

This paper will discuss an employee leadership development program called *CentreStage*. *CentreStage* is a ten week, 30 hour, program offered to Ministry of Education and Training employees in the Office Administration Group. These employees, mainly women, work primarily in the secretarial field in a range of government positions from receptionist to secretary to executive secretarial jobs. The program is offered free of charge to employees during working hours and is led by managers in the Ministry of Education and Training. A combination of workshops and guest speakers make up the curriculum. The program is offered three times per year.

### **Why the Office Administration Group?**

*CentreStage* was targeted to this specific group of employees as a result of a staff survey conducted in 1991. Office Administration staff were asked what kind of program would assist them with personal and professional development. The survey reported that there was interest on the part of the employees to develop their leadership skills to further their careers in government. The program was formed with this feedback in mind. However, it is important to note that government downsizing and layoffs began to take effect in early 1992 and leveled off in 1996. This climate of insecurity prompted employees worried about being laid off to enrol in *CentreStage* to explore career options. At the present time, the threat of downsizing is not as strong, and therefore, employees are again focused on their development within the government. There is a strong possibility that further downsizing will take place in 1999 and beyond which may once again affect the *CentreStage* program. In addition to assisting people to build their leadership skills, *CentreStage* complements other programs such as developmental and acting opportunities that are provided to staff.

### **The Purpose of *CentreStage***

The purpose of *CentreStage* is to provide employees of the Ministry of Education and Training with personal development, leadership and employability skills. According to the surveys conducted by the Conference Board of Canada for its *Employability Skills Profile*, employers require employees to develop new ways of thinking, managing and working. According to Mary Ann McLaughlin in her study, *What Are Employers Looking For?*, the employers that were surveyed identified the need for employees to have positive attitudes and behaviours, strong communication skills and the ability to work well with others in a team environment. The *CentreStage* program provides the opportunity for participants to develop the personal development and employability skills listed in the *Employability Skills Profile*. Further *CentreStage* provides a learning climate that is safe and team oriented.

It is likely that the Ministry of Education and Training will benefit as an organization by providing the *CentreStage* program with its workers having enhanced employability and leadership skills. As Thomas Bailey notes in his article, *Changes in the Nature and Structure of Work: Implications for Employer-Sponsored Training*, providing employees with training is a way to enhance the skills of groups of employees, and therefore, of the organization. He further

states that those organizations which successfully integrate work and learning into the ongoing operation of their business will have important advantages including increased employee loyalty and morale.

### **What Does *CentreStage* Need to be Successful?**

According to Robert Wenig and William Wolansky, in their study on employer-sponsored training in the United States in 1983, employee training requires the commitment of many parties. Management must view training as a long-term investment rather than as a cost. Specifically, there are certain resources and commitments required by management in order to offer successful employer-sponsored programs including the commitment of senior managers to employee personnel development, some incentive for employee self-improvement, the availability of well-equipped training facilities and an adequate instructional resource center.

For *CentreStage* to be a success, there must also be a strong commitment on the part of the colleagues of participating staff. Often colleagues have to support participants by doing their work while away from the office. The program also requires commitment from participants in terms of regular attendance, participation during sessions and providing feedback in planning the curriculum.

*CentreStage* requires significant resources in order to offer participants a variety of experiences. These include having facilitators who are willing to provide the time to plan the programming and to deliver the curriculum, the availability of physical space, audio visual equipment and the commitment of guest speakers.

### **The Selection of Participants**

Participants are selected for *CentreStage* on a first come first served basis. The program is advertised on the email system to all members of the Office Administration Group and flyers are posted in the Ministry buildings. Participants are asked to complete a form which includes space for a recommendation from their immediate supervisor. As Michael Weerts discusses in his study on developing instruments to assess employer-sponsored programs, training opportunities should be open to all interested employees and should be publicized through use of electronic means such as email or bulletin boards and through other means including postings and memorandums. Weerts suggests that other key factors for determining participation include using recommendations from supervisors and not basing participation on seniority or level of position.

### **Determining Learning Needs**

In his research on determining learning needs, Weerts recommends using a questionnaire or survey to determine employee learning needs. One way to achieve this is through the use of self assessment questionnaires to get information on what the participants would like to learn and how they learn. As Charles Claxton, Patricia Murrell, and Shirley Griggs point out in their extensive studies on learning styles, the identification of learning styles will motivate students and contribute significantly to their learning. In the *CentreStage* program, participants explore their learning styles in the first session. Information about learning styles can also help

participants and facilitators become more sensitive to the differences participants bring to the program.

### **The *CentreStage* Curriculum**

The curriculum is designed in the format of what Patricia Cross would define as a non-credit, adult education program with an emphasis on group process, teamwork, personal development and life long learning. There are some design features in *CentreStage* including a visioning exercise and a formal program evaluation that are found in other public sector employee development programs. Terry O'Banion has written extensively on the subject of designing staff development and leadership programs in the community college sector. He believes that a statement of philosophy for the personal development program should be developed and approved by those for whom the program is designed. Further, he would recommend an evaluation of the overall program, including indications of improvement in the development of individual staff members.

In the *CentreStage* program, all participants are enrolled prior to the first meeting and no new participants accepted after the first meeting. In the first session, the group works together on developing a vision for their learning. The number of participants averages at 25 people. As stated earlier, all participants require permission to attend by their immediate manager. They attend once per week for 10 weeks. Each session is 3 hours. The structure of the curriculum is as follows.

- Week 1 - Introduction to CentreStage and Exploring Learning Styles
- Week 2 - Surviving Workplace Change
- Week 3 - Making Change Happen for Yourself
- Week 4 and 5 - Presentation Skills
- Week 6 - Leadership Styles
- Week 7 - Communication Skills
- Week 8 and 9 - Session Topics as decided by Participants
- Week 10 - Learning as New Way of Working and Program Evaluation

Although the facilitators make every effort to work within the curriculum as outlined above, exceptions are made as appropriate. For example, just prior to one session where the topic was supposed to be *Making Change Happen for Yourself*, the long awaited verdict in the O.J. Simpson case was publicized. The first half of the session was spent discussing the verdict in response to participants' need for discussion.

### **Anticipated Outcomes/ Results**

Successful completion of the *CentreStage* program can result in participants having increased personal development, leadership and employability skills. This includes increased self esteem, an increased network of professional colleagues and a renewed sense of life long learning. In many cases, it is through the network of participants, facilitators, guest speakers and managers that developmental or acting assignments are established. Participants are asked to evaluate their learning experience against the vision or goals set in the first session.

## **Conclusion**

The *Centre Stage* program could be improved within the Ministry of Education and Training and expanded for use in other ministries and agencies of the government. An interesting study could profile the participants of the program and their success in achieving their goal in terms of job promotion, increasing employability skills, finding a new employer, or in job satisfaction.

For more information, please contact:

Catherine Drea

Policy Coordinator

Education Quality and Accountability Office

Telephone: (416) 326-2461

E-mail: [catherine.drea@eqao.com](mailto:catherine.drea@eqao.com)

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**Leadership Abstract**

***CentreStage: A Leadership Development Program for Support Staff Employed in the  
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**Catherine Drea**

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