

Developing a Network of Expanded Leadership Capacity: The Pittsburgh Whole Person  
Leader Mind Brain Program

Program Overview and Impact Summary

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The Pittsburgh Foundation sponsored a seven-month neuroscience based leadership development program for executive leaders from a cross-section of non-profit organizations. Leaders were selected based on potential to impact their organizations and the sector. Originally offered as a three month program to 28 leaders, participant feedback led the foundation to sponsor an additional four months of training. Fourteen leaders continued in the program.

Data were collected throughout the program using a mixed method approach including interviews, action plan assessment, whole person awareness assessment data, and organizational culture assessment data. This summary is based on the following data sources: content analysis of interview data with leaders collected 20 months post program participation, summary data from the organizational culture assessment instrument and time series whole person assessment data measuring the spiritual, physical, intellectual, intuitive and emotional dimensions of leadership.

**Program curriculum:**

The curriculum was delivered over seven months and included 5 face-to-face experiential workshops, individual and organizational assessments, individual and organization action planning, individual coaching sessions, and small group meetings (facilitated and non facilitated) to support learning between the workshops sessions.

**Program objectives included:**

- Understand how the mind and brain interact and how this impacts performance
- Understand the impact of leadership mindsets on individual and organization effectiveness
- Increase understanding of organization culture and change process
- Enhance networking and knowledge sharing in the NPO community

## **Themes and Illustrative Quotes from Content Analysis of Interviews Conducted 20 Months Post-Program**

***Understanding strengths and depleting patterns as a result of the curriculum and coaching led to behavior change that had a positive impact on the leaders and their organizations.*** Comments from each leader suggest that while the context and constraints may not have changed -- their understanding and response flexibility increased, their perspective expanded and they had more capacity to deal with the challenges they faced. This also translated into the ability to see more potential in their situations.

*“I learned a lot about my patterns and how they drained my energy. I have become much more flexible - able to see what is my territory and what belongs to others. As a driver type, I don’t always have to be out in front. It is often the back office support of engaging and allowing people to give authentic voice that is really the sign of leadership - so they can own it. This was a big mindset change for me.”*

***Becoming “brain savvy” led to changes in work practices that positively impacted both performance and work-life integration.*** A majority of leaders stated that they restructured their work practices to increase time for strategic thinking and planning. By limiting multi-tasking and distractions they increased focus and strengthened the executive function of their brain. They became more discerning about what was important versus self described “knee-jerk” responses to urgent requests. Impact was better performance, less stress and increased time for what was personally and professionally important inside and outside of the work environment.

*“I also realized that the constant barrage of information from the environment was derailing my ability to use my concentration - which is a really well honed capability that I have. Clearly, I was not managing my environment.”*

***A Whole Person (SPINE) model of leadership built capacity.*** Leaders described the usefulness of the whole person perspective, assessment and action planning in supporting their performance, well being and resilience. The interview data supported the quantitative data collected in the pre and post program whole person awareness assessment.

*“I learned that if I don’t feel the connection with my whole self then I am cutting off a lot of my energy.”*

*“As a nonprofit leader I was working as hard as I could as long as I could to have breakthrough results. What I learned is that I was a better leader if I took care of myself and took the time to listen to my intuition and my emotions. This change of focus inspired me and my staff to find the funding to expand our engagement in the community and to bring on 12 new partners.”*

**Emotional regulation increased.** Leaders reported decreased reactivity, increased comfort with emotions in self and others, better conflict management, ability to work through challenging “messy” issues, improved staff relationships, and improved board relationships. Leaders increased their comfort for coaching others out of reactive responses. Less chaos and more calm resulted in the work environment.

*“My staff says I’m a much better listener. I listen to my emotions more and I’ve passed this to my staff. We pause more and put ourselves in the other team members positions. There is a lot of listening and empathy in our dialogues that fuels a drive to overcome challenges we face.”*

*“In this program, I befriended the emotional component of leadership when I needed to deal with inadequate performance with a member of my staff. Prior to this learning I would have continued to modestly push this person to improve - a form of tolerance. I was able to make a decision to let this person go, to outsource the function and it’s been better ever since.”*

**Comfort with ambiguity increased.** One leader described this as “moving from one right way to many right ways.” Another described the organization’s work as a journey, and reinforced this concept with staff so that they could increase their comfort with the uncertainty of leading in complex settings. Several leaders reported an increase in cognitive agility and comfort using emergent strategies during chaotic moments.

*“Up until several years ago, my mindset as a leader was to provide answers, to always have answers and always have solutions. But I saw that I needed to become better at stepping into the unknown where you don’t always know the answer. I now have the maturity to be comfortable with ambiguity and to work with it.”*

**Shift from emphasis on operations and tactics to emphasis on strategy.** Participants spent more time leading and less time managing. They made more conscious choices about when to delegate and the how to build capacity in their staff. Leaders increased their ability to act strategically and move their organization forward. Strategic planning events increased. Several made staffing and structure changes to support strategic direction. Bottom line impacts included growth in organization, program and service innovations, increase in financial health of organization.

*“The most powerful lesson that I’ve learned about my organization and strategic thinking occurred through the practice of clearing my calendar, closing my door, putting on music and engaging in research, reading, thinking and planning. I have become more creative, more empathic and much more strategic about issues like succession planning and developing my young staff.”*

*“This capacity led me to give conscious focus to my organization to build better performance without losing the people side. My change in leadership has been so successful that we had an increase in our bottom line of \$500,000 in an 18 million dollar budget. This is a very significant*

*increase in one year. We are now moving our culture towards innovation as a future investment which is not easy in a nonprofit environment. This was revolutionary. A lot of leadership is evolutionary, but this was revolutionary learning and application happening during and because of your program.”*

***Increase in coaching and mentoring of staff.*** Several expressed the importance of championing their organization and its people versus demonstrating their own expertise, overdoing, parenting, or “cleaning up” messes. Many used program curriculum for staff development.

*“I’ve been able to take an introspective look at my leadership style and to delegate more and free myself up to build capacity in others. My confidence level is much higher as a mentor and coach of others - to give direction, to delegate and to inspire my team to do what they need to get done for the organization.”*

***More effective succession planning.*** Several leaders were inspired to consider their own next chapter and how to leave their organizations in better shape.

***Leaders gained confidence and greater clarity on their role in the sector.*** They have self-identified as powerful leaders.

*“I had a mindset as a leader that was more to serve my Board vs. lead them. It had to do with my aversion to personal power. This program taught me to focus on what I needed from my Board and to share that with confidence and clarity. The response has been very good. I have been a stronger leader for my staff as well and it’s really helped me to focus on what I need to be doing for my organization.”*

***Recognition that leadership is ultimately relational.*** Leaders spent more time building relationships and reported greater compassion, empathy and insight into others as whole human beings, including their personal history. They understand more deeply the value of “love” and caring in the workplace. Leader action plans included connecting more deeply with self and others and bringing out the best in self and others. They found shared meaning and purpose to increase engagement. The impact was less fear, better performance, less stress, increased resilience.

*“I don’t cut off my emotions anymore. This makes me more accessible. People feel more secure around me.”*

***Leadership mindset and patterns impact organization culture.*** OCAI data collected 20 months after the program ended showed greater congruence between the current culture and the desired culture compared to data collected during the program. During the interviews leaders made a clear connection between changes in their leadership mindset and the changes they initiated in their organization culture. Specific examples include:

Decrease in clan culture was initiated by leader's move away from paternalistic style towards more accountability and empowerment.

By challenging assumption that nonprofit environment was like a "hamster wheel" – the metaphor of a "fly wheel" emerged which impacted strategic planning, action and staff morale.

Increase in innovation was related to increased leader comfort with risk taking and seeing the organization's work and direction as a journey.

Recognition that staff was ready to move away from the status quo toward more innovation created a shared perspective, which resulted in an emphasis on impact, assessment and new program development.

Increased confidence and strategic orientation supported organization growth and community visioning work that impacted thousands

***The cohort structure was valuable.*** Intimacy and vulnerability in self and others was a catalyst for learning and growth. Being in a leadership role can be isolating. This group offered support and challenge. Hearing people speak about their own journey was validating and also led to new perspectives. Everyone mentioned that intimacy developed and that they were surprised that after 20 months the group could reconnect so quickly and go deep. Several leaders talked about the collaborative potential that was beginning to emerge during the last session. Cohort members continue to support and encourage each other. This cohort believes they will eventually collaborate around a common issue in their community.

*"This has been an incredibly helpful and really intimate leadership development process. I've been through so many leadership development programs and while they've all been helpful, this has been the absolutely most helpful, most useful - day to day leadership development program I've ever participated in. It's been authentic - everyone has been so willing to share and bring their honest self into the process. It has made a huge difference - it's been an amazing experience."*

## Whole Person Awareness Assessment Data:

The Lahl and Egan Whole Person Awareness Assessment is a valid and reliable measure of five dimensions of leadership capacity: spiritual, physical, intellectual, intuitive and emotional. Each dimension is measured using multiple items that ask leaders to respond with the percent of time that the statement is true for them. Responses were averaged across each dimension. Participants reported increases across all five dimensions during the program and these increases persisted 20 months post program participation.

Whole Person Awareness Assessment Time Series Data 2010-2013

