Meeting Iowa’s Transportation Agencies’ Leadership Development Challenges

Duane Smith  
Institute for Transportation  
Iowa State University  
2711 S. Loop Drive, Suite 4700  
Ames, Iowa, 50010-8664  
desmith@iastate.edu

Bob Sperry  
Institute for Transportation  
Iowa State University  
2711 S. Loop Drive, Suite 4700  
Ames, Iowa, 50010-8664  
rsperry@iastate.edu

ABSTRACT

The fiscal environment for today’s public agencies includes reduced staffing levels, reduced capital resources, increased expectations for services provided, and increased restrictions for travel and educational sessions. In addition, there is a greater dependence on cross-training and on employees being proficient in many and varied job assignments.

The Iowa Public Employees Leadership Academy is a training program designed to develop better (and/or new) leaders and supervisors. It provides a curriculum to train the next generation of leaders replacing existing leaders when retirements occur. In addition, the Academy provides cross-training, allowing management the full use of the new leaders’ resources.

The development and implementation of the Academy has been conducted as a research project of the Iowa Highway Research Board (IHRB). The IHRB is composed of representatives from state, county, and local transportation agencies. A Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) has been assembled to oversee the development and implementation of the Academy. The TAC provided a vision and identified 10 core modules to be developed, presented online, and incorporated into professional association meetings and conferences.

As the TAC worked through the development of the first Academy modules, a process started to develop. The process includes 10 steps, starting with appointing a TAC and ending by recognizing the volunteers that contributed their time and efforts making presentations.

The products that came from this research project are an identity to be used in the production of module content and promotional materials (a logo), a marketing plan, integration into conferences, workshops and training activities for professional organizations and agencies, identification of measures of success, and a process to conduct peer reviews.
The TAC and the development teams have learned many things and have smoothed out the process. Throughout the development of the Academy, many adjustments were made to facilitate the content development, the recording activities, and the posting online. Those lessons are provided to assist others developing similar activities.

**Key words: academy—curriculum—Iowa Highway Research Board—Iowa Local Technical Assistance Program (LTAP)—leadership—lessons learned**
INTRODUCTION

The fiscal environment for today’s public agencies includes reduced staffing levels, reduced capital resources, increased expectations for services provided, and increased restrictions for travel and educational sessions. In addition, there is a greater dependence on cross-training and on employees being proficient in many and varied job assignments. Responding to these issues involves a well-informed and coordinated work team that includes professionals, supervisors, technicians, lead workers, and workers. Becoming a coordinated work team demands training and interaction that produces a common knowledge foundation for agencies and employees to draw upon.

The Iowa Local Technical Assistance Program (Iowa LTAP) mission is to disseminate the results of research activities and to provide training for transportation agencies personnel. As an example, research such as that completed by the Corps of Engineers Cold Regions Research and Engineering Lab is used for solving problems associated with frost heaves on Iowa’s roadway system. The National Research Council’s Strategic Highway Research Program (SHRP) snowplow research has resulted in more efficient snowplowing equipment and techniques. Research conducted on pavements has been disseminated by the Iowa LTAP in the form of printed materials, technical articles, and presentations at workshops and conferences. Training conducted by the Iowa LTAP is focused for transportation professionals and workers.

In Iowa, the training and educational constraints are being addressed to some extent by providing non-credit, online training sessions. The Iowa LTAP, in conjunction with Iowa’s public agency representatives, is providing that common knowledge foundation. An example is being provided to illustrate how the delivery of a typical training session is being adjusted for the benefit of Iowa’s public agencies. The example presented is the Iowa Public Employees Leadership Academy (the Academy). A coordinated, non-credit training program does not currently exist in Iowa to provide training for the existing or upcoming managers and leaders in public agencies. Through the Academy, the Iowa LTAP is providing a coordinated, structured, non-credit educational program for that purpose.

The Academy is a training program designed to develop better (and/or new) leaders and supervisors. It provides a curriculum to train the next generation of leaders who will replace existing leaders when retirements occur. In addition, the Academy will provide cross-training relating to agency types, which allows management the full use of the new leaders’ resources. It must be noted that the techniques and skills offered in the Academy can apply to all who wish to develop or sharpen their leadership and management abilities. This will be true whether the participants are employed in the private or public sectors.

BACKGROUND

Disseminating the results of research and making training available and affordable is the challenge when developing a competent workforce team. In the past, the Iowa LTAP has partnered with the Iowa chapter of American Public Works Association (APWA) to provide training across the state of Iowa. Many times, the attendees were the only ones in their agency to keep the work activities organized and on schedule. They needed to be at their work location first thing in the morning and facilitate the beginning of the work day. By the same token, they needed to be back to the work location to finish out the day's business. In order to meet these requirements, training events were generally scheduled from 9:30 AM to 2:30 PM. This allowed the attendees to be at their workplace to start the day, and then travel up to one hour to the training site. The ending time allowed time for traveling back to the workplace in time to wrap up the day’s business. Now, with the challenges of reduced budgets, reduced workforce, and increased travel restrictions, this format is not proving to be as successful. Travel and overnight expenses are sometimes
barriers to attending workshops and conferences. Offering training opportunities online allows employees
the opportunity to participate in training events without having to travel.

The development and implementation of the Academy has been conducted as a research project of the
Iowa Highway Research Board (IHRB). The IHRB is composed of representatives that represent state,
county, and local transportation issues and interests. A Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) has been
assembled to oversee the development and implementation of the Academy. The TAC identified 10 core
modules that would be initially developed, presented online, and incorporated into professional
association meetings and conferences. The committee members are:

Bret Hodne, Chair  Iowa Chapter—American Public Works Association
Mark Bair  Iowa Secondary Roads Maintenance Supervisors Association
Bruce Braun  Iowa Chapter—American Public Works Association
Jim Christensen  Iowa County Engineers’ Association
Ed Engle  Iowa Department of Transportation
Tom French  Iowa County Engineers’ Association
Pat Miller  Iowa Chapter—American Public Works Association
Kate Murphy  Iowa Department of Transportation
Dave Shanahan  Iowa County Engineers’ Association
Duane Smith  Iowa LTAP / InTrans

The TAC’s vision for the Academy includes the following principles:

- The Academy will be a leadership Academy for all employees wishing to improve themselves.
- It will be an educational/training program concentrating on leadership skills development.
- Courses will relate to increasing the participants’ leadership abilities.
- The audience will normally include first-line supervisors and higher, but all those aspiring to
  become leaders will be most welcome.
- Presentations will be conducted largely by members of Iowa’s professional community.
- Educational modules will be recorded and made available on Iowa State University’s (ISU)
  Extension Continuing Education non-credit, outreach website.
- Modules will be available on a schedule that allows participants to complete them in a timely
  fashion.
- Review validation questions that will be included with each module and verify the student’s
  understanding of the materials presented.
- Certificates of completion will be awarded.

The TAC has recommended a curriculum and initial course content for 10 core modules:

1. Supervisory Techniques and Skills
2. Basic Management Skills
3. Effective Communication Skills
4. Leadership Skills
5. Community Service/Customer Orientation Skills
6. Legal Understanding
7. Fundamentals of Government
8. Finance
9. Resource Management Skills
10. Operations and Maintenance
LEADERSHIP ACADEMY PROPERTIES

The Iowa LTAP partnered with ISU Extension, the Iowa DOT, the Iowa chapter of APWA, the Iowa County Engineer’s Association (ICEA), and the Iowa Secondary Roads Maintenance Supervisor’s Association (ISRMSA) to develop an online, non-credit curriculum to meet the challenges of today’s public agencies’ economic environment. The curriculum provides training to develop public agency workforce leadership. It is designed for employees who are interested in improving their leadership skills and developing an understanding of how to successfully conduct business or those wishing to develop these skills. This partnership has focused on developing the Academy and making the educational sessions available on the Internet at the ISU Extension Continuing Education website. The name is a bit misleading because the leadership skills and training sessions will apply to anyone wishing to improve or acquire leadership skills, whether they are in the public or private sector.

By making the Academy modules available online, the need for travel is greatly reduced, and the students can access the Academy at any time of the day or night, thereby matching their varied schedules. There are 10 modules that have been identified so far, and many others have been discussed. For each module, the content is developed and speakers who will deliver the educational message are identified. The modules are presented in front of a live audience where audience interaction is a key element of the presentations. The modules are recorded by ISU Extension technicians, edited for website applications, and posted to the ISU Extension Continuing Education website. The entry point to the Academy is via the Iowa LTAP and the ISU Extension Continuing Education websites. Other entry points will be identified and evaluated.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Developing a curriculum that meets the public agency training requirements and lessens travel demands is a viable link in developing the leadership of tomorrow. This is the leadership that will manage the responsibilities of tomorrow and cope with continued reduced resources along with increasing demands for higher service levels.

As the TAC worked through the development of the first Academy modules, a process started to develop. That process is shown in Figure 1 below. The process includes 10 steps, starting with appointing a TAC and ending by recognizing the volunteers that contributed their time and efforts to make presentations.

TAC Appointed

The important traits that were considered when individuals were asked to serve on the TAC are listed:

- Have knowledge of leadership traits and qualities
- Understand what the job of supervisor includes
- Be connected with organizations and agencies that are a source of knowledge expert speakers
- Possess critical thinking skills

Identify the Audience

This critical step is necessary to ensure that the content is appropriate and the presentation materials are available to them. The audience for the leadership Academy is described:
• First-line supervisors who direct work crew activities
• Those desiring to move up from crew-level workers to first-line supervisors
• Anyone wishing to prepare for advancement within the leadership ranks
• Professionals wishing to sharpen their leadership skills and knowledge

**Figure 1. Curriculum development**

**Select Name for Training Activity**

The overriding thought for the name was an all-encompassing name for the audience that will participate. The decision was to name the Academy the “Iowa Public Employees Leadership Academy.”

**Develop the Educational Elements**

A rigorous activity was conducted since such an Academy does not currently exist for Iowa public transportation employees. The following process defines the activities taken to develop the educational elements:
• Goals and objectives were established
• The Academy is to be a non-credit curriculum for non-professionals (but professionals will benefit from taking materials presented)
• Other Academy development efforts were researched
• The APWA’s Leadership Academy was used as a guide during the development
• APWA’s Leadership Academy guide was modified for the Iowa audience

Create Element Content Outline

This step was not conducted for the first modules developed. It didn’t take long working with the speakers to realize this needed to be done prior to working with them. They need some direction and focus to keep on track and with the TAC intentions. This step provides that direction and focus.

• The end products consisted of written notes and power point presentations.
• These products were provided to the speakers once they were identified and had accepted the offer to make a presentation.
• The speakers have permission and are encouraged to make changes to the outlines and power point presentations based upon their expertise and experience.

Select Qualified Speakers

The qualities the TAC use as a guideline in identifying and selecting speakers are listed here as a reference:

• The speakers are known in Iowa and are respected for their knowledge and experience
• They are knowledgeable of the subject matter
• Someone on the TAC has seen them make a presentation(s)
• They have permission to participate and have control of their schedule

Conduct Speaker’s Meeting

This is a critical step, and it should be scheduled well in advance of making the first presentations. This will develop confidence for the speakers and allow them time to make any adjustments they desire to make. The TAC selected them because of their expertise. Their expertise needs to be recognized by giving them permission to make the appropriate changes.

• Select a location that is convenient for the speakers.
• Review the goals and objectives.
• Provide an overview of the individual topics that are to be presented.
• Use the visuals that have been developed as a guide for the meeting.
• Agree on changes and adjustments to the agenda; let the speakers take the lead here.

Present Materials in Workshop Format

This step allows for a “dry run” presentation of the materials prior to taping the session for posting on the website:
• Schedule and advertise the session presentation the same as other educational workshops and conferences
• By having a workshop environment, the speakers are making their presentations to a live audience
• The speakers can monitor their presentation time and content prior to recording for the web posting
• If a registration fee is charged for the workshop, some of the development costs can be recovered
• The workshop should be considered the same as taking the class online and certificates of completion are awarded

Modify Presentations as Necessary

There are always changes that can be made to the presentation, whether for content, timing, or visuals. Any process should allow for this to occur.

• The presentations may be modified because of the length of the presentation or the content.
• This step assures that the key points are adequately covered.
• There is an opportunity to add clarifying graphics and visuals.
• The speakers gain confidence in making their presentations.
• All presentations should tie to each other and the central theme.

Record Presentations for Web Posting

It is best to do this step shortly after the workshop; 2–3 weeks seems to be comfortable for the speakers.

• Invite an audience and allow the speakers to make their presentations to a live audience rather than just to a camera.
• Encourage the audience to interact with the speakers to ensure the online version simulates a classroom type environment.
• Start the day with a light, interactive activity with the speakers that breaks the tension and relaxes them.

Create Validation Documents

These documents are the responses the students complete as they take the online class. The validation response reinforces the main points made by the speakers.

• The TAC made a decision early on in the development of the Academy to not have a graded response and a passing grade requirement. It was felt that for the intended audience, this would be a negative for some and might dilute the effectiveness of the Academy.
• These responses will be completed by the students at the end of each subject (presentation).
• A variety of formats should be utilized to avoid repetition of style.
• Responses may be in the form of answering a question, writing a response, picking the best answer from a list, or providing a true/false response.

Formally Recognize Speakers
The speakers are the key to the success of the Academy. They donate their time and expertise for the betterment of those taking the Academy classes. The speakers should feel good about their experience with the Academy and then be good supporters and encourage others to participate and perhaps even be willing to speak again.

PRODUCTS

The products that came from this research project are an identity to be used in the production of module content and promotional materials (a logo) along with a marketing plan. The Academy modules are sequenced, module content developed, and presentations scheduled. The Academy will be integrated into the conferences, workshops, and training activities of professional organizations and agencies. Measures of success will be identified and implemented, along with a process to conduct peer reviews.

BENEFITS

The Academy provides structured training for Iowa’s public employees wishing to refine or develop management skills. No other program is available in Iowa for them at this time. The Academy modules are provided online and supplemented with face-to-face events held during professional organizations’ conferences and workshops. The vision of the TAC is to provide computer-based training as a base and supplement it with face-to-face interaction. Given the condition of Iowa’s economy and the resources available for Iowa agencies’ training programs, an alternative presentation platform, such as provided by the Academy, is a solution for training. The Academy provides a format that minimizes travel and time away from the job.

LESSONS LEARNED

In conclusion, the TAC and the development teams have learned many things and have smoothed out the process. Throughout the development of the Academy, many adjustments were made to facilitate the content development, the recording activities, and the posting online. Those lessons are provided here in the hopes that they will assist others who are developing similar activities.

- Contact potential speakers early in the process.
- Have a clear idea of the subject and content they will deliver.
- Review the schedule of events as illustrated in Figure 1.
- Establish a timeline as quickly as possible and then stick to it.
- Most speakers will require the content be provided, as a minimum a draft power point presentation to use.
- The Principal Investigator (PI) should develop the validation responses to assure the content is reviewed and that there is continuity for the module.
- Iowa has many gifted and knowledgeable professionals that are willing to share their expertise and experience with others.
- Completing and posting a module should be celebrated since it is very rewarding for all who participate.
- Developing and implementing an Academy type activity becomes a team building activity with persons that may not have known all that well in the beginning.