

# Transforming Communities Through Leadership Development: A Conversation with David Castro, Founder and CEO of I-LEAD

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What is the best way to transform America's most challenged communities? David Castro, founder and CEO of I-LEAD, believes that leadership development helps communities create sustainable solutions that work. In an interview this past October, David explained why he sees community leaders as game changers.

While serving as the first chief of the Public Nuisance Task Force back in 1991, David worked closely with community leaders to address problems such as crack houses and nuisance liquor establishments. David recalls that he could "go to one block devastated by open air drug markets and shootings, but three blocks over, there would be a pristine row of houses." The difference was due to community leaders.

Inspired by human potential, four years later, David co-founded I-LEAD with his boss at the Task Force, Lynne

Abraham, the Philadelphia District Attorney. I-LEAD seeks to capitalize on each community's greatest resource, which is its people, by enhancing their leadership skills.

During the first ten years of operations, I-LEAD developed a leadership program focused on three core areas: interpersonal communications, organizational effectiveness and knowledge of complex public and private systems. Both David and Lynne made long-term commitments to the organization. David still serves as the CEO and Lynne still serves as the board chair.

Through partnerships with Urban Genesis, Pennsylvania's Weed & Seed, and Comcast Foundation, I-LEAD has provided its community-based leadership training program to grassroots faith-based and community leaders in sixteen cities all over Pennsylvania. According to I-LEAD's website, "the several thousand strong alumni of I-LEAD—including political leaders and numerous leaders of small organizations and faith congregations across Pennsylvania—form a potent network for serving the public good."

In 2005, I-LEAD initiated an innovative partnership with Harcum College and began offering an accelerated associate degree program in leadership development. Associate degrees are now also offered in early childhood education, human services and law and justice. I-LEAD's associate's degree program achieves an outstanding graduation rate of 70%, twice as high as expected for the

population served. As noted in a 2008 report by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, the average six-year graduation rate for adults over twenty-four years of age enrolled at community colleges is only thirty-five%.

The secret of I-LEAD's success is bringing college to the community. I-LEAD works with local churches and nonprofits to offer evening classes at community campuses in Philadelphia, Chester, Reading, Coatesville and Upper Darby. I-LEAD coordinates services through its local partners who provide on-site support for everything from financial aid and remedial academic, to childcare.

Students move through the program in small cohorts of, at most, 150 students per site. Classes follow an accelerated schedule and are kept small, below twenty students. Students range in age from 20 to 40, and must have already obtained a GED or HS diploma to enter the program. The vast majority of the students are minorities (95%), reflecting the composition of their communities. Low-income students are able to finance up to 95% of their tuition with financial aid. By the fall of 2013, over 300 students had graduated.

In recognition of David's work in leadership development and I-LEAD's new community-based associate degree program, David was named an Ashoka Fellow in 2009. David followed up on that achievement by helping found a high school for at-risk students in Reading, Pennsylvania.

This school integrates leadership training and life skills into the curriculum and provides opportunities for training in health careers. I-LEAD also offers an ever-expanding list of health advocacy and health training programs.

While preparing for our meeting, I mistakenly assumed that David's experience as the chief of the Public Nuisance Task Force served as the inspiration to focus his career on community leadership; however, when asked, David said his primary inspiration came from his experience as a Kellogg Fellow from 1993-1995. During those years, David was granted a 25% work reduction from the Task Force in order to travel around the country for seminars on leadership for a few weeks every three months. Those seminars served as the foundation for I-LEAD's leadership programs.

David singled out the Kellogg program's eight-minute listening exercise as a particularly helpful tool. In his 2012 book, *Generosity 1.0*, David says he thinks about this exercise almost daily. This exercise requires partners to take turns talking about themselves for eight minutes while the others listen – no interruptions allowed. In his book, David goes on to describe seven different listening challenges to avoid. To David, listening well is a key component of effective dialogue and inclusive leadership.

Given that David has written a book on leadership, it seemed fair game to ask him how he created a culture of inclusive leadership at I-LEAD. David first noted that it is

has been tremendously useful to simultaneously teach and practice leadership; the synergy has improved both. David then tried to dispel any notions of perfection and repeated the story in his book of a disillusioned employee with unrealistic expectations who ultimately quit.

Nonetheless, David listed a variety of leadership strategies that have worked well at I-LEAD: maintain a flat organizational chart (avoid many levels of management); encourage input and criticism from all levels; give as much responsibility to others as possible and view conflict as a source of energy and growth.

Although it is desirable to seek a consensus, David concedes an organization is not a democracy. David recommends neither driving out those that disagree, nor striving to reach a moment when everyone agrees; however, conflicts arising out of power struggles and ambition need to be addressed immediately. David strongly advises nonprofit leaders to base hiring decisions on applicants' degree of commitment to the mission. On a ten-point scale, David said he would far rather hire someone with a seven in skills but a strong commitment, than someone with a ten in skills but weak commitment. David measures commitment with a question: Would you keep coming to work if the paycheck didn't get mailed?

When I asked how his leadership has evolved, both as a CEO and teacher, David emphasized two lessons. First, David has come to understand the importance of a business mindset. Competing for resources is hard in a

world where foundations and the government demand outcomes metrics. According to David, I-LEAD's programs fare very well on subjective survey measures of improved quality of life. "If participants in I-LEAD's leadership programs are asked if they feel better, 100% say yes." Objective data on financial improvement, however, is harder to obtain. In response, I-LEAD has shifted its business model away from grants and donations and toward revenue. Approximately 90% of I-LEAD's revenue comes from student loans, student grants and tuition payments.

Secondly, David has come to place a higher priority on creativity. He views depression, drug use and other social ills as "pathologies of a creative soul" denied an avenue for expression. David observed, "In low-income neighborhoods, problems are at the cultural level as well as the economic. Fixing the culture of schools is as much about developing the human spirit as it is about intellectual capacities."

David concluded that what makes I-LEAD's approach so effective is that it "seeks to look beyond fixing symptoms [of poverty], and works at a deeper level, more holistic, by tapping into creative potential." Through their innovative focus on leadership development, I-LEAD has found that the best way to transform America's most challenged communities is to empower community leaders to create self-sustaining solutions that fit the needs of their community.

*Renya Wasson has a PhD in economics from Brown University and taught economics at Villanova University for many years. She is currently enrolled in the Executive Master of Public Administration program at the University of Pennsylvania's Fels Institute, while she transitions into a career in the nonprofit sector.*

## **References:**

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