Empowering Technical Professionals to Become Effective Leaders
Tufts Gordon Institute adapted its masters-level course Learning to Lead as an intensive leadership development program for managers of Tufts University’s Division of Information Technology. Participants built the skills necessary to foster an environment that encourages collaboration, dynamic cross-organizational communication, and creative problem-solving—proving that creative, tailored leadership development can be a catalyst for positive organizational change.
UTI's Leadership Challenge

Tufts University's 300-member Information Technology division is decentralized. The central computing organization, University Information Technology (UIT) handles a variety of university-wide applications, while additional technical professionals are employed by the local schools and departments to provide support. This complex structure can foster disconnected relationships between central IT and local IT groups, and create barriers to the creative cross-fertilization and intellectual excitement that could help the University's IT organizations recruit and retain its top talent.

The University’s VP for Information Technology and CIO, David Kahle, recognized the need to invest in developing a new crop of leaders and understood that a university-wide IT leadership training program would forge strong relationships and provide Tufts' IT with the creative muscle and synergy to strategically address the University's IT needs.

A Tailored Response

Through TGI’s Corporate Education Practice, Mary Viola, Ph.D., Masters of Science in Engineering Management (MSEM) Program Director and Professor of the Practice, and TGI Lecturer Jerry Brightman, Ph.D., adapted Learning to Lead, the core leadership development course of the MSEM curriculum, as a professional development experience customized for IT professionals.

Participants, representing individuals from both central and local IT organizations, met for more than 50 hours over a 7-month period. In the first few sessions, they brainstormed about issues pertinent to IT University-wide, and identified six—ranging from the pragmatic to the strategic—that would serve as the central focus of course activities.

While the course focused on fostering interactions to develop leadership skills specific to the IT profession in general, and Tufts in particular, it was constructed on the premise that in order to make the practical viable, it must be steeped in good theory. So participants completed hands-on, collaborative projects, readings, and writing that held them to the high standards of the MSEM.

A Pragmatic and Relevant Experience

The Learning to Lead experience allowed Tufts IT professionals to interact, communicate, and collaborate in an unprecedented fashion. In a safe environment built on trust and openness, participants who had never previously worked together connected to propose solutions to university-wide challenges. Forming relationships beyond their close working circles, they began to recognize and appreciate the significance of departments they had previously known little about—or, worse, had deemed insignificant.

The learning experience itself modeled a core learning outcome: that leaders don’t simply develop tangible solutions to problems, their job is to create an environment where creative problem-solving is possible. Participants were “open and willing to try new things because they had a group of people there to reinforce the lessons learned,” explained Viola. Brightman echoed this sentiment, noting that face-to-face interactions among participants shifted to “talking with, instead of at, each other.”

Experiencing a New Kind of Team

Working to solve problems specific to their daily work, participants brought a deeper level of focus and determination than they would have for hypothetical case studies. Believing in the importance of the issues they were working on, participants designed solutions that would immediately and directly improve their working environment.

The course succeeded in promoting collaboration across sectors, fostering better communication, and creating stronger understanding among different IT departments. Customizing and strategically tailoring the leadership course to the specific needs of Tufts’ IT environment proved so successful that there are plans to repeat the course for a second year, with another group of IT professionals.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Course objectives focused on providing students with the opportunity to develop knowledge, skills, and mindset for effective leadership, management, and teamwork, including:

- Interpersonal/team acumen that will allow participants to foster the development of effective teams.
- Strong communication skills, including active listening and speaking to motivate teams and inspire others.
- Conflict management and negotiation skills necessary for forging successful solutions to complex problems.

“Cross-organizational communication and collaboration improved greatly. I expect significant, long-term benefits. I would recommend this program highly.”

DAWN ISHIM
Director of Communication and Organizational Effectiveness, Tufts UIT

SIX CHRONIC ISSUES

Participants helped to shape course content by identifying six issues that would be the focus of their collaborative work:

- Improve IT productivity through project portfolio management
- Improve customer satisfaction and cycle time of new computer deployment
- Foster a more creative environment in UIT
- Build trust in the University’s IT organizations
- Streamline Tufts’ Interdepartmental Requisition process
- Increase adoption of office productivity tools by Tufts faculty and staff

“Learning to Lead participants established a shared language for addressing problems and exploring future solutions.”

MARY VIOLA
MSEM Program Director

“This experience was transformative. I expected to gain some skills that would be helpful for my staff. But the opportunity for self-assessment was wonderful, and I was able to apply the leadership learning immediately.”

LIONEL ZUPAN
Director of Research and Geospatial Technology, Tufts University

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Director of Communication and Organizational Effectiveness, Tufts UIT
What is your leadership challenge?

Innovative, creative, and tailored leadership development can be a catalyst for transformative organizational change. Tufts Gordon Institute’s faculty can tailor corporate education programs for a wide range of organizations.

To learn more, contact:

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