Coaching City Leaders in a Transformational City

Frank Joseph, Candice Phillips and Joan O. Wright

Five years ago, Charlotte, North Carolina's city government realized it had a significant challenge. While Charlotte was enjoying dramatic growth and a strong economic engine, the "Queen City" found itself lacking a sufficient bench team of future leaders. Red flags were raised when a number of key executives were positioning themselves for retirement and the most likely high potential mid-managers had been impacted by right sizing in the early 1990's or simply hadn't developed their leadership skills to a level that would qualify them as legitimate promotional candidates. City leaders responded by enabling a meaningful investment in leadership development. They called upon Candice Phillips, Frank Joseph and Joan Wright to serve as partners in the development and execution of a custom-tailored program called Dimensions in Leadership. Now in its fifth year, the program has stemmed the tide of leadership deficit.

The transformation of Charlotte, North Carolina has been remarkable. A modest southeastern mill town of about 20,000 citizens at the turn of the century, the Queen City is now a thriving, growth-oriented metropolis of nearly 1.5 million people. Much of this growth has occurred in the last 30 years with 33 percent of the population being added during this time.[1]

While similar growth spurts in other southeastern American cities have caused significant problems, Charlotte has found ways to reinvent itself almost on the run. The largest metro area in North Carolina and the second largest financial center in the United States, Charlotte is a business-friendly community proudly boasting the addition of nearly 9,000 new corporations representing $8.6 billion in economic development in the past ten years alone.[2]

A City and Its Leaders Transformed

As you might imagine, supporting the political, financial and infrastructure needs that exist as a direct result of this growth has been a challenging if not daunting task for City Hall. Concerns like commercial and residential development, transportation and the environment are the charge of a progressive City manager and City council group. They, in turn, work with senior managers called key business executives who lead 14 business units that address a myriad of municipal challenges.

As a result of the right sizing in the early 1990s, the city's organizational structure was streamlined and many management positions shifted in scope. Although there were no layoffs, a growing gap in management and leadership skills and experience were unintended consequences. The City's Training Team, led by Edith Blydenburgh, moved from the Human Resources organization to partner directly with the City Manager. The mission of this innovative team was to address the gaps in Executive and Leadership Development, organizational change, business process improvement, and team based initiatives.

By 1996 the local economy was thriving and Charlotte City Manager Pam Syfert and her team of government leaders realized the explosive Charlotte growth. They recognized that the traditional "government" organizational model was obsolete and not longer met the needs of this thriving and growing City. This executive team shifted to a "business" organizational model offering City services and embracing managed competition. They implemented the Balanced Scorecard, innovation and learning became a key organizational measure and the Training Team renewed its focus on Executive and Leadership Development. By this time a number of key business executives were preparing for retirement and suitable successors were neither plentiful nor prepared. Unfortunately a number of years had passed without the strong focus of the early 90s on developing managers.

In 1998, the City Manager's Training Team partnered with key business executives to design a customized coaching and development program led by Senior Training Specialist Candice Phillips. This program would be named Dimensions in Leadership and would be aligned to support the new organizational focus. The sponsorship and initial design would come from the City Manager and her 14 executive leaders. Additionally, Dimensions in Leadership would aid in leadership development by identifying and providing executive coaching to a "high potential" bench team of middle managers. These "high potential" leaders already serving in Charlotte's City government would become viable candidates for significant future leadership roles.

Enter Executive Coaches with a Game Plan

Candice Phillips recruited the support of Frank Joseph, an area leadership coach and consultant and together they led the initial pilot of Dimensions in Leadership. The pilot was an early success. Its key success ingredients are driven by the program's flexibility and simplicity. Additionally, the pilot results proved its capability of addressing individual needs of participants while providing a basic platform and approach that delivers a much wanted consistency to the City's overall development efforts. "The flexibility and simplicity of the program are among its strongest points," declared Phillips. "It is fully capable of addressing individual needs of our participants while providing a basic platform and approach that delivers a much-wanted consistency to our overall developmental efforts."

In 1999, the initial pilot of Dimensions in Leadership included Charlotte area external coaches Mary Lou Albano and Frank Joseph with internal coaching support and program leadership from Edith Blydenburgh and Candice Phillips. In 2000, Joan Wright, a Charlotte-area executive coaching consultant would join the Phillips/Albano/Joseph project team and further enhance the program by adding to the executive coaching component. Vern Williams, a fourth executive coach would round out the team. Receiving full commitment from the City, the Dimensions in Leadership program has been conducted each year for the last five consecutive years. Carol Boger, internal training and development consultant, has just been appointed by the City of Charlotte to lead the project team for 2003-2004 Dimensions in Leadership program.

"We knew going in that the process of transforming leaders in a transformational city would be extremely challenging", Frank Joseph conveyed. "To provide value to participants, the City and the taxpayers, we needed to thoroughly explore all of the various aspects of leadership both on a theoretical and practical basis. These dimensions would result in a thorough development experience for each participant."

It was determined that the Dimensions in Leadership program would engage 20 "high potential" mid-management leaders in Charlotte's current City government each fiscal year beginning in 1998. "Twenty was a limit," pointed out Wright, "because we wanted to be able to provide executive coaching and stay very close to the participants as they made various shifts and growth in their leadership. An important aspect of leadership development is providing the kind of personal attention that participants will appreciate and acknowledge with 100% responsiveness.

An executive sponsor selects each of the 20 participants. Typically, these sponsors are key business unit executives managing one of the 14 City leadership divisions. They have sound knowledge of the participant's aptitude for leadership. "The selection as a participant for this program is considered an honor," indicates Joseph. "Those who are fortunate enough to be part of this process are engaged in a structured nine-month program designed to expedite their leadership development."

"We are now in our fifth year with Dimensions in Leadership," points out Joan Wright, "and the results of our efforts have been extremely gratifying. We have now worked with 100 high potential mid-level leaders and they are either waiting in the wings to assume a leadership role or they have already assumed greater responsibility. Naturally, the success of each participant will lend further emphasis to the value of the program."

Along these lines, it is estimated that those connected with the program have championed the cause by indirectly reaching approximately 500 additional leaders through the active influence of program participants. This pass-along influence is sure to maintain a healthy interest in program participation and many believe that this program will pay handsome long-term dividends for citizens of Charlotte.

Six Key Program Practices

"The Dimensions in Leadership program is built upon six practices or approaches that contribute heavily to its overall success," remarks Joseph. "These are best practice approaches that form the foundation for the entire leadership development activity and each one contributes heavily to the overall effectiveness of the program." A summary of these six practices follows.

Pull vs. push coaching

Program participants are encouraged to expand their leadership capacity to actively produce the results they truly desire (pull) versus simply learning about and responding to plans that the organization or someone in the system has designated (push). Robert Hargrove in his *Masterful Coaching Fieldbook* extensively describes this coaching technique.[3]

Wright summarizes this technique: "During the program, participants are expected to address the 'pull' approach so they can more fully realize their inner aspirations and needs," indicates Wright. "In essence, this important psychological transition becomes a catalyst for the acceptance of leadership and its associated responsibilities."

Partners establish stretch goals

During Dimensions in Leadership, important stretch goals are identified by a variety of people involved in the program. A partnership of sorts is formed with activity and commitment from the participant's boss, sponsor, participant leader and executive coach.

Together, this team or partnership assesses where the leader is relative to the organization's competency model and other relative yardsticks. Additionally, the team works to create a powerful future for the leader and accurate picture of where he/she is performing in the present with gaps and underutilized strengths identified. The assessment often addresses leadership qualities like thinking strategically, building consensus and understanding the political environment.

"When the partnership is collectively working toward something they aspire to achieve," points out Wright, "our experience reveals that the declaration of the gap, attitude and behavior is precise and the details are quite clear. Together, they pursue action and resources with passion, accountability and intensity."

This greatly aids the process of moving the participant forward and melding the partnership into a cohesive unit that genuinely cares about individual as well as corporate needs.

The four dimensions of organizational and leadership development
Participants in the Dimensions in Leadership program are encouraged to blend their talents, skills and interests in multiple directions. They are presented with models of leadership that requires attention in at least four different and distinct areas:

> *The organization*: a "corporate focus" on the mission and purpose of the organization and the role each individual will play in fulfilling the mission statement

> *The business unit*: a commitment to the specific objectives and tactical activities required for the success of the business unit and to the identification of resources the participant must bring to bear in helping to attain stated objectives

> *The leader*: a sense of understanding and commitment to purpose is needed as well as the ability to envision the future, direct subordinates, and communicate a sense of direction

> *The community*: an awareness of responsibility for the greater good, the willingness and ability to think globally, and commitment to a purpose that will result in benefits for all citizens of Charlotte

It takes a village to grow leaders
As Hilary Clinton said, raising children was our future. Building on that idea, we say, "It takes a village to grow leaders."

One of the great strengths of the Dimensions in Leadership program is that everyone involved in the "support system" is expected to participate as a coach. With this collaborative approach, high potential participants advance more aggressively through the program and they more fully appreciate the value in and importance of each contributing member. The "village" of coaches involved in the Dimensions in Leadership program includes:

> *Manager coach*: the input, encouragement and direction from the business unit manager that is vitally important to participant buy-in and personal involvement

*Peer coach***:** the guidance and suggestion of peers who have a personal stake in their own development process. This sharing of experiences makes for a strong bond and establishes valuable future relationships

*Mentor coach***:** a mentor who demonstrates interest in long-term career development and helps navigate the political landscape is essential for the participant's long-term success as a leader

*Learning or executive coach***:** the encouragement, mirroring techniques and feedback a learning coach provides keeps the participant on track and moving toward the desired program outcomes

"Over the past five years, those engaged in the program have shifted into a culture of coaching," said Joseph. "Joint accountability has emerged and a corporate sense of responsibility has emerged for building both leaders and their organizations. With many focused on the success of others, more consistent and dynamic results are being realized."

Customized and "competency based" individual development
A basic tenet of the Dimensions in Leadership program is that personal accountability will always be required for program success. Furthermore, the program must not take a cookie-cutter approach with a rigid one-size-fits-all mentality.

"Since each participant and each of the 14 business units in the City of Charlotte is a unique organism, the Dimensions in Leadership program needs to reflect a very flexible and customized capability," offers Wright. "We take great pride in knowing that this program can work as well for a corporate organization as it does for the City of Charlotte."

The developmental model for the Dimensions in Leadership program was based on the model explained in *The Lessons of Experience*[4] by Michael M. Lombardo and Robert W. Eichinger.
- Engage in the study of theory and fundamentals about 10% of the time.
- Participate in feedback systems (key stakeholders in support of leader's development) about 20% of the time, and
- Spend 70% of their time involved in the preparation of targeted plans to identify their competencies and key organizational goals.

Special assignments are typically identified for each participant to create experiential learning. These are excellent opportunities to learn by doing.

Ongoing succession planning perspective
As each high potential leader is identified and moves through the program, criteria for the next level of leadership gaps and needs are discussed between the organizational development team, key business executives and executive coach. The intent of Dimensions in Leadership is to develop bench strength in a consistent, effective and systematic way.

The Roadmap to Program Success
"The Dimensions in Leadership program has succeeded for many reasons," states Joseph. "The least of which is the fact that a clear-cut, easily understood roadmap of activity is repeatedly conducted. Each

program provides for an individual participant's specific needs and addresses his or her area of expertise while at the same time delivering positive momentum for the organization as a whole. Here is a sequential summary of the program's roadmap for success.

Step One: We begin by soliciting executive sponsors for a nomination of their high potential candidates. The executive sponsor bases his or her decision and selection on predetermined criteria such as the existing succession plan, current talent management goals and readiness of specific high potential leaders.

Step Two: A team of executive coaches meets to learn about and discuss the next level context for organizational and individual leadership issues. Examples of these issues may include changes in specific business unit priorities or interdepartmental conflicts. It is also at this time that the program manager notifies the 14 key business managers and the participants of their selection.

Step Three: Dimensions in Leadership "2 day kick-off" is conducted and it involves various leadership foundations, competency assessments, baseline feedback as well as the expected roles and responsibilities of participants. These two days conclude with a small group meeting between each executive coach and assigned participant. The purpose of the meeting is to prioritize the key lessons learned and increase the participant's awareness of leadership strengths and behavioral tendencies.

Step Four: This step in the process has the executive coach meeting with executive sponsor and manager of the participant. The informal coaching relationship is established and the importance of the "village of coaches" is conveyed. Rapport building begins and the participant's background and development competency is discussed.

Step Five: A key point in the program is the time when the executive coach meets with program participant to link assessments and establish a program framework, goals and personal aspirations. It is here that the program begins to gain momentum. The executive coach has an assessment of the participant's competencies and the participant begins to formulate a plan for growth and development.

Step Six: With the participant having established a program framework, he or she now begins a monthly series of leadership foundations, skill building sessions and executive dialogs with key city executives. Typical in this process is the first-hand exposure the participant gets with Charlotte's City Manager and a dozen other key business unit executives--for example, Chiefs of Fire and Police, Director of Planning, Director of Charlotte Area Transit System, and Director of Engineering and Property Management.

Step Seven: To insure that the participant receives the most effective coaching and sponsorship possible, a "Just in Time" Coach's Clinic is conducted for executive sponsors and managers. Topics discussed include leader as coach, facilitating effective coaching conversations, and assessment of personal coaching style.

Step Eight: To set up each participant with the best developmental plan possible, a collaborative "sign off" team meeting is conducted, including the executive sponsor, manager, executive coach and participant. The goal of this meeting is to walk away with a final development plan that the participant and his or her coach feel best addresses the needs at hand.

Step Nine: To insure that the plan is properly executed, ongoing one-on-one coaching sessions are conducted with the participant and his or her executive coach. It is here that the executive coach addresses issues, such as increasing demands on time and resources or challenges in working through others versus doing the work oneself.

Step Ten: After eight months, a wrap–up meeting is conducted. This session includes the executive sponsor, manager, participant and executive coach. A complete and comprehensive review of progress is made, additional feedback is provided, and an informal future development plan is established.

Step Eleven: To acknowledge and recognize the completion of the Dimensions in Leadership program, a celebration program is conducted. Each of the individual participants stands and is recognized. Participants make presentations conveying the lessons they learned. They also declare future leadership commitments before a community of their peers, manager and executive sponsors.

Step Twelve: One final coaching session with the participant and his/her executive coach is conducted after the celebration to share final reflections and agree upon ongoing support strategies. The executive coach is responsible for the nurturing of the participant and for supporting a maintenance plan which helps to secure future leadership advancement.

They Have to Have a Plan

A major step in the Dimensions in Leadership program is the completion of an Individual Development Plan (IDP) by participants. This plan crystallizes their development process and serves as a development map for the participant to follow. It also provides the coaches with an accountability tool.

The IDP is a one-page document. The critical pieces of the document include:
   1. The specific competency to be developed.
   2. The definition of what success will look like.
   3. The courses and readings that will supplement the participant's development.
   4. The name/s of those who will provide feedback on the plan.
   5. The in-place experience the participant will use for development experience.
   6. The target path or action plan.

Since most development occurs through experiences, Dimensions in Leadership focuses on the leader in their current and emerging role. Coaches are constantly reinforcing the translation of "learning by doing" and with continuous feedback from targeted feedback sources.

The Cycle of Growth and Development

Transformational theory, as described by George Land in *Breakpoint and Beyond*[5], is based on the assumption that human social systems and physical and biological systems are very similar in the way they react to changes in the environment. This process of creative renewal and the cycle of growth and development was used as a model for the Dimensions in Leadership program because of its relevance to (1) the development of Charlotte as a city, (2) the city government as a social system, and (3) the individual leaders within the city.

Transformation consists of three discontinuous phases of growth and change:

Phase One is known as *forming* and it is characterized by a chaotic searching for a pattern – a way to connect to the environment. Much energy is expended and, like energy being experienced by a child, this unlimited creativity is not very focused. An organization during this phase is very entrepreneurial and an adult in new leadership spends time "exploring and discovering new tools, behaviors and patterns."

Phase Two is called *norming*. It happens after a pattern is found. It is a time of improving and repeating the connection to the environment. This facilitates growth by using the energy of exploration for replication, duplication, or modification. The process is much more focused. Leaders of an organization "norm" when they create products, franchises, markets, policies, and procedures. In leadership development, leaders learn new management behaviors that were not used as individual contributors.

Phase Three (the final phase) is known as *performing*. It is a time when the boundaries surrounding the system must be relaxed and the system must innovate. It is a time of qualitative growth – as opposed to the quantitative growth experienced in Phase 2. In phase 3, two things are happening simultaneously: while the "core" grows around creative innovations, a simultaneous renewal phase is completely recreating a new entity. The core grows through innovation, while the new entity grows through invention.

The process is divergent and convergent – creative and focused. The organization in phase three will improve the existing physical plant and may build new facilities in other locations – improve core products and add new products to the line. A leader will continue to build a network of relationships and learn new competencies such as strategic planning, consensus building and political savvy.

Change and Transition
The "traditional learning curve" is synonymous with the cycle of growth and development. As an individual progresses from one phase to another, there is a shift in the way resources are used. These "breakpoints" are not always easy and the transition has distinct phases as described by William Bridges in *Transitions*[6] and *Managing Transitions*[7].

Participants in the program learn that to move on, they must let go of something. This release provides the energy and opportunity to try something new and replace the old with the new. In developing leaders for the City of Charlotte, the challenge is to coach the participants through a process of letting go of behaviors and patterns that are no longer useful and adding new patterns.

Awareness is also built around the "neutral zone." This is the creative and chaotic period between the old reality and the new—where patterns shift and new behaviors seem artificial and awkward. While our participants want to "fall back" on old embedded behaviors that are comfortable, the program gives them the support and encouragement they need to make the mental transition that is required to leave the neutral zone behind and move on toward greater responsibility.

"New Beginnings" are also discussed as a part of program theory. This experience occurs when the participant sees the application of the new behavior and understands the benefit and value of

integrating this into the "normal" way of doing business. It is as if a light goes on and new leadership horizons appear.

To Lead or Not to Lead? That is the Question!

Using the City Manager's expectations for Key Business Executives, the City of Charlotte has adopted a leadership competency model that reflects research findings contained in *The Lessons of Experience*[8] by Morgan McCall, Jr., Michael M. Lombardo and Ann M Morrison. In addition, input from a study called *The Leadership Machine*[9] was used. It was completed at Lominger Limited by its founders Michael M. Lombardo and Robert W. Eichinger, and describes a model of development based on the development of competencies for the various layers of leadership.

These leadership layers include:

> *Personal/Professional*: self-leadership, individual contributor, technical expert. The City of Charlotte uses self as a broad category and includes models ethics and values, as well as self-knowledge.

> *People*: The broad category concerns the leader's ability to develop his/her people and includes the competencies of hiring and utilizing the talents of his/her people, developing, motivating, and providing feedback to others.

> *Process/Project:* Building community and understanding the business are the broad areas, with specific competencies being concerned with the leader's ability to build consensus, build partnerships, set priorities, think and act competitively, solve problems creatively and make good decisions.

> *Purpose/Political*: Looking to the future and the leader's ability to communicate a vision, think strategically, manage change, and understand the political environment.

High Potential or High Professional

Charlotte's research from the Center for Creative Leadership provides insight about individuals who were successful at one stage of development and "stalled" or "derailed" at another level. The definition of "high potential" leaders used in association with the Dimensions in Leadership program is described by Lombardo and Eichinger as "learning agility."

High professionals are usually focused on technical learning and tend to want to know everything about a narrow part of an enterprise. They constantly seek opportunities for gaining deeper knowledge and skill in their technical or functional area.

High potentials are usually very skilled in their technical area, usually in the upper third of performers, and their learning style is balanced between technical and general knowledge. They generally are able to discern the "vital few" from the trivial many and do better at "learning on the fly"—a competency described by Lominger Ltd. in *For Your Improvement*[10]. Another quality that differentiates participants in the Dimensions in Learning program is "emotional intelligence." This is the ability to relate to individuals and groups, as researched by Daniel Goleman in *Primal Leadership.*[11]

Situational Leadership II®, based on the work of Ken Blanchard, is also used as a model for development in the Dimensions in Leadership Program. This tool provides valuable frameworks for leaders; especially those who have been successful as an individual contributor and are now considered "high potentials" for continued development.[12]

Situational Leadership II® segments the development process into four quadrants using two sets of behaviors: Directive and Supportive.

Quadrant one involves directive behaviors. It recognizes low support and high direction. This quadrant is the first stage. Frameworks, tools, calendar, and assessment are provided for the participants. Quadrant two involves coaching and includes high direction and high support. This stage involves the most energy. Learning Coaches, Supervisors, Key Business Executives, and peer leaders provide coaching.

The third quadrant is supportive and reflects high support and low direction. At some point in the development process, the participants gain some traction and pick up momentum. They begin to see the value of the new behaviors and begin to experiment with new applications. This leads to delegating - the final quadrant that includes low direction and support. Toward the end of the program, the participants take more initiative and responsibility for their development. The last session is termed "transitions" instead of graduation to continue the learning process.

At the conclusion of Dimensions in Leadership, every participant makes a formal presentation to their Key Business Executive outlining their progress. They also participate in a "Stand and Deliver" session in front of all their peers, supervisors and key business managers. Blanchard associates this level with the "self motivated achiever."

Proof in the Leadership Pudding

"Five years of sponsoring Dimensions in Leadership have resulted in some very impressive results for the City of Charlotte," offer Wright and Joseph. "They represent gains both for individuals and the organization as a whole and a wonderful consultation experience for both of us."

One hundred percent (100%) of the participants have enhanced skill behaviors and a mindset shift regarding leadership. Eighty-five percent (85%) of participants have become more productive and 15% of the participants have already been promoted.

From an organizational standpoint, 93% of the participants have been retained and occupy significant leadership roles. The program success has influenced a "developmental approach" throughout human resources programs and numerous examples of cross-organizational learning have resulted in innovations, cost savings, and increased customer satisfaction with city services. Examples include integrating land use and transportation planning—the latter initiative involving a new multi model transit system and the integration of other key services like police, fire neighborhood services and solid waste management.

In summary, to be a transformational city, one must have transformational leaders and leadership. This belief is imbedded in the humor shared among genetic circles. These experts state that in life you

always have two options: grow or die. A corollary to that is that no organization can grow faster than the leaders within it. The City of Charlotte has experienced explosive growth over the last 20 years.

The city has been fortunate that many elements have come together to create a culture of growth and development. One of those elements is the belief and strategy of city leaders such as City Manager Pam Syfert, (and five time Mayor Pat McCrory - a Duke Energy Training and Development Manager) that leaders can be developed. Dimensions in Leadership and the 'village" of coaches that support it are a testament to that belief.

Frank Joseph
Frank Joseph is a speaker, facilitator, coach, and consultant in leadership, team, and organizational development. His focus is on developing strategic leaders and he has worked with professionals in both private and public sectors. His clients include the City of Charlotte, Wachovia, Southern Progress, Novartis, and W.R. Grace.

Mr. Joseph has served in leadership roles in the academic community and was Dean of Students and Director of Leadership Development at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He also was an excellence award winner as a leader with Drake Beam Morin, the world's largest career management firm. Frank has bachelors and masters degree from The Pennsylvania State University and is a former President of the Charlotte Chapter of ASTD.

Candice Phillips
Candice Phillips has been involved with corporate training and development for 17 years. As a senior training specialist with the City of Charlotte Training Team, Candy has had the opportunity to be involved with leadership development at several levels. In addition to leadership development, she is responsible for overseeing business education, supervisory training, new employee orientation and internal consulting for the organization. Candy holds a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration and is a certified facilitator in various topics and assessments, including Benchmarks® 360° Feedback, the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Big Five (Neo-PIR).

Joan O. Wright
Joan O. Wright is principal of O'Sullivan Wright Consulting, a firm specializing in Executive Coaching, Leadership Development and Talent Management Strategies. Her practice helps companies achieve targeted business results by attracting, developing and retaining key leadership talent.

Sample clients include City of Charlotte, Wachovia, Wells Fargo and Duke Energy. Joan has 21 years of corporate experience in Human Resources Management roles with Philip Morris, Citicorp, GE Capital and most recently at First Union National Bank where she was head of executive leadership development. She is an active speaker at major global leadership development and executive coaching conferences. Additionally, she holds the distinction of advanced certified corporate business coach. Her professional affiliations include senior executive coach with Executive Coaching Network, Inc., International Coach Federation- Charlotte Chapter, and Rotary Club of Charlotte-South.

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