework for orchestrating the creation of public value.

Over the next year, I combined these two learnings and met with dozens of leaders from across the state government. As I grew my informal network, I led with themes and took the approach to explore ideas that created public value when talking with other leaders. I consistently expanded my informal network by asking each new connection: Whom do you know who you think I should also meet with? The answer would inform who next to initiate a networking connection.

These networking interactions confirmed a missing piece in the middle for mentorship, coaching, and support for leaders. In 2019, I created a one-page value proposition, called The Enterprise Innovators Circle. I pitched my idea to a dozen colleagues to create a group to explore navigation, support, and visibility for the work of emerging leaders. Everyone I pitched my value proposition to had an affirmative response, yet I was not getting traction on moving my idea from theory into practice.

Others had confirmed that my idea was valuable, but I wondered if it was doable. Where would I get the resources and capacity to make it happen? Who, with positional power, would support my value proposition? Who did I see as an authorizer to provide legitimacy? The Kennedy School taught me that if your sources of power are not right for the innovation or change that you want to make, you will need to team up with others. In June 2019, I approached the Chief Learning Officer for the State of Washington, who had already heard my pitch. I asked her directly to sponsor a pilot. She said yes.

Methodology

INVITATION TO JOIN

I purposefully invited people from diverse cultures and backgrounds from my informal network to join the pilot. I did this because my goal was to provide a safe space for managers to navigate the challenges of being a leader, and I needed to know that participants were leaders who modeled seeking to understand the motivations of different individuals, respected the views of others and showed empathy and humility. They were also persons who were central in the informal network of their organizations, regardless of their position in the formal hierarchy.

KICKOFF

The kickoff meeting occurred in August 2019 in partnership with the Interagency Committee of State Employed Women and the Washington State Department of Enterprise Services Workplace Learning and Performance. From the start, I gave the group a new identity as “Innovators” to cultivate a shared identity as co-creators for positive change. (For example, I began every email communication with “Hello Innovators!”)

As I thought about the diversity within The Innovators Circle, I tried to predict as accurately as possible the probability of faultlines emerging: subgroups or coalitions that emerge within teams. I saw the likelihood of strong faultlines developing based on two elements: the diversity of race or culture and the variety of government agencies. I saw a low probability of faultlines emerging based on the majority being of the same gender (women) and sharing the same educational level (all having at least an undergraduate degree) but were of different ages (ranging from the 30s to 50s). Also, collectively the group shared similar values, dispositions, and attitudes about leadership.

I avoided the emergence of faultlines by using a task-oriented leadership style in the initial stages of the pilot. At the close of the kickoff meeting, I assigned participants to meet one-on-one before the next meeting to discuss a leadership challenge they were experiencing. Over the next few months, I intentionally switched from a task focus to a focus on relationship building. By December 2019, opportunities for socialization became a central focus in our group, with invitations to family events like a tree trimming party.

MONTHLY MEETINGS

Early on, I facilitated participants through an in-depth discussion to capture leadership topics relevant to the group. I immediately followed up the conversation with a survey based on the topics I had heard in the meeting. In the survey, I asked the group: *At future meetings, what leadership topics do you want to delve deeper into?* The following were the top-five responses from the group:

- How to harness and sustain a cultural appetite for leaders with character (human-centered).
- How to influence up, down, and across (with or without authority).
- How to develop a network of trusted peers to go to for support or guidance.
- How to further foster trust, so team members are honest and willing to provide feedback.
- Skills to navigate office politics and how to explain it to team members.

The survey confirmed what the group needed to know and wanted to understand, so I used this information to prioritize future agenda topics.

Also, in the survey, I asked the group: *At future meetings, what aspects of peer-to-peer mentoring do you want to explore as a pilot group?* The following were the top responses from the group:

- Extend my network by sharing connections and "doing business" with each other (when appropriate).
- Receive feedback and advisement to tackle specific challenges.

This feedback confirmed that the group desired to meet for peer mentoring to tackle challenges, conduct business, and grow relationships.

Before long, a regular meeting format emerged. I would open meetings by asking the group: *"What do you want from today?"* I would bullet point these items on the whiteboard to help set expectations on both sides. At the end of our meeting, I would close the meeting by revisiting the list. We routinely achieved every item on the list, including things like "have an epiphany" or "experience peace."

Next, the group would engage in an ice breaker or team-building activity. An example includes drawing a random penny no more than 20 years old and then sharing with the rest of the group something significant that happened to them in that year.

After the team-building activity, the group would then share their experiences during the past month mentoring each other. It was followed by the group having an in-depth discussion on leadership

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theory, skills, or best practices. The topics often reflected the initial survey results. Other examples of discussion topics included leading first and managing second or the power of informal networks. A theme that kept showing up during these discussions was around people of color facing significant challenges in promotional opportunities because of implicit bias woven throughout the hiring process. The group collectively desired to explore how to make the hiring process genuinely fair.

At meetings, participants experienced a supportive environment to dialogue and share what they knew and valued as well as what they needed to know and wanted to understand. All-in-all, this created a community of learning. To keep participants engaged, I coordinated the rotation among them to lead different portions of each meeting.

IN BETWEEN MEETINGS

I assigned homework after each meeting, which at a minimum included participants meeting to mentor each other. In between every monthly meeting, participants met for mentoring to tackle challenges, encourage each other, and conduct business. Other examples of homework included surveys and self-assessments to prepare participants for the next meeting.

Value Creation

By December 2019, participants began enthusiastically reporting examples of eclipsing layers of bureaucracy in getting business done because of The Innovators Circle. Participants also shared others were seeing a marked change in them and their leadership abilities, and participants attributed this to The Innovators Circle. The Innovators Circle had brought together emerging leaders of diverse backgrounds to forge new relationships and collaborative opportunities. Below are just a few examples of its value creation:

- Some participants interacted in other capacities. In one instance, an Innovator gave a head nod to another Innovator from the audience during a governor’s task force meeting. Her head nod signaled to her fellow Innovator that it was okay to “speak truth to power,” and so she did. She later shared this story with the group and said she felt as though, “I had wind under my wings because I had people at the table who had my back!”
- Another Innovator reported experiencing The Innovators Circle as a space to come, “be clumsy,” and vulnerable. He experienced a space where he could “fill my cup back up” and openly share his challenges as a leader. He reported experiencing a “positive impact every month in a small amount of time,” which led to implementing ideas in his department. He was inspired to create a “Speak Your Truth” space. A space for department employees to come and share stories, connect, and collaborate.
- In the words of one Innovator, “The peer-to-peer meetings helped the team quickly build trust as a group because we developed trust in each other in those personal meetings. The greatest value I have received was to participate in a group where we discussed challenges in hiring and promoting people of color, authentically discussed barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and shared our learning and experience in leadership, which is different from management.”
- In the words of another Innovator, “I felt that everyone belonged, and I could feel bold, and fearless, and qualified and that for a change, I didn’t stand out because of my race. I believe that there has to be a broader impact for more people to feel that way.”

The Innovators Circle provided a safe space for participants to navigate the challenges of being leaders. It provided leaders with a community of learning. It helped leaders to grow their abilities (and grow their informal networks) to become better leaders. It provided an avenue to identify additional leadership development needs from within the enterprise. It helped participants get business done that might not otherwise occur because of the relationships formed.

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Recommendation

At the Results Review in May 2019, Governor Inslee asked what techniques work best to help managers of state agencies improve their performance. “I have a friend who is not a perfect executive of a large organization. I’m trying to disguise my request for advice here,” the Governor added, laughing. “How do I become a better executive? I’m serious. I’m just thinking of my own life. I’m walking around worrying about the budget and worried about all this and that. How do you embed this in a manager that this is a high level of responsibility?” (Drew).

The Innovators Circle could be a solution. Public service managers need a safe space to navigate the challenges of being a leader and growing informal networks to become better leaders. To be official, The Innovators Circle needs operational capacity, legitimacy, and support. The Department of Enterprise Services Workplace Learning and Performance seems to align with the goals of The Innovators Circle and is the recommended authorizer. DES sponsored the pilot and can provide legitimacy by making this value proposition official and perpetual.

If DES acted as an authorizer, who would sponsor the operational capacity to make it a permanent fixture? Who would provide the resources? I hope that DES and anyone reading this white paper will impart legitimacy to actors who could provide the capacity, resources, and support to make it official and perpetual. Participants of The Innovators Circle collectively want to see its existence continue and expand after the pilot ends.

If a solution were to expand across the state by creating more circles, I strongly recommend the continued use of the methodologies outlined in this white paper. I also recommend having a person(s) continue in the role of orchestrator. (Harvard professors found that someone must act between all points to ensure they are continuously operating together.)

The group consistently revisited a collective desire to influence hiring and promotional practices across the state to ensure equity, diversity, and inclusion. I highly recommend The Innovators Circle complete this work after the pilot ends. And that the Chair and Vice Chair of the Interagency Committee of State Employed Women, in partnership with business resource groups, champion any policy work that may come from these efforts to the Governor’s office.

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Acknowledgment

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Much gratitude to Cheryl Sullivan-Colglazier, Michaela Doelman, Amal Joury, and Jane Chapman for using your positional power to authorize the pilot. A special thank you to Alexandra Manual for mentoring me while creating The Enterprise Innovators Circle.

References

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Appendix

SAMPLE MEETING AGENDA



Enterprise Innovators Circle

Innovators Circle Meeting Agenda
Dec. 6, 2019
8:30 – 10:00 AM, DES Room 2330

Housekeeping – 5 min

- Shanelle asks the group: *"What do you want from today?"*

Ice Breaker Activity – 20 min

- Ice Breaker – facilitated by Kathleen

Report outs – 15 min

- Report out on peer-to-peer mentoring experiences – facilitated by Ayanna

Presentation & Group Discussion – 40 min

- How to further foster trust, so team members willingly provide feedback – presented by Mike

Wrap up – 5 min

- Revisit the *"What do you want from today?"* list

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Appendix

SAMPLE EMAIL COMMUNICATION

Hello Innovators!

To share documents, please find a site just for us here: [Innovators Circle](#)

Click the "Sign In" link in the upper right-hand corner of the page. Use your email address to log in, and here is your password: [Innovators!](#)

After you sign in, you will have the ability to upload files in the *Library* tab. (You do not need to sign in to view the site.) (Also, I uploaded our team contact list and survey results in the *Library*.)

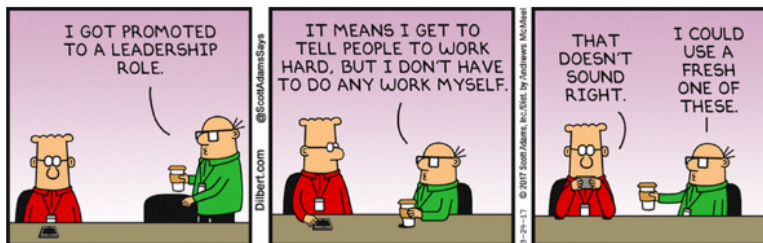
HOMEWORK

Between now and our next meeting on Oct. 11, please do the following:

- Continue to meet for peer-to-peer mentoring.
- Take the Managing-vs-Leading-Self-Assessment (see attached). (I also placed this in our *Library*.) This assessment will help us continue exploring our theme: *Lead First, Manage Second*.
- Expect to report-out about your peer-to-peer mentoring(s), as well as to participate in a team conversation about the assessment.

Lastly, our time together this month was nothing short of inspiring! I hope you all have an [AMAZING](#) month, and I look forward to "circling" together again soon.

Cheers,
Shanelle



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