

Veterans Health Administration

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Executive Dimensions hits the mark in a developmental program for senior medical center leaders.

Leadership development is a tradition at the Veterans Health Administration, where a number of programs have been created to help employees advance in their careers. But in recent years there came the realization that a gap existed at the very top.

“We created a high-performance development model and moved it through all the levels to develop new leaders, because we consider every VA employee a potential leader,” said Kolman Rosenberg of the VHA’s Cleveland Employee Education Resource Center. “After a number of years we realized we were drilling down in the organization but leaving out our most senior leaders, our medical center directors.” Their solution was to create a leadership institute for the top executives of the VHA’s 163 medical centers.

The Senior Executive Leadership Institute, which launched in 2002, is a content-rich program that combines a high-quality educational experience, in-depth assessment and feedback, and extensive follow-on executive coaching. Executive Dimensions, the 360-degree assessment and feedback instrument chosen for the program, was appropriately high level, too, designed by the Center for Creative Leadership to specifically address the leadership issues of top executives.

Providing valid and reliable feedback had been a concern as the VA program was being put together. “We had already been using 360-degree instruments in programs at the lower levels and we originally thought about using some of those,” said Rosenberg, “but they didn’t really reflect the skills and competencies senior leaders deal with on a day-to-day basis.”

Those considerations drew them to Executive Dimensions, which is based on research conducted with top-level executives. Its exclusive normative data ensures that those being assessed are compared only to others at their level, a recognition that their challenges can differ a great deal from people at the middle-management level. VA already had first-hand knowledge of Executive Dimensions, having participated in CCL’s pilot studies of the instrument.

In gearing up for the start of the Institute, VA planners identified

Objectives

- » Provide top-level senior executives with an in-depth analysis of their leadership styles and abilities as part of a comprehensive developmental program
- » Train a team of facilitators in the delivery of Executive Dimensions assessment and feedback

Outcomes

- » Participants received feedback on their skills and abilities and were able to compare their results with those of similar high-level executives
- » Through the program’s educational experience and insights gained from 360-degree feedback, participants gained a new appreciation for the leadership capabilities needed to be effective in today’s work environment

about a dozen people in the organization who would serve as feedback facilitators for the program and contracted with CCL to customize a certification workshop. Rosenberg, who was among those being certified, describes the workshop as an intensive experience that did its job of getting the group quickly up to speed and ready to go. “We gained a good understanding of the instrument, especially the validation and reliability studies that were done with it. We took the instrument ourselves and practiced with sample feedback reports, too.” (Although VA did not require this service, CCL also can provide facilitators who will come to an organization to facilitate feedback on any 360-degree assessment.)

VA scheduled multiple Senior Executive Leadership Institutes, to provide participants with the maximum benefit of attending a relatively small-sized program.

The Institute gives senior leaders a choice opportunity to step away from their daily responsibilities, gain an honest assessment of their leadership strengths in light of the realities of today’s workplace, and develop new skills. “*Many of these people have been in their positions for a long time,*” observes Rosenberg. “*In the last 10 years, the pace has changed and the changes that have come about in the work environment have been monumental. The comment I hear most is how much they appreciate being given time to reflect and concentrate on their own development.*”



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