

# Creating *Leaderful* People:

## Resilient, Caring, Creative, Connected & Thriving

Do you ever feel a sense of isolation in your administrative role?

How well do you know the values of the management and administrative teams?

by Christine Marin and Diana Cawood

“*What might happen* if I invited administrators from all

district departments and schools to participate in a common leadership development opportunity? Would school principals, vice-principals, technology managers, works yard managers, accounting department heads and human resources leaders find common ground for shared stories, reflections and learning?” These are the questions that Monica Pamer, Superintendent of Richmond School District, asked herself as she contemplated a new opportunity called *21<sup>st</sup> Century Leading and Learning (21CL&L)*. “Regardless of where you work in the district, all of you are leaders, and the work world now demands a set of leadership skills that are often more about listening than talking, supporting than controlling, and reflecting before acting.”

The invitation was sent and Cohort 1 ran as a pilot program from September 2012 through February 2013. The success experienced by this first cohort paved the way for Cohort 2, which worked and learned together from September 2013 to April 2014.

In total, 38 learners collaborated in 12 Peer Learning Teams (PLTs). They crossed boundaries, created connections and made discoveries with team members who represented 32 different departments and schools. What was gained? What was lost? What can be sustained? And for those who faced the challenges of unrest and uncertainty during much of 2014, how did they use their learnings?

In this article, we present a brief summary of the *21CL&L* curriculum together with stories told by a few of the participants. Perhaps they will serve as a catalyst for your own conversations and facilitate your own creation of a culture of leaderful people.

## Mike's story

Mike spreads his arms to symbolize how he strives to keep his energy broad. In his capacity as General Manager, Maintenance and Operations, Mike confronts problems every day – technical, financial, criminal, philosophical, and personnel problems. The *21CL&L* sessions brought him to an increased self-awareness and he was able to identify the core values that keep him steady at the helm. Mike sees himself as a manager, but also as a learner and an explorer. Because of the *21CL&L* experience, he spends more time getting to know colleagues and employees and is more easily able to recognize their talents. The cross-boundary sharing with administrators from schools and from different district departments helped him to develop a stronger sense of his own contributions. He focuses more on matching personnel with district needs and opportunities and on developing a systemic succession plan. Mike hasn't changed. He continues to be who he was. But the *21CL&L* Cohort allowed him the space, time, and collaboration to reflect on and articulate his role as a district leader and learner.

### Three Levels of Learning: All at the Same Time

In every moment we are always acting within a multi-dimensional zone where three different levels intersect: the individual, the relationships and the whole system. The outcomes are created by the mix of our level of personal self-savvy, our interaction capacity with relationships, and our ability to hold awareness of the bigger picture – the whole district. If we want better outcomes we have to get better at all three levels and the mix. The design of *21CL&L* challenged participants to integrate these three levels of learning simultaneously. At the same time as they clarified their personal values, the learning leaders practiced widening their gaze enough to appreciate the whole system and be open to diverse, sometimes controversial, input from their team members who brought different experiences of working in that system. By sharing their discoveries freely they opened up the potential for everyone. Cohort 2 began

their 7 month learning journey already buoyed by the buzz in the hallways. Leadership is seen as a practice and the *21CL&L* participants were practicing.

## Michael's story

Michael is now more likely to start a staff meeting with “I’ve been thinking about ... and I can’t get this question out of my head ... ” And he means it. Michael, District Administrator of Continuing Studies, has always been a self-starter, keeping up to date with reading and research, but *21CL&L* brought him awareness of the power of questioning tentatively. He’s practicing to make the switch from one who knows and tells to one who asks and invites. He’s delighted with early experiences of others stepping into the conversations with their ideas and questions. When Michael invites teachers to observe him facilitate classes using this approach, the intended conversation sometimes falls apart and Michael changes directions on the spot. This provides excellent debriefing material with the teachers. It provides excitement for Michael as he learns to love the unpredictable and becomes more comfortable with letting go of the answers. He sees how effective leadership also means being able to step out of a prescribed role to create space for a passionate, whole-hearted person. An added, and unexpected, nuance of this learning pathway for Michael is the issue of courage, which took on a higher profile. Despite his best intentions to raise issues for collaborative discussions with his staff and others, Michael admitted to fears that his initiatives may be seen in the wrong light: is he trying to play modern principal, to show off, to judge others? His work on courage during the *21CL&L* sessions gave him a stronger foundation for leading and learning from an edge that is not always comfortable. It helped him to maintain integrity and honesty in his intent. He reconnected with the value of scheduling time for self-reflection and its impact on constructively managing the day to day. As a leader he also has more patience with the pace of change and better understanding of decisions made in others parts of the district.

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## Basic Premises but No Guarantees

Monica Pamer and Diane Brow, Director of Instruction - Human Resources, confessed to not knowing exactly how it would work and trusted their Executive Team's vision for creating a leaderful culture where leadership is everyone's business. They invested in a design that did not give guarantees – except the guarantee to engage everyone's input. The basic premises were clear: learning can occur at multiple levels simultaneously; learning is based on lived experiences in the workplace; everyone can grow his/her leadership; all learning can contribute to the wealth of resources in the whole system. The outcomes would depend on the willingness and commitment of those who chose to show up for the challenge.

### Jo-Anne's story

“It's not about being right.” Jo-Anne, Human Resources Coordinator, steps back in the conversation to keep a space open, suspend judgment, and encourage richer information and better understanding from all sides. More than a year after finishing Cohort 1, Jo-Anne continues to integrate the *21CL&L* insights into her work. She covers a range of responsibilities for the district: postings, hiring, employee records, development opportunities and disputes. Jo-Anne puts a priority on active listening skills with staff and union reps when she facilitates workplace unrest meetings at the various school sites. In the midst of tension, she focuses on creating a result where dignity is kept intact. Since her *21CL&L* experience, she is witnessing an increase in acceptance of decision resolutions. Having a sense of adventure as well as nurturing strong relationships and helping others do the same are constant leadership values for Jo-Anne. Faced with the job action challenges, Jo-Anne took on roles which were out of her comfort zone but which grew her capacities. She took advantage of the situations to interact with other parts of the district. The interactions with the children during recess supervision and invigilating with the teens brought her joy, reminding her of the

power of being present in the moment. She has a more complete understanding of the many different district roles and will apply this while carrying out her H.R. practices. She has supporters in her life that she didn't have before the *21CL&L* experience. Jo-Anne still enjoys vibrant contact with the members of her team for support, brainstorming and advice in areas where she doesn't have direct experience. As Jo-Anne sees it, these types of connections, especially across boundaries built on respect and trust, are the cornerstone of a healthy workplace.

## What are We Creating? A Trajectory for the Future

The *21CL&L* opportunity hasn't solved all the issues or offered access to perfect leadership effectiveness. There will always be moments that stray from the true trajectory envisioned by those who support a culture of leaderful people. What has been achieved is the capacity to recognize when those moments are off the trajectory and the courageous presence to collaborate with others to regain the leaderful path. As one of the cohort participants said in sharing their team's discoveries: “It is not about how smart you are ... It's about practice in seeing the whole system and having the conversations.” Christine's story provides an example.

### Christine's story

As a school administrator, Christine felt both comforted and challenged by the call to increase awareness at all three levels of learning: individual, team and whole system. Christine was used to thinking about core values, but she was given the time and context to share them with members of her team, whom she had come to trust over the months of *21CL&L* collaboration. Her team members' roles in the district were very different, but they discovered that they shared core values such as trust, honesty and integrity. Through their conversations they came to the realization that these values, although shared, were applied differently in their spe-

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cific work settings. They found comfort as they realized that they were very small parts of a greater whole. They were part of an enormous, complex structure and that gave them purpose and a feeling of security. At the same time, they came to realize the importance of their individual roles in that complex structure. Christine realized what a vital role she played in providing a two-way bridge between district decision-makers and educators in the classrooms. Others were depending on her to improve the information flow in all directions. She ended her seven-month *21CL&L* journey with an increased commitment to align her actions with her beliefs and to do her best to support the system.

For many administrators and leaders who chose to participate in the *21CL&L* Cohorts, leadership has been enriched by clarifying core values, by owning one's strengths and by seeing more clearly – with a growing appreciation for each other and for how the whole district works. There is evidence of people mustering the courage to act according to those values, especially when confronted with challenges. Some participants demonstrate more certainty to pose questions or to wonder out loud. Others are more proactive in connecting and col-

laborating with colleagues across boundaries. Leadership is about making the right decision, based on what you know.

No one's best work happens in a vacuum, independent of the relationship dynamics and the surrounding bigger picture context of the whole district. We can't always change the bigger picture, but we can understand it better, and in better understanding, we give ourselves options to lead and work more effectively. Next steps are currently underway to create a variety of ways to support all *21CL&L* participants in the application of their learnings in day to day work. By continuing to connect and follow-up with each other, the *21CL&L* colleagues can further the building of a leaderful culture. 

### About the authors

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## Cover Story





Our cover art this month is by **Dania Schill**, who was a Grade 12 student from Duchess Park Secondary in Prince George when she completed this work last year.

We thank Dania, her teachers, Mrs. Haines, Ms. Rose and Mr. Bourque, and Vice-Principal Parrish Child for sharing this work.


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