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Energy and Environment: Better Together

Mentorship Program

Can the energy sector and environmental groups work collaboratively? A joint mentorship program between two Alberta government ministries is showing that it can be done—with help from Myers-Briggs® (MBTI®) tools.

The mentorship program began in 2005 as a pilot project in Alberta Environment. When Environment had an opportunity to enhance its mentorship initiatives in 2009, the timing coincided with Alberta Energy's plan to start its own mentorship program.

"Our original program focused more on individuals," says Wendy Reukema of Alberta Environment. "It wasn't helping us so much with the connection between people in their partnerships or teams."

"Wendy and I talked about creating a new cross-ministry program," says Karen Gilchrist of Alberta Energy. "We can't work in isolation. This program is a tool to break down silos." Reukema and Gilchrist use a matching system to help partners find suitable mentors. In their applications, partners define what they expect from themselves and their mentor, and mentors describe what they can offer. Partners and mentors are matched based on partner needs and mentor capabilities.

At the outset of each session, which runs from October to June, mentor and partner pairs develop a step-by-step plan to reach a desired learning outcome. To help them get there, the program provides separate orientations for mentors and partners, sessions on personality type and learning styles, networking opportunities, telephone and online check-ins with participants, and a wrap-up celebration.

"The program gives people the framework, the tools and the time to learn, but the learning is self-directed and self-paced," says Gilchrist.

As they developed the program, Reukema and Gilchrist did some learning of their own. "Power dynamics were a challenge," says Reukema. "We found that some partners had one-sided expectations from mentors, and some mentors saw their partner's questioning as disrespect."

"We wanted to get away from supervisor-subordinate relationships," says Gilchrist. "We use the term 'partner,' rather than mentee or protege. The non-positional language helps participants think of each other as peers in a collegial environment."

Another challenge was making sure the program had practical value for participants: "These are busy people, so it had better be worthwhile," says Reukema. "We designed it to be inclusive yet broad in scope. The program supports individual needs, from on-boarding new entry-level employees to preparing people to step up to the executive level."

To help achieve their goals of equality and practicality, Reukema and Gilchrist built the program's initial stage around the MBTI Step I™ and Step II™, and the MBTI Work Styles Report.

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“All these people are strangers to each other, and new relationships are stressful,” explains Reukema. “The Myers-Briggs session gets them thinking about their own preferred work styles, and about using personality types to relate to one another.”

Reukema says the MBTI Work Styles Report, with its emphasis on balancing two different but equal styles, is useful for mentors and partners forging new relationships: “It helps them work through the ‘storming’ stage of becoming a two-person team.”

Reukema points out that partners aren’t the only ones who benefit: “The program is useful for mentors who may have little experience in managing people and personalities. This opportunity gives them a chance to develop skills such as relationship building and, in doing so, apply that learning to their partnership.”

With 15 pairs of participants this year and 17 last year, the program has helped both ministries meet some of their corporate objectives. “It fosters our ministries’ goal to work together, it addresses knowledge transfer and it contributes to succession management,” says Gilchrist.

“Once the program has ended, a lot of partnerships continue informally, and a lot of them continue in friendships,” adds Reukema. “It’s an opportunity for people from different regions and different corporate cultures to come together and create networks. You can’t get this kind of learning in a classroom.”

Wendy Reukema

organizational development and effectiveness advisor with Alberta Environment, holds a business management degree and is finishing her certificate in adult and continuing education. In her spare time, she is an instructor in organizational behaviour and human resources at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology.

Karen Gilchrist

manager of performance, learning, and compensation with the Department of Energy, holds a commerce degree and has been with the government for 25 years.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is available from Psychometrics Canada at
www.psychometrics.com