

Leadership Development Tip: Growing Leaders Throughout Your Organization

By Leslie Fox

Can businesses survive and thrive in the coming decade without seriously committing to developing leaders throughout the ranks? While we often hear CEOs bemoan the lack of leadership capacity in subordinates, too often external leadership training programs and executive coaching are limited to the executive suite and department directors. Funds for external leadership development resources are stretched thin today, and thus developing your own leaders is an effective answer to creating greater leadership depth and breadth in your organization. One cost effective approach to growing your own leaders is implementing a program of Leadership Study Groups led by your own executives.

At Care Communications, Inc. (*CARE*) every headquarters employee is included in Leadership Study Groups, which are similar to book clubs. At *CARE* the leadership development program primarily focuses on Systems-Based Leadership™ as described in our book *Leading a Business in Anxious Times: A Systems Approach to Becoming More Effective in the Workplace*. Every employee is expected to learn how anxiety in the workplace impacts business outcomes. Through group discussions participants learn about universal patterns of emotional behavior. They learn that leadership is a relationship process that increases one's capacity to manage one's own anxiety, work collaboratively and respectfully with colleagues, clients, and vendors and express one's creativity in responding to business challenges.

The program is simple to launch. Each employee is invited to join a study group that meets for one hour a month. The books and articles to be read are selected by the executive team and the meetings are co-led by the CEO and the President. Usually the group is asked to read one or two chapters or articles a month and come prepared to discuss what resonated for them in the assigned reading. The resulting discussions stimulate everyone's thinking and help employees and executives get to know one another at a deeper level.

Introductory groups begin with *Extraordinary Relationships* by Roberta M. Gilbert, M.D., which usually is completed in about four months. The employees then join regular leadership study groups that read a variety of books and articles on systems-based leadership and other business leadership concepts. Groups complete one or two books a year.

The program, which began in the early 2000s has been received enthusiastically by employees and has contributed significantly to building a culture of leadership at *CARE*. All members of the *CARE* team know that they can and are expected to be leaders, no matter what their position on the organization chart. Beginning in 2011, the program will be extended to all field staff, making use of remote technology to support the monthly meetings. Meetings will be co-led by executives and practice line leaders, who have found that the study groups have really changed how they interact with their staff and want to see field staff benefit from leadership development as well.