



Developing the Skill Set and Mindset of Future University Leaders

Emory University is highly invested in and committed to developing its employees — particularly those with leadership potential. With the goal of building a pipeline of future leaders throughout the university, Emory’s learning and organizational development team has created and oversees several leadership development programs for staff at all levels — from high-potential front-line employees to people managers to director-level executives.

While all of these programs are in high demand and enjoy widespread support (nearly 1,600 Emory employees have completed one or more of the programs), Emerging Leaders at Emory, which targets mid-level leaders with high potential for growth to a strategic leadership role, has been particularly successful.

The Need

Prior to the creation of its formal leadership development programs, Emory encountered several challenges in developing leaders within the university. “We are a large, decentralized institution with multiple cultures across campus; almost nothing is “required;” and we lacked a formal talent management system,” says Wanda Hayes, the university’s senior director of learning and organizational development.

Although Emory has had an executive-level, high-potential leadership program for many years, the implementation of a new talent management strategy a few years ago opened the door for expanded leadership development offerings.

Getting Buy-In

After the learning and OD team mapped out a strategy for how it imagined new and/or redesigned leadership development offerings for high-potential employees at multiple levels might be implemented, and what the different programs might look like, it was time to get the stakeholders on board, says Hayes. Senior leaders from the learning and OD office, along with Emory’s associate vice president for HR, met with deans, vice presidents and other senior leaders from across campus to solicit feedback around the concept of “high-potential” (what does it mean,

how do we measure and define it?); discuss specific school and division talent needs; and talk about differences in leadership competencies and needs at different levels. From these conversations came the blueprint for the Emerging Leaders program.

“Our deans and vice presidents were very vocal about the need for additional development of their high-potential employees in order to ensure better transitions into new

roles at higher levels, and as a means to increase the retention of top talent,” says Hayes. “As it turns out, getting buy-in was the easiest part of the process.”

Emerging Leaders at Emory

Emory’s Emerging Leaders program targets high-potential, mid-level leaders (managers and assistant/associate directors) being considered for more strategic roles at the director-level or higher, and focuses on developing both the skill set and mindset needed at the next level. For the purposes of the program, says Hayes, “high-potential” individuals are defined as those who have a high motivation to lead and bring out the best in others, have a strong interest in personal development and are receptive to feedback, are able to adapt easily and deal with complex and ambiguous environments, are resilient in the face of stress and change, and are a good culture fit with Emory.



Through its multiple leadership development programs, Emory University’s learning and organizational development team is helping the institution address talent planning by helping to retain leaders, creating avenues by which to promote and rotate talent from within, and helping to ensure success at key transitions throughout the institution. For these reasons and more, the team was selected as the recipient of CUPA-HR’s HR Excellence Award in 2017.

Participants must be nominated by a vice president or dean, and the selected individuals move through the program in a cohort that represents a cross-section of the university (an approach that, according to Hayes, helps build a

foundation for relationship-building and collaboration and facilitates a better understanding of the talent across the university.)

The Emerging Leaders program is built around the concepts of leading self, leading others and leading the business, and consists of leadership style assessments, developmental assessments, workshops, peer coaching and mentoring, action learning, guided reflection, and the opportunity to interact in an informal setting with vice presidents and deans from across campus. Participants log roughly 180 hours of learning and development over the course of eight months. Program topics include:

- leadership styles and self-awareness;
- performance-based communication;
- coaching, emotional intelligence and diversity;
- cultivating relationships and partnerships;
- strategy, budgets and decision making; and
- managing change, resilience and immunity to change.

At the end of the program, participants present a portfolio project wherein they reflect on the program and the impact it has had on their leadership style, their skill sets, their mindset, and the most meaningful takeaways, including specific examples of how they have implemented the concepts in their current jobs.

According to Hayes, the program was well received from the get go — for its inaugural run in 2015, she received 56 nominations for 20 spots. Thus far, 58 individuals have completed the Emerging Leaders program, and, says Hayes, the metrics indicate that it is serving its intended purpose — of the 39 graduates who have been out of the program long enough for measurement to be completed, 95 percent have remained at Emory, 23 percent have been promoted at the institution, 26 percent changed jobs within their department or division, and 10 percent changed divisions.

“The program’s impact on participants and the institution has been evident and far-reaching,” says Hayes.

“Participants have reported improvements in their decision-making skills, coaching abilities, emotional intelligence, ability to create networks and partnerships, communication skills, ability to deal with change, and self-awareness, and have reported increased confidence and a broadened perspective of university-wide issues.” As for

the benefits to the university, Hayes says there have been documented instances of increased efficiencies, cost savings and cost avoidance, and improved leadership competencies. The learning and OD team regularly assesses the program and its effectiveness through surveys, focus groups, success case interviews, pre- and post-program feedback from participants and their direct supervisors, program participant retention data and utilization data.

Hayes attributes the success of the Emerging Leaders program — and in fact all of Emory’s leadership development programs — to several factors: ownership by senior leaders, a clear connection to the institution’s talent management strategy, approaching learning and development in a holistic manner, and creating programs that meet needs and help address workforce-related challenges.

What’s Next?

Says Del King, Emory’s associate vice president for human resources, “The process of creating and implementing our leadership development programs has led to an increased understanding and awareness of the need for a better talent management process and strategy, which is now underway.” To that end, Emory’s HR division is currently working on streamlining and creating consistency around the university’s approach to talent management, including implementing similar talent assessments across the board

and maintaining these assessments in a central HR database. Additionally, learning and OD is considering moving from nominations for leadership development programs to invitations based on talent assessments.

The team is also preparing to launch a new leader onboarding program this summer, which will be mandatory for newly hired and newly promoted managers and will provide a solid foundation of leadership principles, culture, and policies and procedures of the university.

With the third cohort having just completed the Emerging Leaders program, Hayes and her team will spend the summer gearing up to launch the next cohort of the executive-level program, Excellence Through Leadership, in the fall (because of the time and resources needed to administer the programs, Emerging Leaders and Excellence Through Leadership will run in alternate years going forward).

“Our hope with this and our other leadership development programs is to ready a steady stream of leaders-to-be — leaders who are prepared, knowledgeable, skillful and eager to lead in the direction the university is headed.” 