

Women's Executive Development Program Finds its Sea Legs

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Senior learning executives have tried any number of creative ideas to help grab and focus learners' attention. But not many can claim to have used a 118-foot, authentically rigged schooner as a learning lab. Chart Your Course, a six-month executive development program for women, begins with a shared-learning experience on board Tallship Unicorn. Originally build in 1947, the former motor fishing vessel offers up to six women at a time the opportunity to learn sailing techniques while they are assessed, coached and work to meet personal and professional development goals.



Chart Your Course is built on five competencies, which come from male and female client interviews via executive development program partner BeamPines, Inc., exit interviews from past participants as well as Catalyst studies. The first competency is emotional intelligence. “We want these women to ask themselves a series of questions so that they can become more self-aware, tune into their strengths and development opportunities, (know) what type of empathy they have, their sensitivity and self control within the workplace,” said Dawn Santamaria, CEO of True North of Clinton, LLC and executive director of Chart Your Course for BeamPines, Inc.

The second competency is managing and building relationships and deals with work-life balance, establishing trust, conflict management and strategic planning. The third competency is communication skills, relaying a message effectively, active listening and the ability to share information. The fourth competency centers on owning and positioning power, which Santamaria said is key for executive women, particularly older executives who have to negotiate power dynamics in the workplace. “There are fewer and fewer (female) role models available to senior executives, and though there are more of us in the board room than there were maybe 10 or 20 years ago, there are fewer of us than our male counterparts. How do we behave in the boardroom? How do we get our negotiating skills and our impact within the boardroom? How do we do that more effectively?”

The last competency is executive leadership and presence and assists participants in developing a style and a strategy for executing projects from start to finish.

Chart Your Course has four components. First, there is an assessment to help participants hone in on their strengths and identify areas for development. The second component is the actual ship experience. Third, is a workshop component, which follows the ship experience. There are five workshops, one for each of the five competencies. The fourth and final component is a professional coaching element.



“Unlike a lot of other leadership programs that have a hands-on learning element like an outward bound, this is truly authentic,” Santamaria said. “We don’t stick ropes in the middle of the woods and ask you to scale a wall. Everything that takes place on the ship has an element of unpredictability. From a ship owners’ perspective, inevitably there is always something that goes wrong, that wasn’t planned for. That’s what business is like, and that’s what real life is like. What makes it interesting when having women on board as opposed to our male counterparts is that women tend to come on board and completely surrender to the experience, and their ability to surrender themselves to the experience accelerates the learning curve. We only have them on board three to five days, and there’s no getting off. It’s not like a golf outing where you can retreat to the hotel room after a round of golf. You’re processing 24x7 when you walk onto this ship. Their timeline and breakdown is immediate.”

Business needs, even executive development needs, are fairly universal with the exception of different product or service demands or particular industry vagaries. Generally, businesses need to make money, be efficient and be organized. Executives need to know how to lead strategic initiatives that will bring about these basic-yet-fundamental concepts. Furthermore, men often need executive development too. But Santamaria says it’s not that women’s needs are necessarily different, it’s the way that they learn that can present a challenge for learning leaders.

“All of the competencies that this program is centered around are universal. It’s more that the process of their learning is different and how to create an environment where women can learn more effectively,” Santamaria explained. “Statistics show that the amount of women in the workplace is less than our male counterparts. Their salary levels are still lower than our male counterparts. The amount of women in CEO positions is less than our male counterparts. It’s better than it was, but we are still in the minority. It doesn’t make us victims, but it does make us unique in that we still have a long way to go. How can we be more effective? How can we turn those numbers around? Women are more apt to learn and extend themselves in an all-female environment where they are women that have shared experiences.

“Oftentimes it’s the Tallship experience part of this program that is the biggest obstacle to get over,” Santamaria said. “Yet it is the component that makes it so powerful. We’re trying to get them to look at how they approach something new in their life or in business. Do they determine what their limits are or are they open? How comfortable are they at taking risks? We get them to connect the dots between how does this translate to how you operate within the workplace.”