

*Leaders Grow Leaders:
Creative Learning Groups at NASA/Goddard and EPA*

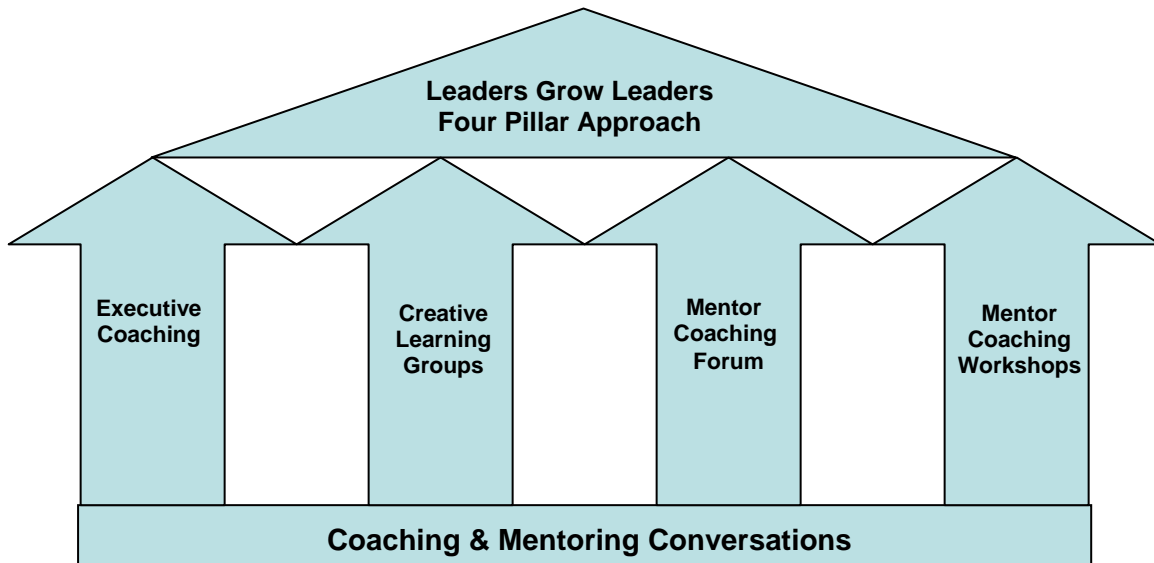


**EDEN (Executive Development Exchange Network)
January 26, 2005**

*Joan Wangler, EDIN Associates & Lee Salmon, Federal Consulting Group
<http://www.fcg.gov>
Members of the Creative Learning Group (CLG)*

“Civil servants deliver America’s dream.” –Ron Brade, Goddard CLG

The Creative Learning Groups (CLGs) are part of a four pillar approach for cultivating human capital at all levels of the organization. New coaching and mentoring conversations are the fuel for enlivening the workplace and producing outstanding results.



***Leaders Grow Leaders:
Creative Learning Groups at NASA/Goddard and EPA***

*There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.
- Margaret Wheatley*

In today's world of relentless change and transition the area of Emotional Intelligence, specifically developing people in their full humanness and ability to have strong relationships and candid conversations beckons the greatest amount of attention. For the last four years members of the Creative Learning Groups (CLGs) at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center and subsequently the Environmental Protection Agency have been involved in an invigorating leadership coaching "community of practice."

Communities of practice are groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise...A community of practice may or may not have an explicit agenda on a given week, and even if it does, it may not follow the agenda closely. Inevitably, however, people in communities of practice share their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems...Communities of practice can drive strategy, generate new lines of business, solve problems, promote the spread of best practices, develop people's professional skills and help companies recruit and retain talent.- Etienne Wenger and William Snyder

Named as a best practice in government by the Council for Excellence in Government, the CLG members have found a time and place where they can reflect, be in community, and have conversations at a deeper and more meaningful level than is possible in the heat of daily doing. They refer to this time as "Oasis Time," a time to pause from the daily journey, be in the company of other travelers, and seek refreshment and rejuvenation in a safe environment. By working closely with one another, with their coach, and special guest coaches, they can see themselves better, view their own blind spots, connect to personal wisdom, consider new possibilities, and take new actions.

This is a time when people drop their facades and talk honestly and openly about concerns, challenges, joys, and fears. The net effect is a groundswell of mutual support. Author Peter Klein tells us that given that all of us are already very critical of ourselves, we can evoke more creativity, more brilliance, and more spontaneous combustion by making it safe for people to try new things that they would never achieve by rigorous critical comments. Unconditional support engenders increased sustained high-caliber performance.

***Leaders Grow Leaders:
Creative Learning Groups at NASA/Goddard and EPA***

***The Story of Mission: Space to Grow
Creative Learning Groups at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center***

NASA's Vision

***To improve life here,
To extend life to there,
To find life beyond.***

How does knowledge management occur freely, naturally, and in community? How do we nurture a knowledge sharing culture and the long-term health and well-being of the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center? How do we optimize human capital to make necessary organizational changes? What happens when baby boomers leave for other pursuits? A sense of community, connection, collaboration, and purpose can help make a significant difference. Knowledge is a social phenomenon; it's all about informal learning, people talking together about what matters, and feeling a sense of ownership, balance, and belonging.

On September 14, 2000 a small group of self-selected members of the Project Management Development Emprise (PMDE) launched a Community of Practice that eventually became known as the Code 400 Creative Learning Group or Mission: Space to Grow. They worked on a vision that propelled them into an organizational frontier that has since sparked the interest and imagination of numerous federal agencies who desire to know the secret ingredients of such an endeavor. Mission: Space to Grow is an organizational form that has radically galvanized learning, knowledge sharing, and change within the Directorate, Goddard, and the greater federal community.

The intent of the pilot Creative Learning Group (CLG) was to promote a coaching culture that supports the Code 400 Directorate's vision of World Class Program/Project Management. The effort was initiated to give on-going support to a group of self-managed leaders; support would be in the nature of designing, championing and implementing learning opportunities that brought out the curiosity of the people who work within Code 400, expanding the room for differences, and encouraging new approaches, more questions, and more productive and meaningful conversations.

One of the major objectives of this Creative Learning Group initiative was that every member of the learning group would learn coaching so that they could share innovative ways to view and manage programs and projects, learn from one another, practice coaching one another on real life issues, promote greater productivity, energize and transform the workplace by replicating their experience of the Creative Learning Group within the organizations they lead. The ultimate goal being that each organization would become a CLG and all leaders would also be coaches.

Leaders Grow Leaders: Creative Learning Groups at NASA/Goddard and EPA

The Art of the Possible

Albert Einstein believed that “Imagination is everything.” William James wrote that “By changing our thoughts we can change our lives.” The purpose of writing a CLG vision statement was to jumpstart us into consciously creating and effecting the changes we wanted to see happen in the Goddard culture.

While we knew that we could not control or dictate the behavior of others, our vision was about how we wanted to conduct day to day business; that tone of being would attract others. Here is the vision that captured our values and what we thought would be possible:

The Creative Learning Group Vision

We are a diverse learning community of motivated leaders with a common goal of utilizing our unique assets to expand our horizons and better serve the Goddard community. Our success rests on our ability to:

- develop a network of trust ;
- share knowledge, information, and insights;
- support, coach, and mentor each other;
- improve our communication skills in all of our conversations;
- implement and demonstrate our leadership values when coaching and communicating with our employees and teammates.

Having a vision is not the same as living a vision. We meet on a regular basis with our coach to sustain and deepen that vision.

CLGs Expand at Goddard

A natural silo-busting phenomenon has occurred at Goddard. The original CLG provided a tipping point for other CLGs to take shape. The CLGs have expanded to include members from different directorates. In addition, graduates who complete the Leadership Alchemy program at Goddard have formed a CLG for continuing growth and development. All the CLGs meet together for center-wide learning. Frequently the CLGs at Goddard and EPA get together for community learning events.

***Leaders Grow Leaders:
Creative Learning Groups at NASA/Goddard and EPA***

Environmental Protection Agency's Mission:

To protection human health and the environment

**Creative Leadership Groups at EPA
Office of Pesticides, Prevention and Toxic Substances**

In August 2002, EPA launched its pilot program, Creative Leadership Groups (CLG), as a way of growing leadership talent within one of its scientific and technical organizations. Then Assistant Administrator, Steve Johnson, wanted to develop talented GS-14 and 15 staff in addition to the limited number of people selected for the Agency's SES Candidate Development Program. He was also interested in increasing collaboration and communication within an organization whose parts didn't communicate very well.

The design of the pilot program borrowed from the success of the CLG program at NASA but was customized to meet the needs of EPA. The EPA CLG was open to self-selected volunteers with an interest in learning and developing their own leadership capabilities. The initial design was to establish three groups: two made up of a highly diverse mix of volunteer candidates from all three parts of the organization, and one intact team that was recruited by management from one of the three organizations within OPPTS. Each group was led by a coach facilitator. The idea was to learn from the developmental experiences of each type of group.

Each of the two diverse mixed, cross-organizational groups defined their own vision and goals. Conversely, the intact group was given a project goal defined by management—a more traditional way of doing work. After about two months, the intact group decided to break away and function more as a self-directed project work group than a CLG. The group redefined the project goal and selected its own leadership. They went on to produce a report and made meaningful recommendations to management.

The two remaining CLGs began to collectively and individually explore a number of topics that are at the heart of authentic leadership; i.e., leadership that emerges from within through a greater awareness of self and the development of relationships with others in the group.

The CLG experience is experiential and creates interplay between safe, intimate small group meetings and larger community meetings that stimulate shared learning, networking and mentoring. Participants in the CLGs have become leaders with broader and deeper awareness, finely honed intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, and a stronger character woven from deep connection with others who share an ecological view of the world. They model leadership qualities for all—leaders and followers—to emulate.

*Leaders Grow Leaders:
Creative Learning Groups at NASA/Goddard and EPA*

Some of our explorations:

- The dynamics of change, transition and their management- leaders understand that we live in a world undergoing fundamental transformation at all levels, that change requires new learning and growth, and constant change leads to emotional losses, anger, grief, resistance, confusion, fear, and ambivalence.
- Assessment and development of Emotional Intelligence (EI) competencies, especially self-awareness and self-management.
- Historical lessons on leadership and courage from the Battle of Gettysburg and insights on Native American culture through the paintings and journals of George Caitlin
- Principles of strategic inquiry and the art of the question-- great leaders don't always have the answers; they usually have the best questions.
- Principles of Action Learning and Appreciative Inquiry-- leaders need to know how to use tools of action research, appreciative interviews, and other coaching conversations to mine the organization and people for its strengths, and base planning and action on what works.
- Coaching and mentoring competency- leaders bring out the best in their people, develop future leaders, and create great places to work. Leaders listen deeply and can give and receive feedback without becoming defensive.
- Conflict management, resolution, and developing sustainable agreements- leaders manage the tension between the vision and reality of the organization and are comfortable with emotions- their own and those of groups.
- Leadership storytelling-- the new leader is a storyteller, realizing that we are the stories we tell and, therefore, we have to be conscious and deliberate in telling them. We learn new knowledge and gain inspiration from great stories.
- Work-Life Balance—leaders keep work in balance with life outside of work so they have the energy, clarity of thought, and creativity to contribute their best continuously.

***Leaders Grow Leaders:
Creative Learning Groups at NASA/Goddard and EPA***

Focused Conversation

Break into conversational groups to discuss the presentation.

Objective Questions

1. What words or phrases do you remember from the presentation?

2. What were some of the key ideas or images in the presentation?

Reflective Questions

1. Where were you surprised?

2. What was the high point of the presentation for you?

Interpretive Questions

1. What was the talk saying? What was it about?

2. What issues does this dialogue bring up for you?

3. What are some deeper questions we could ask the presenters or explore ourselves?

Decisional Questions

1. What could we do here about these issues?

2. What could be our first step?

***Leaders Grow Leaders:
Creative Learning Groups at NASA/Goddard and EPA***

Source: *The Art of Focused Conversation: 100 Ways to Access Group Wisdom in the Workplace* by R. Brian Stanfield