

Study finds local government supervisor training can be more efficient

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City department supervisors would benefit from training roughly every eight to nine months on conceptual leadership skills, like strategic planning and conflict resolution, according to a study that includes two University of Kansas professors.

Those supervisors, however, need less frequent [training](#) on interpersonal skills, such as team collaboration, accepting and providing feedback and understanding citizens' needs. Those interpersonal skills were found to last longer after one training session, said Heather Getha-Taylor, a KU associate professor in the School of Public Affairs and Administration and the study's lead author.

The study is the first of its kind to address the effectiveness and "skill decay" of leadership training at the local government level, Getha-Taylor said. It could allow local governments to utilize efficiencies when training staff, especially in the face of recent criticism of lavish conferences and [training sessions](#) at the federal level, she said.

"We often see training as a cost to be contained or to cut. So we know training is essential, but this is part of an empirical look of training to say that it's important and here's one of the ways we can do this in a more strategic way," she said. "If the issue is cost containment, if the issue is where you don't have enough money for training, you could use this to say: Let's invest in the conceptual skill-building on a more frequent basis and then do other parts on a more intermittent approach."

The journal *Public Personnel Management* published the findings earlier this year in "Considering the Effects of Time on Leadership Development: A Local Government Training Evaluation." The other authors are Jacob Fowles, a KU assistant professor in the School of Public Affairs and Administration, and Chris Silvia, an assistant professor at Brigham Young University and Cullen Merritt, a KU graduate and assistant professor at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

The researchers surveyed leaders of various departments from police, fire, public works, parks and recreation and others of a Midwestern city. The department leaders participated in various training sessions over nine months in 2010 and 2011. Getha-Taylor said a key to measuring the influence of the training sessions was to have participants complete a self-assessment on their own leadership skills before undergoing any training.

Participants then self reported their progress at a midway point and at the end of the final training session. Getha-Taylor said.

As far as interpersonal skills that were covered in the training, participants in later surveys reported generally better communication in their departments as they employed skills such as interacting more and listening more to employees and helping staff understand certain processes.

"The explanation, I think, is once you hear about interpersonal skills, you go and apply that every day at work," Getha-Taylor said. "You are doing it."

The city also reported better cooperation between departments in subsequent months, including in response to a major snowstorm that winter.

While participants did report instituting strategies of conceptual leadership that they learned, such as providing clear goals and defining expectations for their departments, the study found roughly eight months after the training, the effects in this area seemed to wane.

"You probably need some reminders because you may not actually be putting that into practice on a daily basis," Getha-Taylor said. "But you are working with other people regularly. That to me is an explanation of why you might need more of a refresher in terms of your conceptual knowledge. Now we just have an opportunity to show what's happening."

The findings are significant because most people interact with their local government services far more than the state or federal government, Getha-Taylor said. In the past few years, after the uproar of lavish spending on Government Services Administration training in Las Vegas, the public has become skeptical of the value of government-employee training at all levels, she said.

"We would all agree we don't want to spend training dollars frivolously, but most people want their money just to go toward service provisions," Getha-Taylor said. "However, you can't have good service provision if people are not well trained. If they're not up to date on their knowledge, if they don't have the appropriate skill sets, then we're not going to get the performance that we are actually looking for."

The study could help local governments both administer and evaluate effective and efficient training sessions to help improve employee performance in a fiscally responsible manner, she said.

More information: *Public Personnel Management*,
ppm.sagepub.com/content/early/.../13/0091026015586265

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