

The Management Preparation Program of Plano, TX Project Summary

The Management Preparation Program of Plano (MP³) was created and developed when the City of Plano recognized the need to prepare for the tidal wave of retiring baby boomers and the lack of preparation for transitioning to the next generation of leaders. Current statistics indicate 70% of the Management Team is eligible to retire by 2010. In searching for a solution, the absence of succession planning models for municipal government became apparent, as did the urgent need for the development of a strategic plan. The City's commitment to continuous excellence led to a preparation tool to enhance managers' ability to successfully compete for next-level positions.

Executive competencies required to successfully direct the organization into its future were identified and communicated through this initiative. Mastery of these competencies ensures organizational objectives are met; service excellence is demonstrated while working with citizens, non-resident customers, and colleagues; and vacancies in key areas will not create service challenges for the organization. Armed with the knowledge of current organizational status and defined staffing goals, the City established and implemented MP³.

A multi-tiered, twelve-month program, MP³, combines diverse training methods to maximize cognitive, affective, and social learning. The program provides reciprocal benefits for the participants and the City in that managerial skill sets and opportunities for promotion are enhanced while the City's commitment to service excellence is reinforced. The goal is to provide the skills required of executive managers.

This multi-tiered approach to development assists participants in maximizing their emotional, technical, and interpersonal skills. It has been noted that successful leaders understand the concept of emotional intelligence; hence, the City of Plano incorporated this philosophy within a curriculum which includes topics such as Conflict Resolution and Mediation, Public Relations, and Teaming/Decision-making. Coaches work with participants for a minimum of eight hours per month to share their knowledge of organizational culture, processes and expectations. This holistic approach to enhancing leadership aptitude is proven to positively impact personal and professional character. Graduates are prepared to proficiently influence relationships and promote optimum business performance.

Enhancement for Today...Empowerment for the Future

The Management Preparation Program of Plano (MP³) addresses challenges and potential performance gaps resulting from retirements/resignations of tenured managers. Additionally, it enhances skills and broadens perspectives of incumbents to meet high performance standards. It is at the cusp of anticipating changing needs and a desire to remain a high-performance organization that the City of Plano began reaping the rewards of succession planning.

The City of Plano is a well-planned community located in northeast Texas. It has evolved from a small community of 17,872 in 1970 with limited diversity to a large, thriving community of over 255,000 with an ethnically, professionally, and culturally diverse makeup. Today, this municipality employs over 2,500 employees who recognize their primary responsibility as providing “service excellence” – regardless of the task at hand. In the early 1970’s, Plano was a city of only 17,872 that was about to experience tremendous growth and visibility. Plano’s geographic location in the northern corridor of the Dallas–Fort Worth metropolitan area played a significant role in its growth. As U.S. Highway 75 provided easy access to Plano, it became a magnet for young, college-educated professionals and major corporations. By 1990, the population soared to 128,713 and Plano became home to Electronic Data Systems (EDS), Frito Lay, JC Penney, Dr Pepper/Seven Up, Inc., and other major corporations. As Plano has continued to flourish, so has its commitment to preparedness and excellence – so much so that it earned the designation of “All-America City” by the National Civic League in 1994.

Approaching the year 2000, and not wanting to test the notion that “one of the best predictors of future failure is past success,” Plano re-focused its energy on maintaining its status and performance in an environment that was now approaching maturity. It reached that level. Maturity in people is a sign of wisdom, progression, and influence. As an employer and provider of services to its community, Plano is committed to excellence in maturity as it was in growth. A desire to maintain its attraction as one of the best and safest places to “live, work, and play” caused Plano to focus on strategic planning to ensure sustainability for its fiscal and human resources. Human resources are the foundation of any service organization and, in 2001, Plano embarked upon a methodical journey to ensure it would always have capable, qualified employees to consistently provide the level of service to which Plano citizens are accustomed.

Not unlike many other organizations, Plano recognized that it was being impacted by the pending wave of increasing retirements coupled with a lack of focused preparation for transitioning to the next generation of leaders. A 2001 review of Plano’s workforce identified 46% of the Management Team as eligible to retire by 2006, and this number increases to 70% by 2010. The reality of these numbers, as well as the absence of a systematic mechanism to guide the transition process, awakened a sense of urgency within the City Council and Executive Management. Prior to 2000, Plano’s hiring and promotional practices adequately fulfilled staffing needs, as the current demographic phenomenon did not exist on a large scale. However, today’s environment is quite different in that change is constant and strategic preparation is a key component of continuous success. To improve its opportunities for success in a rapidly changing environment – regardless of the challenges presented – the City Manager tasked the Human Resources Department with researching the concept of succession planning.

If properly implemented, this program would have a far-reaching impact on the organization’s culture. Therefore, it was imperative that the HR staff be attentive to what was being requested. The more traditional reactive role of HR would not deliver what was needed. Rather, a pro-

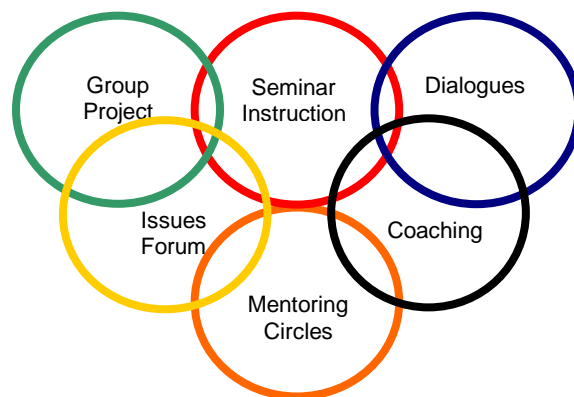
active, business-based, results-oriented process would be the only way to move forward. After all, this was an organizational initiative, not an HR initiative. Credibility was the key to a long-term solution. So, the HR Director met with the City Manager and Executive Directors; listened to their concerns; considered the organizational pulse; anticipated questions and needs; and began research and development to deliver exactly what was needed.

This in-depth research project began with the following questions:

- What are the strategic objectives of the organization now and for the future?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the organization's culture?
- What changes, if any, are indicated to continually improve the work environment?
- What executive/leadership competencies will be required to help the City succeed in the future?
- What assessment methods are beneficial to identify potential candidates and develop systematic training?
- What tools are useful to evaluate program results?

A review of succession planning models in both public and private sector organizations led Plano to develop and customize a model to meet its specific professional development needs. Development of MP³ was not easy. It required time, attention to detail, multi-faceted research, and commitment to delivering a somewhat undefined result. Nine months after its inception, process was stressed as a means to consistently successful outcomes.

This initiative has armed Plano with the ability to enhance cognitive and leadership skills of managers while preparing them to successfully perform in next-level positions as they become available. Rather than risk any negative impact to delivery of services as the number of retirements increases, Plano has ensured itself of performance continuity by preparing the right people to be in the right places at the right times. MP³ promotes continuous improvement through a multi-dimensional approach to learning, as indicated by the model shown below:



How has the City of Plano benefited from this “home grown” succession model? The following characteristics are increasingly evident throughout the work environment:

- Improved communication among staff/across departments
- Availability of cross-functional work teams for special projects
- Promotions and heightened engagement of program graduates
- Improved employee engagement
- Subjects previously thought “closed to discussion” are now “open to discussion”
- Challenges are seen as opportunities.

Some thought Plano's transition through 30 years of tremendous growth to its current anticipation of build-out and maturity would present a challenge to its reputation for high performance practices and customer service excellence. However, the refreshing benefits of succession planning and performance modeling are indicators that reaffirm Plano is prepared and staffed to deliver unsurpassed levels of service to its citizenry for many years to come.

With a goal of offering a comprehensive solution for its succession needs, the City of Plano designed a three-phase, multi-dimensional program. It is important to note that any program of this type should be interwoven with processes to stress transparency, fairness, and purpose. Credibility is necessary if employee and organizational buy-in are to be achieved.

Participation in MP³ begins with an *Application Phase* which invites both self-nominations and executive nominations. To help employees decide whether MP³ is the program for them, interested employees are invited to attend "lunch and learns" to discuss program details and have questions answered by the Program Director and graduates. After attending these "lunch and learns," employees are able to make informed decisions as to whether they want to commit the time and energy necessary to successfully complete MP³. Those who decide to pursue program participation do so for an opportunity to gain higher levels of insight and become more engaged and visible throughout the organization. All applications are screened by the Succession Planning Team (SPT), and it is this team (comprised of the City Manager, an Executive Director, and the HR Director) that determines which candidates will move on to the next phase of the program – the *Assessment Phase*.

The *Assessment Phase* involves a more practical determination of whether employees have achieved a level of readiness to successfully address new challenges presented by next-level positions. While it is often the attractiveness of higher status and salary that compels employees to seek promotional opportunities, MP³ highlights the reality of changing skill sets required for different levels of responsibility. How often do we hear employers struggling to understand why a technically proficient person promoted to a managerial position now seems unable to excel? Could it be the fact that technical competence does not necessarily translate to interpersonal competence? There must be a "fit" between skill sets and position requirements. So, the full-day assessment centers developed require candidates to participate in exercises written to next-level position requirements. For instance, if a candidate is a Department Director applying for participation at the Executive Director level, his/her responses are evaluated based upon his/her capacity to move into that next-level position. The evaluators for all assessment centers are intentionally selected from other public/private sector organizations. The transparency of information shared during the *Application Phase* along with including neutral assessors at this phase helps alleviate tendencies to accuse Plano of pre-selecting participants. In addition to the assessment results and applications, candidates and their immediate supervisors must also submit competency evaluations to the SPT. At the end of the *Assessment Phase*, a final selection is made. The process begins in July and is completed by November. Candidates are notified of selections, and the *Development Phase* begins in January of the following year.

The *Development Phase* is where work for the participants truly begins – and continues. A cohort atmosphere is designed to promote open communication, intensive learning, generation of previously untapped ideas, and encouragement of synergy that will continue beyond the 12-month *Development Phase*. A consistent result of MP³ has been that participants have taken on the affect of a much-used rubber band. That is to say that they are intellectually stretched to a

point that they do not return to the positions of thought or behavior they held at the time of entry into MP³. Employees in MP³ complete an intensive development process which helps them to hone, strengthen, and sharpen their skills. The organization shares in the benefits of this intellectual and emotional growth as well. The MP³ curriculum is an intentionally challenging one which accurately reflects organizational and societal realities of excelling within today's (and tomorrow's) rapidly changing and demanding environment.

As with any successful initiative, there are both expected and unexpected outcomes. Development of MP³ proved to be an effective use of internal talent, as the program has delivered continuous benefits without requiring large financial expenditures. In fact, there was no budget for MP³ from the time of its inception in 2002 until 2004. The HR staff dedicated many hours to the research, development, and implementation of MP³. In addition, a consultant already engaged with Plano agreed to develop content for the curriculum and actually deliver/facilitate the classes. One year later, this consultant agreed to serve as Program Director at no additional cost to the City. By 2004, the program had obtained the credibility hoped for, and the City decided to hire other subject matter experts to assist with curriculum instruction. It was at this time that Plano decided to dedicate funds to cover expenses for speakers, food for classes/meetings, and group project development. As of 2006, this allocation has not increased.

To continue meeting goals of "service excellence," Plano realizes its staff must meet its standards, regardless of environmental factors. Plano's City Manager is committed to providing learning opportunities for staff. In fact, when budgets are being reviewed for places to trim (unlike in many other organizations), the Plano training budgets are far from the first areas of consideration. The time to stop learning and improving is not when turbulence is on the horizon. So, Plano has taken its learning initiatives to an even more accountable level. Plano now partners with two (2) universities and two (2) community colleges to provide growth opportunities for all employees.

As it completes its fifth successful year with MP³, what has Plano learned that may be of value to other organizations? Stick to basic concepts of learning and communicating, and stress transparency and openness throughout the organization. There are many best practices, but organizations must take the best practices and customize components to meet their specific needs. There must also be a realization that process and relational issues are addressed over time, and patience is required to attain desired results. Words of wisdom from Plano: *Assess your needs; develop and implement an appropriate plan; monitor and revise the process, as indicated; resist the urge to title missteps as failures; and stay committed to your goal(s).*

What does the future MP³ look like? It is a phenomenon that has already begun. What began as a succession initiative to ensure that retirements of tenured managers would not negatively impact delivery of services to citizens of Plano has become an organization-wide initiative to promote continuous learning and professional development.

Planning has always been a core commitment for Plano. It has positioned the City to remain strong and competitive for forty (40) years. In a service industry such as municipal government, typically 60% - 70% of the budget is dedicated to staffing needs; so, it remains a priority to invest in the most important aspect of the budget – people. Offering MP³ as an avenue of development has been a great asset, and it has served as a springboard to many other innovations. Rejuvenation and synergy have resulted making Plano excited about its readiness to seize opportunities not yet visible on the horizon.

Reinforcement of the characteristics of high performance and increasing the level of dialogue have truly been the cornerstone of MP³. Plano has been given many opportunities to share knowledge within the organization, the community, and with its governmental colleagues. This sharing has been accomplished through on-site classroom instruction, site visits throughout the community, and presentations for seminars. Although MP³ was customized to meet Plano's specific needs, its basic structure is adaptable within any environment. Since its introduction in 2003, Plano has responded to eighty-five (85) written requests for information on the development and implementation of MP³. Plano subscribes to the idea of sharing and partnering for win-win results. Consequently, MP³ has been the subject of sixteen (16) articles in state, national and international publications; the recipient of five (5) awards; presented as a topic during twelve (12) conferences; and was included in the CPS Human Resource Services study entitled *Building the Leadership Pipeline in Local, State and Federal Government*. These opportunities to share program details provide platforms for dialogue and the creation of networks which cultivate ideas and promote high performance. There are multiple ways to approach succession planning and professional development, but Plano has the improved performance; enhanced communication; implementation of successful initiatives; and continuing credibility to show that its approach works. What is the most valuable lesson Plano has learned through MP³? It is important to invest the time and dollars necessary to keep the best of the past while innovatively addressing the future challenges. Plano believes it is the careful and intentional planning of MP³ that has resulted in there being few barriers to its acceptance. It attributes the same to the many unanticipated benefits it has brought to the organization. Perhaps, the following statistics speak best to what MP³ has delivered to the City of Plano:

- Eight (8) MP³ graduates have been promoted.
- A Department of Sustainability has been introduced.
- Two (2) MP³ graduates successfully managed the Katrina Hurricane Housing Response Initiative within Plano.
- The MP³ Class of 2004 completed a Service Prioritization Study to be used as a guide for future fiscal planning.
- The Parks & Recreation Department has implemented a successful Mentoring Project.
- Mentoring Circles continue to grow and provide a forum for employees to be refreshed and share ideas within one another.
- The Issues Forums provide a monthly platform to brainstorm and share executive-level information and determine how best to disseminate this information throughout the organization.
- A qualified, high-performing work team may be called upon at any time to develop an idea, conduct research, or implement an initiative deemed as priority by City Management.

When the City of Plano reflects to determine whether responding to the need for a succession plan has been worth the staff time, organizational commitment, and financial resources devoted to this topic, the answer is an unequivocal "yes." Plano is pleased that it has embraced an initiative which not only benefits the organization but has enhanced the personal and professional lives of the people who continue to make it a success – its employees.