

# Building Strong Leaders in the California Domestic Violence Field: Lessons from the Strong Field Project

Recognizing that strong and effective domestic violence leaders are needed to carry out their organizations' missions and that leaders hunger for opportunities network, collaborate, and build a movement to end domestic violence, Blue Shield of California Foundation created the Leadership Development Program (LDP) as part of the Strong Field Project. The Foundation partnered with CompassPoint Nonprofit Services to offer a program customized for domestic violence leaders and based on the best and latest leadership and management frameworks and tools.<sup>1,2</sup> Since the LDP began in 2010, almost 60 diverse, leaders from middle managers to executive directors from the domestic violence field have participated in this in-depth 18-month program.<sup>3</sup>

Domestic violence leaders participating in the Leadership Development Program have gleaned many valuable insights into the nature of leadership in the domestic violence field and their own capabilities as leaders. Although each leader would express a unique set of personal lessons, it is possible to identify some common, recurring themes that characterize the overall impacts of the LDP on these leaders. The six leadership lessons summarized below, extracted from individual leadership profiles of LDP participants and cross-analyses of multiple cohort interviews, are intended to inform other leaders as they consider their leadership and career pathways in the domestic violence field and their professional development needs.

## ***Lesson 1: Leaders who intentionally create the space for reflection and self-development can reinvigorate themselves and build a foundation for growth.***

For many domestic violence leaders, taking time away from their programs, staff, and organizations to focus on their own professional and personal development is difficult, part of the ongoing struggle to address issues of work-life balance and avoid burn-out. Those who have fully committed to self-care and professional development as an ongoing practice, however, have typically experienced powerful metamorphoses. Most notably, their self-awareness and self-confidence have reached new heights, largely because the LDP provided them with the time and space for deep reflection. One leader described the result of

*If I try to lead like others in the field, it's never going to work for me. I will only be a good leader if I'm able to be authentic to myself.*

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Leadership Development Program, please see: <http://strongfieldproject.org/about-us/strong-leadership>.

<sup>2</sup> CompassPoint defines leadership as: A process of engaging others to move forward an organizational or community agenda, rather than a position of authority.

<sup>3</sup> Cohort 3 is scheduled to complete the program in December 2014.

this reflection: “I truly feel that I know what my role is now. I’ve gained more confidence in my ability to lead others, to guide others and give them opportunities, as well as to step out of my own comfort zone.”

***Lesson 2: Authentic and effective leadership starts from a place of self-awareness and appreciation of one’s own strengths.***

Struggling with the complexity of leading a domestic violence organization, many leaders express some degree of self-doubt about their leadership abilities and effectiveness. This problem can be particularly acute for those who have made an unplanned entry into the executive role. This self-critical mindset has often had a spill-over effect in the leaders’ organizations and in the field. However, the LDP has demonstrated that it is possible for domestic violence leaders to approach their leadership and domestic violence work from a different frame of mind, one in which the leader recognizes that she possesses a unique combination of strengths and that she does not have to emulate anyone else’s leadership style. The strengths-based approach to leadership used in the LDP has helped many domestic violence leaders make this shift. Engaging with the StrengthsFinder assessment<sup>4</sup> has given leaders profound new insights about themselves and their staff. For example, one leader shared the following:

*Whatever strengths you have are the strengths that are going to help you within your organization and the movement...if you aren’t leading yourself, then you can’t lead your organization and you can’t lead the field. You have to constantly be in touch with who you are as a leader, your own personal strengths and how that plays out within your organization and team.*

*I used to ignore the vulnerable parts of my personality. Now I know that they actually help me to be a more versatile leader.*

***Lessons 3: Effective leaders are not afraid to embrace their weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and they know that doing so can open up new avenues for engaging others.***

Many domestic violence leaders, like those in other fields of social service, tend to view themselves as “heroic leaders” who are expected to have all the answers and make decisions unilaterally. As a result of participating in the LDP, many leaders recognized that this description applied to them and found that as they gained more confidence in their leadership abilities it was easier to let go of this burdensome and unrealistic view of their role. Instead, they became more willing to be honest with themselves, admit their weaknesses, and understand that having areas of vulnerability was quite *okay*. One leader shared the benefits of finding the courage to embrace her vulnerabilities and to acknowledge that she didn’t know everything:

<sup>4</sup> Rath, Tom. 2007. *Strengths finder 2.0*. New York: Gallup Press.

*Being an authentic leader means being honest about what I don't know and what I need help with. I have gotten an overwhelming response from people when I reached out to ask for help.... By the time I stepped into the ED role, I felt a lot more prepared and confident.*

Another leader described learning to “lean into her weakness,” which for her meant developing the ability to network and the “confidence to go out into the field.”

With these realizations, leaders were poised to grow in various ways: to not overprotect their vulnerabilities, to be more open to listening to others, to work to overcome their weaknesses, to become resourceful in seeking help both inside and outside their organizations, to create diverse teams and mobilizing others to tackle challenges and to solve pressing problems collaboratively. Embracing weakness is important, but only part of the equation. The other part is creating diverse teams and mobilizing others to tackle challenges.

***Lesson 4: The possibilities for sharing leadership grow as an individual leader grows, particularly to mobilize others to take on challenges and engage in problem solving together.***

Building on the increased capacity to “lead themselves” through increased self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses and commitment to personal change, leaders often express strong belief in “leading with others.”<sup>5</sup> They are highly committed “shared leadership” but search for ways to effectively mobilize and share responsibilities and decision-making with diverse members of their staffs and acknowledge and bring forth strength and power in others. The LDP has helped leaders address this challenge in various ways, the most important of which was teaching leaders how to empower others to solve problems and take ownership of proposed solutions. This occurs through use of “coaching,” a process that supports individuals to make more conscious decisions and take new action. It helps individuals identify and build on their strengths and internal resources. Coaching also fosters new levels of reflection, awareness, communication, accountability and engagement.<sup>6</sup> Finally, this entailed leaders giving up the role of “fixer” and trusting that others have the strengths and abilities needed to develop effective solutions. This shift on the part of leaders happened more readily when the leaders had developed increased self-confidence and self-awareness as a result of other LDP activities.

For example, one leader related that she was not clear about how to operationalize her goals of shared leadership and integrate them with basic duties of “being a supervisor, getting things done, and having a structure.” But the LDP taught her how to “get out of the way,” avoid micromanaging

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<sup>5</sup> See CompassPoint’s *Leadership Competencies Model* (2009) Adapted from the work of Center for Creative Leadership, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, David Day, and Building Movement Project.

<sup>6</sup> See Judith Wilson & Michelle Gislason (November 2009). *Coaching Skills for Nonprofit Managers and Leaders : Developing People to Achieve Your Mission*, Jossey-Bass.

staff while remaining involved at every level of a project, and truly empower people to “take on challenging tasks.” She now knows that it is important to help others “find their own leadership potential and feel ownership of their programs.” This leader emphasized that the foundation of shared leadership begins fundamentally with the growth that leaders experience and the self-confidence that leaders have.

***Lesson 5: Leaders in the domestic violence field—no matter what their race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation—need to constantly challenge their assumptions about race, power, and privilege.***

The structures of privilege distort our psyches in a variety of ways, depending in large part on our locations relative to each of the multiple axes of oppression (race, gender, class, ability, religion, and sexual orientation, among others). Domestic violence leaders have suffered these distortions as much as anyone, and one of the effects is to produce assumptions and patterns of interaction that can have dysfunctional effects when serving a highly diverse clientele and working with and retaining staff members from diverse backgrounds. Some of the more common patterns are “dysfunctional rescuing,” blaming the victim, avoidance of contact, and denial of difference.<sup>7</sup>

Using a multicultural framework for leadership, the LDP has challenged participating leaders to become more aware of how their own positions vis-à-vis the multiple dimensions of oppression affect their assumptions, behaviors, and interactions with others. This has helped white leaders become more aware of their privilege and how they can use it in positive ways—for example, to build trust and increase access to domestic violence services for all clients in need. It has helped some leaders of color fully step into their cultural knowledge and experiences to address unequal power dynamics and create a more welcoming environment for diverse communities.

*Before the LDP, I was completely unaware of the power and privilege that may be seen in me because of my ethnicity. LDP helped me to understand this, embrace it, and be more aware of it in my dealing with people of all cultures.*

***Lesson 6: Taking risks opens up new opportunities for growth.***

Increased self confidence has tended to increase leaders’ willingness to take risks, which has translated into bold action and the opening up of new growth opportunities. Leaders recounted how the LDP helped them initiate difficult conversations with staff members and colleagues, advocate more strongly for themselves, seek out new leadership opportunities, voice their opinions and ideas more readily, expand their networks, and take on new leadership roles (on task forces or statewide boards) in the domestic violence field. In other words, risk-taking has led domestic

<sup>7</sup> See Valerie Batts (2001), Is Reconciliation Possible, “Lessons from Combatting Modern Racism.” <http://visions-inc.org/wp-content/uploads/Is-Reconciliation-Possible.pdf>

violence leaders to play more active roles within their organizations and contribute more to the domestic violence field. One leader can envision how actions taken now will affect her future:

*Now I take more professional risks that I think are necessary to help me and my agency move forward that I would not have taken 12 months ago. These risks are necessary for me to develop as an individual within my agency and within the domestic violence field. More importantly, so that wherever I land in the next 5–10 years, all of these tools will still be relevant and all of them will be accessible. I think it is so very important what we do and how things transfer [over to new responsibilities].*

## **Conclusion**

Conscious leadership development practices have made a tremendous difference for the leaders participating in the Leadership Development Program. What they have learned from the LDP has become part of their life-long practice in leading themselves, others, their organizations, and the domestic violence field. These individuals have transformed, becoming more aware, effective, and sustainable leaders who are making impacts at multiple levels and are prepared to stay in the domestic violence field for the long haul.

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