# Driving
# CHANGE
## With Criteria-Based
## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Fordham University's IT department has improved its professionalism, communication, and leadership depth.

BY JOSEPH A. SCLAFANI

I n 2006, Fordham University's IT department was split into three distinct silos: infrastructure, software applications, and instructional computing. But that year, to support a multiyear enterprise resource planning project, it launched a reorganization initiative to meld these silos into a cohesive department. At that point, the chief information officer (CIO) invited me to join the effort as a consultant and coach to support the talent development aspect of the reorganization.

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I worked with the IT department's leaders to periodically review the goals and specific aspects of the reorganization using a wide variety of tools—from interviews with senior leaders and off-site meetings to staff surveys and leadership assessments—and adjusted them in response to successes, shortfalls, and the evolving needs of both IT staff and university clients. We emphasized providing technical training in the new enterprise software system to employees at all levels and focused professional development on senior leaders of functional silos, aiming to drive change through a top-down approach.

By 2011, these efforts had yielded positive results, improving coordination between silos, supporting the progressive digitization of the university's key organizational functions, and improving the IT department's customer experience. However, they had failed to address several persistent issues among mid- and lower-level staff, specifically:

- **Staff empowerment.** Mid- and lower-level staff appeared reluctant to exercise initiative in addressing organizational needs, which constrained the department's flexibility and innovativeness in responding to customer needs.

- **Trust.** Some staff feared that others would take advantage of their shortcomings or mistakes, which made it difficult to develop a broader culture of accountability—a central goal of the department's original transformation program.

- **Sustainability.** The top-down approach to the department's transformation had constrained the development of proactive leadership at midmanagement levels that could contribute to the institutionalization of the desired collaborative work culture.

In response, the CIO decided to expand the IT department's professional development efforts. Later that year, we collaborated to launch the Fordham IT Laureate Program. Using a "middle-out" approach, the program develops small groups of middle managers to initiate small changes within their areas that can grow into organization-wide changes. By doing so, it also creates a promotion pool of experienced leaders capable of assuming higher responsibilities and helps fulfill the transformation that the 2006 progam initiated.

## Program Components and Design Criteria

| Program Component | Design Criteria | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Relevant | Experiential | Reflective | Flexible |
| Individual assessments | | | ✓ | |
| Group discussion using CoachingOurselves modules | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Multiple-problem action learning | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| One-on-one coaching | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Chief information officer consultative discussions | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

## Design considerations

We developed the Laureate Program with the goal of sustaining a talent and cultural evolution beyond its initial implementation phase. Ultimately, we decided to incorporate four criteria to help accomplish this:

- Relevance. The program's components link to real workplace challenges.
- Experiential. Peer coaching is its principal learning method.
- Reflection. It facilitates both humble inquiry and self-awareness.
- Flexibility. It uses "modular" content that can be adjusted easily to shifting challenges.

From its start, the program incorporates the four criteria. The first three are rooted in well-known principles of how adults learn, namely the idea that dialogue with peers can surface different perspectives and that subsequent reflection on those experiences can address real-world problems. The fourth criterion —flexibility—flows from the other three: Fordham IT's ongoing transformation program will inevitably lead to the emergence of new challenges for its staff at all levels, and we knew the program would need an easily adaptable design to keep the content relevant and engaging. The figure on the adjacent page shows the relationship between these design criteria and each of the program's components.

## Selection and participation

Although the Laureate Program is voluntary and open to all staff, we select participants based on their brief written responses to two prompts: First, they must reflect on the program's relevance to their personal and professional growth and, second, they must explain how the experience will support the IT department's and university's strategic missions. Using this information, we create cohorts of up to eight participants with similar supervisory responsibility that stay together throughout the 14-month program.

Once accepted, participants experience each of the program's six main components:

**Individual assessments.** When participants begin the program, they each take a series of leadership and personality assessments, including EQ-i 2.0 for emotional intelligence, MBTI Step II for psychological preferences, FIRO-B for interpersonal orientation, and TKI for conflict-management styles. These provide participants with the information about themselves they'll need to facilitate self-awareness and sustain personal and professional growth.

The assessments are web-based and supported by individual one-on-one coaching. Participants are free to share their results with the rest of their cohort,

## Group Discussion Issues
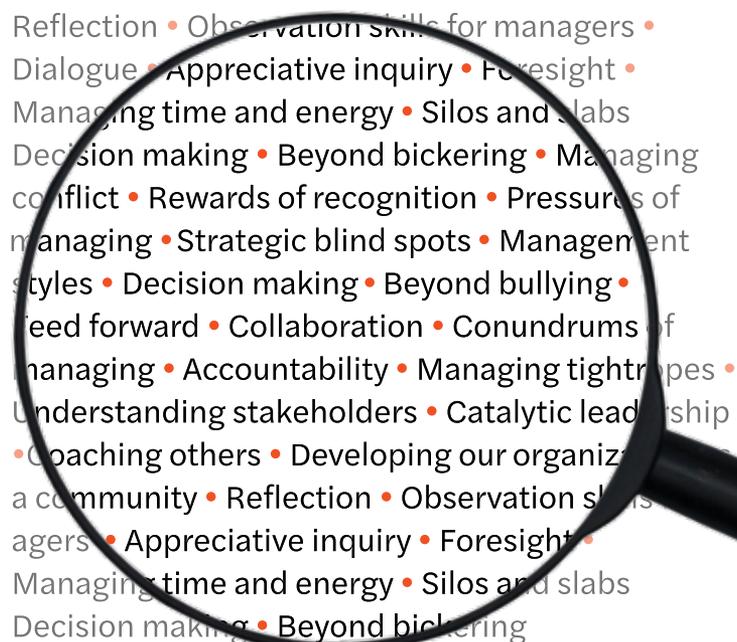
Reflection • Observation skills for managers • Dialogue • Appreciative inquiry • Foresight • Managing time and energy • Silos and slabs Decision making • Beyond bickering • Managing conflict • Rewards of recognition • Pressures of managing • Strategic blind spots • Management styles • Decision making • Beyond bullying • feed forward • Collaboration • Conundrums of managing • Accountability • Managing tightropes • Understanding stakeholders • Catalytic leadership • Coaching others • Developing our organization a community • Reflection • Observation skills agers • Appreciative inquiry • Foresight • Managing time and energy • Silos and slabs Decision making • Beyond bickering

and they often weave what they learn into other components, specifically during group discussions and action learning sessions.

**Group discussion and peer coaching modules.** Throughout the program, cohorts meet every other week for 90-minute discussions structured around the modular topic guides from CoachingOurselves, a practical management peer-learning methodology that Henry Mintzberg developed. These serve as the program's backbone.

A typical module presents information around a management challenge and, through exercises and by posing questions that encourage participants to share individual experiences, helps each learner develop a reflective mindset. The modules move the group toward self-facilitation. As the program's facilitator, I initially introduce the session's theme, explain how the discussion process should work, then become progressively less involved as the session proceeds.

We typically ask each cohort to complete 20 modules. Five—reflection, observation skills for managers, dialogue, appreciative inquiry, and foresight—serve as a stable foundation across cohorts, while the remaining 15 can change in response to organizational challenges and participant feedback. A list of the issues addressed in these facilitated discussions is in the figure above.

# THROUGHOUT THE PROGRAM, COHORTS MEET EVERY OTHER WEEK FOR 90-MINUTE DISCUSSIONS.
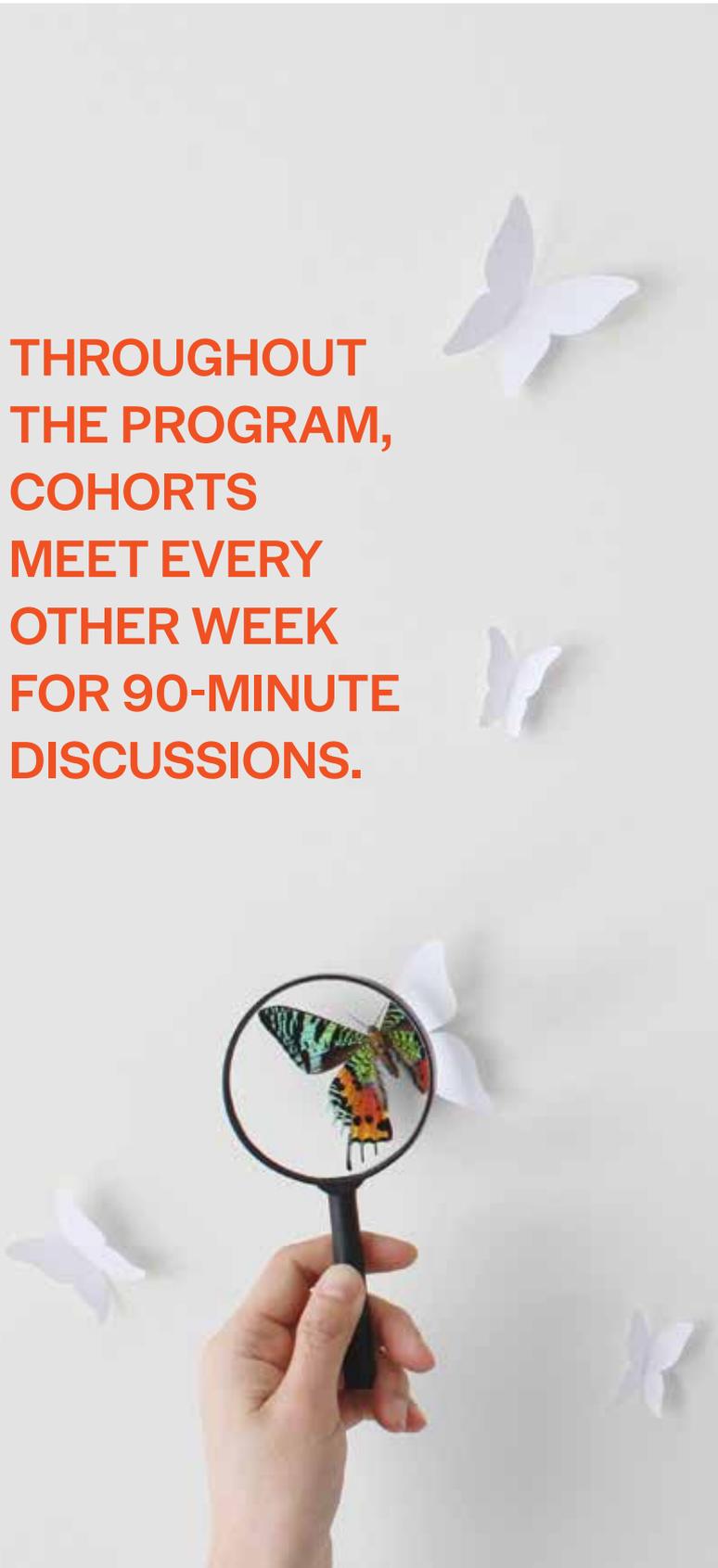
The CoachingOurselves modules provide each participant with an opportunity to learn and reflect on a wide variety of management issues, promote individual learning and development, and gain insight into their work and Fordham IT's organization.

**Multiple-problem action learning.** Whenever a group member requests it (typically after every four or five CoachingOurselves group discussions), a cohort comes together for an action learning session. In these sessions, participants give and receive facilitated peer coaching related to a specific, current work challenge.

Beyond promoting meaningful insights, ideas, and solutions to those who present their problems, the reflective inquiry process gives participants the opportunity to develop important personal and professional competencies, such as giving and receiving feedback and help, solving problems, listening, systems thinking, and taking risks.

**One-on-one coaching.** As with the action learning sessions, participants can request one-on-one coaching throughout the program. During these sessions, learners can follow up on any issues from their individual assessments, group discussions of management challenges, or conversations in the action learning sessions with personalized, confidential coaching.

**CIO consultative discussions.** At least three times throughout the Laureate Program—after the program's first three group discussion sessions, at its midpoint, and during the last session—participants meet to have a conversation with the university's CIO. These 90-minute sessions serve as a forum where:

- The CIO communicates directly with individual contributors and midlevel managers about the Fordham IT department's day-to-day functioning and assigns special projects and issues for group follow-up.
- Participants communicate directly to the CIO their insights and suggestions regarding the day-to-day challenges they and their colleagues face.

**Reflection and evaluation.** Following group discussion and action learning sessions, participants write brief reflections on the issues raised and the quality of the discussion using a template that is posted in a shared drive prior to the upcoming session. I collect these "Reflection and Feedback" forms by email, using them to track individual and group progress and make any necessary program adjustments.

We also collect participant feedback on the overall program experience through anonymous online midterm and final surveys. These are relatively short,

asking participants for their views regarding the modules and issues they found most helpful, the relative usefulness of the various program components, their experiences (good and bad) with colleagues when using what they learned, and ways to improve the program.

## Impact

Five cohorts—nearly half of the IT department's full-time staff—have completed the Laureate Program since 2011. So far, it has had a positive impact on both the participants and the department's overall effectiveness.

Participants report positive personal and professional growth. Most frequently, they say they've improved their skills related to active listening, identifying and validating assumptions, self-discovery, and appreciating diverse viewpoints and cultural styles when interacting with colleagues. Several participants have moved into positions of greater responsibility, typically in new areas that require the leadership and soft skills developed in the program in addition to technical expertise. These new roles range from supporting the CIO's participation in institution-wide governance bodies to leading the IT team for one of the university's professional schools.

In terms of long-term effects on the IT department, the Laureate Program has made a notable impact in several areas. The participants and their colleagues frequently cite the enhanced cross-functional communication and coordination among alumni as a game changer for the IT department's quality of professionalism. Further, the CIO has tapped into the program's alumni as a valuable resource for improving the upward flow of information—for example, identifying the root causes of a critical service disruption and recommending corrective actions, which was an assignment successfully executed with systemwide implications.

The reflective inquiry approach taught in the program has even led alumni to organize their own "coaching cafés." Open to anyone in the IT department, these sessions use selected CoachingOurselves modules to facilitate periodic group discussions and peer coaching. The session leaders select topics—such as dialogue, bullying, managing conflict within teams, and organizational culture—through informal conversations with other staff members.

After seven years, we've noted several factors that have contributed to the Laureate Program's success:

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### Action Learning Issues

- Incident management communications
- Surviving conflicting directives from two supervisors
- Motivating an unengaged long-term employee
- Improving effectiveness of meetings
- Engaging an unresponsive supervisor
- Exerting influence without authority
- Working for a volatile or unpredictable supervisor
- Collaborating across organizational silos
- Clarifying new responsibilities following a promotion
- Improving one's assertiveness

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- Grounding a program's design in a stable set of criteria allows for periodic adjustment to the content and balance between its elements. This makes responding to changing individual and organizational needs easier, which helps sustain the program's value to both participants and the business.
- You can create a solid platform for advanced discussions of specific management issues and challenges by initially focusing on core skills such as observation, dialogue, and reflective inquiry. Together, these foster the mindset and listening skills that enable participants to mine, explore, and learn from their own and others' experiences.
- Combining lessons on specific management techniques and concepts with opportunities for participants to reflect on their relevance with peers enhances individual learning. However, understaffing that crowds out time for reflection can constrain the organizational impact of that learning.
- Sustained visible support by senior management makes it more likely that participants will apply what they learn to their work. For example, the CIO's demonstrated continual personal involvement in the Laureate Program communicated the IT department's commitment to supporting the entire staff's development.

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