

# Turning the Art of Leadership Development into Science

By **Sister Paulette LoMonaco** and **Laurie Williams**

When our New York-based nonprofit, [Good Shepherd Services](#), acquired two smaller nonprofits in 2012, we gained a golden opportunity to develop emerging leaders in our organization. And that experience set us on the road to adopting a new, more rigorous approach to leadership development.

Indeed, leadership development is an art that we are working to turn into a science, because strong leadership, together with a defined strategy, is the enabler of all the good we aim to achieve.

Our mission is to help vulnerable young people in high-need communities to chart successful futures. The mergers expanded our range of services and challenged talented staffers to step into exciting new roles. Let's consider each acquisition.

## The Art of Stretch Assignments

The first, the Groundwork network of after-school, college preparation, case management, and other support programs, propelled Good Shepherd Services into the high-need neighborhoods of East New York and Bedford-Stuyvesant. The second, the Edwin Gould Academy in East Harlem, brought us a low-income residence for homeless youth aging out of foster care and the family court system. Successfully folding these two organizations into Good Shepherd Services provided an opportunity for key staff to tackle assignments that could stretch them to even higher levels of skill, responsibility, and confidence.

These weren't our first acquisitions in the course of the 66 years that we have been incorporated. And in the past, the executive director and board of directors led the merger integration efforts. However, this merger experience was different. For some time, we have been on a journey to grow all of our senior leaders' capacity and skill in the art of leadership. These latest mergers gave us an opportunity to mentor two senior leaders as they tackled many merger integration challenges.

We asked Kathy Gordon, assistant executive director of our Brooklyn Community-Based Division, to spearhead the integration of Groundwork.

“Our challenge was to quickly assess and respond to the infrastructure and program needs while being sensitive to the staff’s morale,” said Gordon. “One of the key challenges entailed allowing the Groundwork staff members to mourn the loss of their agency, while simultaneously fostering a new and positive connection to Good Shepherd Services.”

Gordon led a Groundwork/Good Shepherd Services transition team that met biweekly for a year, addressing all the small and large issues that emerged. In facing each of these challenges and patiently working them out, Gordon grew in her ability to reshape a culture, to solidify community relationships, and to create and find resources to develop new programs to meet the needs of the community. “I learned an enormous amount from this experience, which stretched me in so many ways,” she said.

A second high-potential leader, Denise Hinds, who was then our assistant executive director of Residential Programs, took on the task of integrating the Edwin Gould Academy into our residential continuum of programs and services. The academy provides 36 studio and 15 one-bedroom units of affordable, transitional housing for homeless young men and women. For Hinds, integrating the academy’s services demanded new and deep knowledge of bricks-and-mortar financing, subsidiary board structures, and government regulations affecting supportive housing. Hinds also worked with the academy’s attorneys to tackle a number of legal issues, including acquiring a permanent certificate of occupancy for the academy’s apartment building.

To complicate matters even more, the two sources of rent subsidies for academy residents dried up, making it increasingly difficult for the young adults to pay their rent. “Given this loss of revenue, I needed to find other means of funding to support the building’s operations,” said Hinds. “All in all, this was a big learning curve for me and gave me exposure to another side of the housing world that I would never have had the opportunity to experience.” Hinds’s successful efforts led to her promotion to associate executive director of all out-of-home care, including our family foster care and adoption programs.

But our leadership development efforts didn’t stop with Gordon and Hinds. We saw an ongoing need to turn what had been pure opportunism for two senior staff members into a system that created opportunities to



Two transfer school students during their graduation. Good Shepherd Services has 12 multiple pathway programs in the Bronx and Brooklyn that help students, who previously dropped out or were off track for graduation, finish their studies and receive their diploma.

Photo: © Federico Rodriguez

stretch and develop our top managers—all 33 of them. We needed to make leadership development a structured day-in and day-out part of our way of doing business—taking it from art to science.

## The Science of Developing Leaders

To evolve in this direction, we thought through how we might link our everyday work to leadership development opportunities tied directly to the skills and capacities needed for the future of our organization. (See *Nonprofit Leadership Development: What's Your "Plan A" for Developing Future Leaders?*) We are now focused on connecting all of these dots using a tool called a [Performance-Potential Matrix](#). For more than three decades, the matrix has been used by for-profits, and increasingly nonprofits, to structure conversations about employee potential and development needs.

The matrix displays nine boxes and plots leadership potential from low to high on the vertical axis, and performance from low to high on the horizontal axis. Someone in the top right box, for example, has earned the highest rating. How are we applying the matrix? First, we looked at our future leadership needs, defined future skills and capacities to meet those needs, and embedded those skills in the criteria by which we assess our top managers in the organization. From there, our executive team created development goals for their respective direct reports. Now we are in the process of identifying development experiences and assignments to help all top managers meet our leadership development goals, as well as providing the mentoring and formal training needed to help individuals get there.

As we develop those experiences and assignments, we follow a time-tested model of leadership development, [the 70-20-10 rule](#). Put simply, leadership is learned primarily by doing, with reinforcement from informal coaching and formal training. Hence, 70 percent of effective leadership development comes from on-the-job assignments, 20 percent from coaching, and only 10 percent from formal trainings.

Here's an example of one manager's development goals and accompanying 70-20-10 assignments:

- **More delegation, less doing.** Assign project to assistant director, providing coaching without actively problem solving.
- **Less formality, more collaboration.** Facilitate a peer coaching group.
- **More big-picture context.** More face time with executive team and the executive director (as appropriate).

For her part, Gordon has found that the Performance-Potential Matrix provides a practical framework for thinking about stretch assignments for her direct reports. And the 70-20-10 rule guides the mix of assignments.

Using the matrix, Gordon promoted a talented manager, Joy Goldsmith, to a new position, senior division director. In that role, Goldsmith's tasks have been heavily weighted toward learning by doing. A new sports program for disconnected young

people has required not just supervision, Goldsmith's strong suit, but going deep into program details and getting hands-on operational experience. Goldsmith also has gotten an opportunity to work with private funders and participate in fundraising visits, another new dimension to her work.

Gordon provided a measure of coaching, as needed, along the way. As for training, "we are extremely big on training and providing resources for that," she observed. Now she considers how training experiences mesh with leadership development assignments for her direct reports.

For Hinds, the matrix has helped her direct reports more clearly understand their strengths and where they can build new skills. "It has allowed us to set clear goals, and people really appreciate that clarity," she said. In one instance, the matrix discussion helped a person make the decision to move on. And in another, a direct report eagerly sought stretch assignments, which Hinds provided. Hinds sees the matrix taking root at Good Shepherd Services because of the way it connects performance evaluations with the organization's leadership needs.

What's at stake with getting leadership development right? It's frequently said that an organization is only as good as the people who lead it. And the best place to cultivate those leaders often is among the talented members of your own staff. That's been our experience. But it's not enough to make leadership development a one-off affair for a select few. With the right tools in place, leadership development rises from art to science—a structured, every-day approach that leans heavily on learning by doing. It's working for Good Shepherd Services, and it can work for any organization.

*Sister Paulette LoMonaco is executive director, and Laurie Williams is associate executive director of Good Shepherd Services, a New York City-based youth development, education, and family service agency that serves over 27,000 program participants a year.*



Harbor School Week: A summer camp student and a Good Shepherd Services youth staff member participating in Harbor School Week, in which summer camp students learned about maritime life and aquatic activities. The City nonprofit organization has 15 summer camp programs in the Bronx and Brooklyn that serve more than 1,500 children and youth.

Photo: Courtesy of Good Shepherd Services

**BOSTON**  
535 Boylston St., 10th Fl.  
Boston, MA 02116  
Tel: 617 572-2833

**NEW YORK**  
112 West 34th St., Ste. 1510  
New York, NY 10120  
Tel: 646 562-8900

**SAN FRANCISCO**  
465 California St., 11th Fl.  
San Francisco, CA 94104  
Tel: 415 627-1100

