

**SUGGESTIONS FOR INCLUSION OF THE DISABILITY COMMUNITY
IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS**

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This brief will identify possible barriers that exclude people with disabilities from seeking leadership opportunities and how current instruction methods can be adapted to overcome these barriers ensuring inclusion.

Introduction

While serving as Program Manager of the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities during the Carter Administration, Claudie Grant, Esq., stated that the key to the advancement of the social inclusion of individuals with disabilities is empowerment; “Now, more than ever, leadership abilities are essential skills that the disability community must nurture and fully utilize.” (Grant, 1995) The question then becomes how leadership educators can aid in this nurturing process. With this in mind, the task for leadership educators becomes two fold; the identification of possible barriers that exclude people with disabilities from seeking leadership opportunities and how current instruction methods can be adapted to overcome these barriers to ensure inclusion.

Carol Gill, Director of the Chicago Center for Disability Research, suggests that there are several specific barriers to leadership development in the disability community;

- Environmental and program access
- Transportation and access barriers
- Failure to accommodate differences in functioning
- Income level of individuals with disabilities
- Educational disadvantage
- Job discrimination leading to lack of employment and in turn leadership experience
- Strength of the status quo of society's institutions
- The dilemmas created by future roles of non-disability allies (Gill, 1999)

Gill further suggests the following to assure future opportunities for leadership development in the disability community;

- Ensure access at all levels of projects, programs, and systems
- Break from tradition and modify programs to meet the styles and needs of the individuals with disabilities
- Create procedures to recruit, develop, train, support and promote persons with disabilities
- Avoid stereotyping attitudes
- Develop ways to recognize and reward leadership accomplishments of persons with disabilities
- Develop innovative working alliances between people with and without disabilities. (Gill, 1999)

How Does It Work

Potential barriers to inclusion of individuals with disabilities in leadership development programs must be identified and accommodations developed to ensure the opportunity for participation in such programs. In addition, current disability based programs must be adapted to provide more traditional leadership training. The Oklahoma Youth Leadership Forum (YLF), a self advocacy program for high school juniors and seniors with disabilities, has integrated a traditional leadership module into its curriculum. An examination of the combination of inclusive techniques and leadership training used in the Oklahoma YLF can provide an excellent frame work to modify existing traditional leadership development programs for inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

Results to Date

There are currently 37 states offering a Youth Leadership Forum. The Oklahoma YLF staff developed and implemented a traditional leadership training module this year (2005) into the curriculum. An evaluation of the leadership training module's efficacy

is currently being conducted. There are also ongoing assessments by the participants and staff on how to improve inclusion and involvement of traditional educators (pre-service Special Ed educators, leadership educators, and graduate students) in the forum staff. Discussions are currently underway between the Oklahoma Development Disabilities Council and the New Mexico Developmental Disabilities Council to aid the New Mexico Council in the establishment of a YLF in that state.

References

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