

A Study of Leadership Development in the Regional Institute for Health and Environmental Leadership

The doctoral dissertation of Linda Olson (Olson, Linda. Leadership Development for Public Health and Environment, unpublished dissertation, University of Denver, 2005) examines the leadership changes in 67 graduates for four years (1999-2002) of the Advanced Leadership Training Program of the Regional Institute for Health and Environmental Leadership (RIHEL). Of the many changes identified by Olson, the following illustrate the impacts of RIHEL on the growth and development of leadership qualities among its graduates.

(A) 95.5% of the RIHEL alumni described specific leadership situations in which their behavior was influenced by their participation in RIHEL. The situations most frequently described were:

- Leading on boards or task forces, such as regional bioterrorism response team, a government health board, a national air quality group, a national emergency response committee, etc.
- Leading on cross-sector collaborations, such as a pilot school health nurse program, a public-private partnership, oversight of a collaborative on radioactive material jurisdiction, a research collaboration focused on causes of haze, etc.
- Leading new initiatives, such as a countrywide fire plan, new tribal programs, a hospital merger, a new regional leadership training program, several start-up groups that secured new funding for pilot projects, etc.
- Leading through hard times, such as serious budget cuts and staff reductions, a program dismantling, a merger of contentious departments, a non-declared federal environmental contamination emergency in a depressed community, etc.

(B) When participants were asked to identify those factors which had contributed most to their growth or change in leadership practices, four themes occurred most frequently in their responses:

- Confidence. RIHEL was credited with substantially increasing the confidence of the participants and with increasing their willingness to take action in leadership situations and create new leadership opportunities.
- Skills. The participants identified skill sets that they had acquired from their RIHEL experience. These skill sets contributed to greater confidence and willingness to act in the presence of leadership opportunities. The skill sets involved most frequently: problem-solving, team-building, collaboration, and relationship skills.
- Self-Awareness. RIHEL was seen as contributing to dramatic changes in self-awareness in two consistent ways: first, the perception of self as a real or potential leader; second, the recognition of leadership opportunities as existing constantly and in everyday work situations.
- Frame-of-Reference. Participants reported developing a new philosophy of leadership, a new language for describing and understanding leadership, and new ways of interpreting and responding to leadership situations.

Olson's dissertation concluded: "RIHEL as a training intervention can be credited significantly with the changes in leadership practices of alumni from years 1999-2002. It gave them self-awareness, a leadership framework, and skills to improve in multiple leadership opportunities. Increased confidence was central to their development. Confidence was both an encouraging factor and a resulting factor to the increased exemplary practices. Leadership training had a positive impact overall in the RIHEL alumni leaders' development. ... This study provides insight for those integrally involved with RIHEL as well as those outside of RIHEL. ..." (pages 200-201)