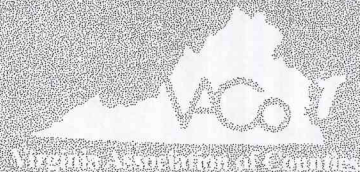


Recognizing the Best in County Government Programs!



# 2014 Achievement Awards



## 2014 VACo Achievement Awards

Deadline: June 2, 2014

### Application Form

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 2, 2014.**

#### Program Information

Locality Henrico County

Program Title Re-Imagine Training: Learning Through Conversations

Program Category Organizational Development

#### Contact Information

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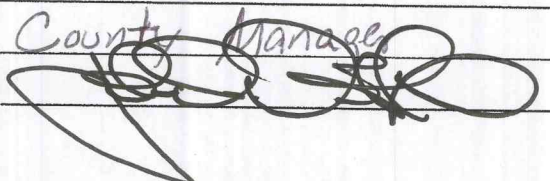
Telephone # 804.501.7203 Fax # 804.501.7200

E-mail ben14@co.henrico.va.us

#### Signature of county administrator or chief administrative officer

Name John Vithoulkas

Title County Manager

Signature 

## Call for Entries

## Re-Imagine Training: Learning Through Conversations

### 1. Abstract of the Program

The world of training is changing. Traditional learning conventions are increasingly under pressure. Learners want answers “just in time,” and are accustomed to searching online for information quickly and inexpensively. In contrast, it is costly and time consuming to design classroom training. Additionally, traditional training is frequently “content” driven rather than culture-focused – a concern at the brink of 2012, when Henrico County was experiencing a massive culture shift due to an unprecedented number of long-term, high-level employees retiring, including our County Manager of 20 years.

To meet these challenges, County staff developed an agile, responsive initiative which involved far less development time and created an interactive forum for participants to exchange organizational wisdom. By incorporating panels of experts in our classes, facilitating leadership discussion cohorts, and sponsoring classes and town halls led by our own upper managers, we reached a new audience of learners while sparking powerful conversations about our organizational culture. Over 600 employees participated, and surveys indicated that 81% improved in the competency of *Understanding the Business of Henrico County*. Most importantly, this initiative is learner-focused, easily adaptable to future organizational learning needs, and key to engaging the workforce in conversations about our culture as we navigate change.

### 2. Problem/Need for the Program

At the cusp of 2012, Henrico County employees experienced cultural changes unlike any in the county’s recent history. Several leaders retired, and there was a pressing need for employees to share knowledge, have conversations with top-level leaders, and develop social networks to support them through these turbulent

times. At Henrico County, we had an extensive catalog of “soft skills” classes for employees, but the traditional classroom model did not go far enough to empower people to have conversations, become more collaborative, solve complex problems, and create social networks to support them on the job.

Another concern was the time it takes to develop training content. Multiple sources (Chapman Alliance, ASTD) estimate that it takes 43 hours to develop an hour of instructor-led training, which can be cost-prohibitive and inflexible. We were seeking ways to “do more with less” and trainers were juggling multiple projects. We needed a way to reduce the development time for training.

It was imperative to come up with ways to meet – and anticipate – learner needs more rapidly and more cost-effectively than the traditional instructor-led classroom model allowed. It was also clear that training needed to be more agile and more responsive to organizational needs. Perhaps most importantly, we needed a training format with a greater amount of participant knowledge sharing, conversations, collaboration, and creation of social learning networks for continued support back on the job.

### **3. Description of the Program**

On December 14, 2011, the Department of Human Resources’ Employee Development and Training (ED&T) staff brainstormed new ways of approaching training. This session was called Re\*IMAGINE\*Training – using capital letters for the word “imagine” to emphasize the need to think in a new way about the learning function. Our goal was to create methods other than traditional instructor-led training to use our time, resources, and county experts to facilitate learning and conversation among employees.

We brainstormed a list of 38 ideas, and then rated them with regard to their value to the organization, their ability to streamline processes (make it easier for our customers to participate in our programs, as well as providing additional options for them), and the amount of time and resources it would take to implement them. This rating system resulted in four strategies – some of which we could implement immediately in the beginning of 2012, and some which required more in-depth development for implementation later in 2012 and into 2013:

1. Panels of Experts in our traditional classes
2. Upper Manager-Led Facilitated Conversations with employees
3. Follow Up Discussion Groups with participants from our traditional classes
4. “Conversations on Leadership” Cohort Discussion Groups

**Strategy One: Panels of Experts in our traditional instructor-led classes:**

We sought to increase the amount of storytelling, networking, and conversation related to our culture within traditional instructor-led training classes by incorporating panels of employee “experts” into these classes. Employees on the panels shared stories of personal struggles and successes, answered class participants’ questions, and engaged in conversations about lessons learned:

- Learning and Developing Supervisory Skills, 1/31/12: In this class targeted for non-supervisors, two first-line supervisors participated on a panel for an hour and a half, discussing such issues as transitioning from a peer to a boss and dealing with performance issues. Later, two upper managers participated in a panel for an hour and a half, sharing how their leadership styles have changed as they moved up in the organization.

- *The Power of Political Savvy, 4/24/12*: In this class for County employees in any job classification, four middle and upper managers participated in a panel discussion for two hours, sharing their personal stories about navigating political challenges within local government.
- *Learning and Developing Supervisory Skills, 10/2/12*: As above, with different leaders on the panels.
- *Inclusive Leadership: Harnessing the Power of a Diverse Workforce, 1/16/13*: In this class for participants in various classifications, a panel of culturally diverse employees shared their personal backgrounds and told stories of how they struggled with, and overcame, perceived differences between them and others in the workplace. They participated in open conversation with class participants and answered their questions.
- *The Power of Political Savvy, 2/13/13*: As above, with different leaders on the panels.
- *Inclusive Leadership: Harnessing the Power of a Diverse Workforce, 5/22/13*: As above, with different panel members participating.

### **Strategy Two: Upper Manager-Led Facilitated Conversations with employees**

With so many changes occurring at the top levels of our organization, we sought to create opportunities for employees to listen to, and interact with, our upper managers. With this in mind, we created two three-hour, open-forum, facilitated conversations for middle managers led by our Director and Assistant Director of HR:

- Transitioning to an Upper Manager Role, 9/16/12: This facilitated discussion with a group of middle managers focused on how to transition from middle to upper management. Our Director of Human Resources shared the story of her own transition and lessons learned, and participants also discussed other top county leaders' transitions as case studies to guide them in their own career aspirations.
- Top Leadership in Henrico: Article Discussion Group II, 5/15/13: This facilitated discussion with a group of 36 middle managers focused on a case study related to leadership and ethics, and involved in-depth conversation about implications for participants' own leadership roles.

At the end of 2012, our former County Manager retired – a huge shift for our culture given that he had been our County Manager since 1992. Our new County Manager approached us about coordinating Town Hall meetings to give employees a chance to interact with him and discover more about his vision for Henrico County – as well as hear from our departing County Manager. These sessions were so successful that we coordinated two more, giving employees the opportunity to converse with him and his four Deputy County Managers:

- Town Hall: Your Time with Virgil and John, 12/18/12: A two-hour session for non-supervisors and first line managers in which our outgoing and incoming County Managers shared their visions and stories. The majority of time focused on a facilitated question-and-answer session in which employees asked questions, shared observations, and interacted informally with our two County Managers.
- Town Hall: Your Time with Virgil and John, 1/4/13: As above, but for middle and upper managers.

- Town Hall Meeting with John and His Team of Deputy County Managers, 6/7/13: An informal town hall meeting that all county employees were encouraged to attend. Employees asked questions, got to know our top leaders personally, and heard directly about the pressing issues facing the County while being challenged to think about ways they could help our top leaders in solving them.
- Town Hall Meeting with John and His Team of Deputy County Managers, 11/22/13: As above with different attendees as this was an encore session to allow even more employees access to interact with our top leaders.

**Strategy Three: Follow Up Discussion Groups with participants from traditional classes**

We created a forum for participants in some of our more intensive training classes to harness their energy and keep the conversation going by holding discussions months after the original class. Participants shared how they applied what they learned, and sought guidance from each other related to continued challenges:

- Transitioning to an Upper Manager Role: Follow Up Discussion Group, 12/4/12: The Assistant Director of Human Resources and ED&T trainers facilitated a two-hour discussion with middle managers who attended the class *Transitioning to an Upper Manager Role*. The group discussed the challenges of transitioning from a middle manager to an upper manager, and shared lessons learned from their own and other leaders' experiences.
- Focus on Leadership Follow Up Discussion Group, 3/18/13: Focus on Leadership was an intensive five-day, 40-hour class that ran from January-May, 2012. In this Follow Up Discussion Group, instructors facilitated a

discussion with alumni about lessons learned and applied since the original class. The group left the session with a renewed commitment from the previous class to continue to meet on their own, and they continue to meet to this day.

- Lead Worker: In Charge but Not the Boss Follow Up Discussion Group, 11/19/13 and 12/10/13: In the original two-day class targeted for non-supervisors, participants examined the unique challenges of having leadership responsibilities without formal leadership authority. Weeks after the class was complete, participants participated in two-hour facilitated conversations about how they had applied the content.

#### **Strategy Four: “Conversations on Leadership” Cohort Discussion Groups**

Perhaps our most creative strategy was to design two intensive cohort discussion groups for learners who committed to meet over several months in order to discuss leadership challenges they faced. We kept the group size to 12 or fewer people in each cohort in order to maximize their ability to share stories, ask each other for feedback, build trust, and develop lasting relationships with peers from whom to draw support back on the job:

- Conversations on Leadership: Assistant Director Discussion Group: Jan. – May 2013 (8 meetings): Assistant directors engaged in executive development and knowledge sharing – essential elements of the County’s Succession Management initiative. The intimate nature of this experience enabled members to ask questions and draw upon one another’s insights in a safe environment, as well as creating professional networks from which to draw support. ED&T staff facilitated, and each meeting took place at a different location and included facility tours and explanations of processes and functions associated with that site.



- Conversations on Leadership: Middle Manager Discussion Group: Sept. 2012 – March 2013 (9 meetings): A similar format as above but with middle managers and with an instructor facilitating. This session also included tours of a variety of work locations throughout the County. In addition to building trust and rapport, which results in excellent networking opportunities, the tours also increased participants overall knowledge of the organization and allowed the host participant to practice leadership, facilitation and public speaking skills.

#### **4. Responding to Economic Downturn**

One of the primary goals of this initiative was to respond to the economic downturn. Because time is money, we sought to reduce the time it takes to design training classes, and also reduce the time it takes from inception to delivery of classes. By facilitating conversations among participants rather than creating instructor-led training designs, we eliminated the need for our training staff to spend 43 hours designing each single hour spent in a classroom, and our trainers could instead focus their time on the actual interactions with learners resulting in an approximate savings of \$58,931. We were also able to deliver training to meet organizational needs without the typical lag time between recognizing a need and responding to that need.

Going forward, the adaptability of the model allows us to use the core conversational structure to quickly and easily modify it for different target groups and a wide range of content areas. For the 2013-2014 fiscal year, we are sponsoring discussion groups for assistant directors, middle managers, and participants in our Leadership Development Program, and are focusing on topics which range from political savvy to managing generational differences, holding challenging conversations, and managing performance at all levels of our organization. By having the ability to quickly adapt this powerful model to current and future organizational needs, we are

continuing to respond to the economic downturn by significantly reducing the design time to create future learning experiences.

The networking experienced in our conversational discussion groups has helped participants respond to the economic downturn in their leadership roles. Participants have been able to share ideas for cost savings with employees from other departments so that all are able to benefit from good ideas – which might otherwise have been trapped in the natural silos created by functional divisions.

Finally, this initiative responded to the economic downturn from a cultural standpoint. Since “doing more with less” has deeply affected how our county does business across the board, employees have been dealing with the turmoil and confusion that inevitably accompanies large-scale changes. By creating open forums in which upper managers could informally converse with employees at all levels of the organization, we were able to allay some of this anxiety and quell unhelpful (and untrue) rumors which typically sprout in environments without sufficient information exchange – and end up affecting productivity. Hearing directly from our County Manager, Deputy County Managers, and department heads – as well as conversing with one another – went a long way toward decreasing anxiety and creating an environment of trust and openness.

## **5. Use of Technology**

Technology played a core role in all elements of the initiative:

- Excel spreadsheets and data from our Oracle-based Human Resources Management System (HRMS) and Microsoft Access were used extensively in generating lists of eligible participants for our various classes.

- Microsoft Word was used to create the class outlines, promotional and marketing materials, and any handouts shared with participants.
- Email via Microsoft Outlook was also used extensively to communicate before, during, and after each element of the initiative.
- PowerPoint presentations were used in several of the training sessions.
- Participants in the “Conversations on Leadership” Cohort Discussion Groups participated in online leadership blogs. This was a new use of technology for many of the participants, and challenged them to learn new ways of interacting digitally.

## **6. Cost of the Program**

- The greatest cost was \$5000 for the training staff to purchase a vendor’s “Conversations on Leadership”-type Discussion Group model that contained 17 topic suggestions and pre-created discussion prompts for participants. Included in this fee was a half-day workshop for the training staff which taught us effective cohort facilitation skills. When we weighed purchasing this model against the time it would take us to design it ourselves in-house, it was well worth the cost.
- After this initial “start-up” cost, we have been able to quickly and easily adapt the discussion group model for various target audiences and purposes, and will continue to use it for years to come at no additional cost to the county.
- The cost of adding panels of experts to our already-existing classes cost us \$0 since employees were the panel members.

- The Upper Manager-Led Facilitated Conversations cost us \$0 because county leaders facilitated these learning experiences.
  
- Our Follow Up Discussion Groups were facilitated by the instructors who taught the original classes upon which the discussion groups were based:
  - Transitioning to an Upper Manager Role: Follow Up Discussion Group cost \$0 because the original class was facilitated by internal upper managers.
  
  - Focus on Leadership Follow Up Discussion Group cost \$876 for two hours of instruction. There was no charge for the planning and design of the discussion group structure.
  
  - Lead Worker: In Charge but Not the Boss Follow Up Discussion Group cost \$720 for two hours of instruction. There was no charge us for the planning and design of the discussion group structure.
  
- One “Conversations on Leadership” Cohort Discussion Group cost a total of \$3150 for 16 hours of instruction.
  
- The total cost of this initiative was \$9746 with ongoing benefits and with no future expenses needed.

## 7. Results/Success of the Program

The results are many and varied:

- Regarding classes with panels of experts and an increased focus on participant interaction:
  - 81% of participants stated that they had improved in the county competency of *Understanding the Business of Henrico County* when surveyed a few months after they'd taken the classes.
  - These classes received an overall satisfaction rating of 96%.
  - In response to open-ended questions on the evaluation forms, 55% of participants stated that the most impactful feature of these classes was the interaction with experts and each other. This is remarkable given that open-ended questions typically generate a much wider range of responses.
  
- Regarding our "Conversations on Leadership" Cohort Discussion Groups:
  - These classes received an overall satisfaction rating of 97%.
  - When surveyed a few months after the discussion groups ended, 100% of participants stated that they had improved in their leadership skills, 100% stated that they had increased their awareness of their leadership strengths and weaknesses, and 100% stated that the networks they had developed as a result of participating in these discussions were beneficial to their jobs and departments.
  - One participant stated "This was one of the most valuable experiences I've had since being with the county. The sharing of ideas, implicit support, and networking were invaluable and it's a testament to its success that our cohort has decided to continue meeting (after the formal experience ended) to explore other topics of mutual interest/concern."
  - These Discussion Groups were so successful that we scheduled four more "Conversations on Leadership" Cohort Discussion Groups for the 2013-2014 training year, and made participation a requirement for participants in our Leadership Development Program.

- Regarding our Upper Manager-Led Facilitated Conversations:
  - These classes received an overall satisfaction rating of 96%.
  - We were able to reach a new audience. 160 participants who attended had not signed up for other open-enrollment, soft-skill classes in the previous two years.
  - These experiences gave 409 participants access to our top leaders in a time of great cultural transition, allowing them the opportunity to ask questions, informally converse, and share ideas.
  
- Training turnaround time decreased. Due to the shorter time needed to develop these conversation-based learning, we are able to implement them quickly. One example is that when our County Manager requested we facilitate Town Halls, we were able to schedule them within the month of his request without the need for spending 43 hours of development for each single hour of classroom instruction.
  
- A total of 603 people participated in these four types of conversation-driven learning opportunities: Panels of Experts in our traditional instructor-led classes, Upper Manager-Led Facilitated Conversations, Follow Up Discussion Groups, and “Conversations on Leaders” Cohort Discussion Groups. This number will grow as we continue to offer such learning opportunities in the future.
  
- Participants saw such value in networking with, and learning from, one another that after our Follow Up Discussion Groups and Cohort Discussion Groups formally ended, participants committed to continuing to meet as self-directed teams, and they continue to meet regularly to this day.

## **8. Worthiness of an Award**

At the beginning of 2012, as the County of Henrico grappled with unprecedented numbers of retirements in our top ranks, knowledge-sharing became a clear organizational imperative – and one not always achieved through traditional training methods. John A. Vithoukas was named County Manager in January 2013, and he sought a way to reach as many employees as possible in order to share his vision. In addition, we needed to become more efficient while at the same time creating opportunities for a crucial function of learning: conversations allowing the sharing of institutional wisdom.

Our Re\*IMAGINE\*Training initiative achieved all of these goals. We were able to create many more opportunities for the open exchange of ideas while at the same time reducing the time we spent designing traditional training classes. Importantly, we now have the capacity to partner quickly and easily with our County Manager and department heads – key stakeholders and strategic partners in our organization-wide effort to spur important conversations about our culture. At the same time, we now have a model which allows our training staff to be more agile and adaptable, quickly responding to organizational needs and creating the space for the conversations that need to occur throughout the organization. Perhaps the clearest indication of this initiative's success and worth comes from our employees themselves, who have told us resoundingly through their comments and class ratings that they have developed as leaders – and understand our culture more fully – as a result of participating in our conversation-focused learning opportunities.

Perhaps the most important element of this initiative's worthiness for an award comes from its adaptability to other localities and cultures. The model of incorporating panels of experts in classes, facilitating leadership discussion cohorts, and sponsoring classes and town halls led by upper managers can be easily replicated in other organizations, and is an inexpensive and powerful way of getting tremendous learning and cultural value out of minimal time and financial investment.