



ICMA 2015 Program Excellence Awards

Strategic Leadership and Governance Award

City of Surrey
Emerging Leaders Program / *The Right Decision*
50,000 and Greater

OVERVIEW

In December 2014, the City of Surrey, British Columbia launched its Emerging Leaders Program (ELP) to develop high performing individuals across the organization through education, workplace experience, and mentorship.

An integral component of ELP is applying newly developed skills through real business projects. As a course project, ELP participants worked with the University of the Fraser Valley to develop the manual *The Right Decision: Evidence-based Decision Making for Government Professionals* and its companion workbook.

The books strip evidence-based decision making down to the basics and guide government professionals through the steps to making informed, transparent and justifiable decisions. The companion workbook reinforces the steps through examples, real-life case studies and exercises.

The Right Decision is an important project outcome that has benefitted the City, the ELP participants, and all municipal staff. The books have become a go-to resource for staff when making decisions and evaluating programs. Both the manual and workbook have also been made available at no cost to other governments and the public at <http://cjr.ufv.ca>.

CHALLENGE AND NEED

The cities of today face myriad challenges, from the aging population that is seeing many managers retire in the next decade, to increasing demands from the public for greater efficiency and more transparency in decision making. It is critical that cities both invest in the leaders of tomorrow, and look closely at their organization and practices for opportunities to be more efficient, effective and accountable.

ELP and its project *The Right Decision* meet these needs in several ways. ELP is providing individuals from across the organization the skills, knowledge and experience to successfully lead the City in the future, while ELP course projects such as *The Right Decision* are building

capacity both in participants and the City as a whole. Projects are selected to address specific challenges facing the City, while providing participants with transferable skills and experience.

In the case of *The Right Decision*, the partnership with the University of the Fraser Valley offered an exceptional learning opportunity to ELP participants, while the resulting manual and workbook addresses an unmet need within not only the City but other municipal organizations, by providing a practical new tool for evidence-based decision making that is specifically focused on government staff and administrators.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION AND COSTS

The notion for ELP was conceived by the City Manager in 2014 as part of his continuing effort to meet the challenges and demands of building a world-class city. Over the course of 2014, a curriculum was developed to teach participants the values, attributes and behaviours required to be a City of Surrey leader, and to help them acquire the skills, knowledge and experience needed to lead and manage staff and to run a business unit. ELP was officially launched in December 2014, with 20 participants selected from all areas of the organization.

The course project began in spring 2015, following a request across the City for proposals for projects that would provide high quality learning opportunities while addressing a challenge or need within the City. Among those stepping forward was Fire Chief Len Garis, who had participated in the development of two earlier installments of the *The Right Decision* series on evidence-based decision making for the police and fire services. He proposed that ELP work on a version of *The Right Decision* that would specifically target government professionals.

The ELP participants were requested to provide feedback on the manual (co-authored by Garis), and to develop examples, real-life case studies and content for the workbook. For this latter task, they interviewed a variety of City departments to identify typical challenges, and then developed potential examples and case studies to illustrate the material and serve as the basis for

exercises. Of the initial proposed 20 examples and case studies, 10 were ultimately selected, with one of the key criteria being transferability to other governments and regions. The ELP team then assisted in editing the manual and collaborated in writing and editing the workbook.

The books were printed in November 2015 and copies have been widely distributed among Surrey staff and other interested organizations in print and PDF format.

Costs: ELP leverages in-house management and materials to mentor and teach the participants, so hard costs are minimal. In terms of *The Right Decision*, in-kind contributions from City staff and the University of the Fraser Valley meant that hard costs were limited to the design of the two books (\$2,350), and the printing of a total of 1,050 manuals and 800 workbooks (\$15,000).

TANGIBLE RESULTS / MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

Well received: The books have been enthusiastically received, both within the City and by other governments. Due to high demand, a second print run was required within weeks of the initial printing. The online versions also had more than 650 page views in the first three months. When the books were first published, the City was receiving daily inquiries or positive feedback from other governments and organizations. There continues to be a steady level of external interest, with inquiries and kudos received from across North America, China and Europe.

New tool: The City has distributed the manual and workbook in print and PDF format to staff throughout the organization, and is strongly encouraging staff to incorporate the step-by-step processes into their day-to-day decision making. The mix of theory and practical information has made the books a go-to resource for staff.

Higher profile for evidence-based decision making (EBDM): EBDM was already occurring in Surrey prior to this project, but in a more informal way. By providing consistent, user-friendly information and a step-by-step process, these new tools turn theory into practice and are helping to firmly embed EBDM into the City of Surrey culture.

Professional development: The project provides ELP participants with skills and experiences such as: organizational knowledge (learning about other City department functions and challenges during the research phase), team building (working in a team environment to complete the project, and collaborating with staff from across the City), project management (seeing a project through from concept to completion within strict timelines), research (investigating typical City challenges for potential examples and case studies), and evidence-based decision making (using EBDM skills to select appropriate material and write content).

Organizational development: ELP's work and the process of developing the project material were intended to break down silos and involve people from all areas of the organization. Not only did the project material benefit from the varied perspectives, but the process itself demonstrated to all the value of bridging the typical departmental boundaries. The relationships formed have helped to encourage a whole-city approach to decision making and problem solving. Further, the process of working on *The Right Decision* and the positive external feedback the books have received has strengthened staff pride and engagement throughout the organization. When promoting the project both internally and externally, the City of Surrey has underscored the importance of the staff contribution.

Additionally, following the success of the project, the City is creating a Continuing Improvement Team in 2016 that will assist groups within the organization who want to improve their efficiency and service delivery.

Advancing the public service: The availability of *The Right Decision* manual and workbook at no cost is helping to facilitate wider adoption of evidence-based decision making – ultimately leading to more informed and accountable decisions by all municipal governments, regardless of resource level and location. The content, examples and case studies were specifically chosen for

transferability to ensure that other governments and regions would benefit from the material.

Surrey is also using its networks to promote widespread awareness of this free new resource.

Greater accountability and transparency: All municipal governments are accountable to the public for how they use taxpayer dollars. There is also an increasing appetite among citizens for their governments to act more transparently and to justify their decisions. *The Right Decision* helps municipal governments meet these requirements by making sound decisions that can be clearly linked back to research and data.

LESSONS LEARNED

- The benefits of partnering with other organizations were clearly demonstrated. The partnership with the university provided a deeper and more meaningful learning opportunity for the ELP participants than Surrey would have been able to provide on its own. It will likely lead to future projects involving external partners.
- Both ELP and *The Right Decision* project demonstrated how joint research and professional development activities can help to promote cross-departmental collaboration and staff engagement. They will serve as a model for future whole-city initiatives.
- There is a great demand among government professionals for information and guidance in working better and smarter, and cities can help advance the public service by considering how their in-house professional development projects may translate elsewhere. The City recognized at the outset that *The Right Decision* would likely garner widespread interest, so selectively curated the manual and workbook content to ensure it would be relevant to other government organizations.