

## **PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT & PREPARATION**

### **Life Skills Programs**

#### ***Description***

Life skills are the first or initial component of a comprehensive human resource system in a community. For many citizens who have been long term unemployed or who are undereducated, life skills training offers a beginning in their efforts to increase their community participation and their economic self-reliance. Life skills are defined as behaviours used appropriately and responsibly in the management of one's own affairs. Life skills addresses the core communication and self-organization skills that make it possible for individuals to even consider their own further development. Increased self-confidence leads to a sense of power over their own lives – and an ability to contribute to the life of their community in a variety of ways. While many life skills programs are funded for employment outcomes, this is often an unrealistic expectation in a short-term perspective, but it can be a long term outcome of having taken this first step.

Self -empowerment and personal leadership can be encouraged with an approach like the Saskatchewan NewStart Life Skills programming. NewStart was developed in the late sixties and early seventies as an initiative of the federal department, Manpower and Immigration (later Canada Employment and Immigration Commission). The intent was to design an effective system for delivering adult basic education to disadvantaged populations. The designers - educators, psychologists and counsellors - designed a deliberately structured, experiential approach that incorporated specific skills, a sequence of skill development and specific problem solving systems. They recognized that adults learn most effectively when there are the following conditions:

- A perceived need (on the part of the trainee] for new knowledge and skills;
- An opportunity to apply what has been learned;
- An emphasis on integrating new learning with what is already known; and
- An appreciation for past experiences.

The NewStart core lessons are delivered sequentially, each building on the previous learning, and each focus on a single core skill:

- Listening;
- Questioning;

## *Tools & Techniques*

- Identifying and Describing Feelings;
- Acknowledging and Accepting Feelings of Others;
- Giving Feedback; and
- Receiving Feedback.

Lessons on more advanced skills, such as Identifying Assumptions, Facing Fears, Arguing Fairly, Assertiveness, Self-Evaluation and various problem-solving systems can be offered after completion of the core lessons.

### ***Benefits***

Life skills programs can be a powerful component of employment-oriented programs. Employment counsellors know that people with life skills training have improved their communication and self-management skills and thus are more likely to find and to keep jobs than are those without the training.

Another major benefit is the development of group cohesiveness and consequent peer group support. The group is the primary learning and support vehicle for the participants. This ensures that when participants leave the program they have an on-going and effective support network.

Graduates of the program have identified themselves as skilled, capable, self-empowered people. This has the effect of broadening and deepening the pool of people available to the preliminary CED tasks of building citizen participation and developing leadership in the community. Life skills can be one of the key cornerstones upon which to build an integrated CED strategy.

### ***Major challenges***

A twelve-week life skills program for 20 participants can cost up to \$40,000 or even more, depending on what supports can be supplied by the community and what supports must be imported, bought or rented. So finding funding partners that acknowledge the program as an empowering process – as opposed to a direct part of an employment program with jobs as the intended outcome – is often difficult.

Effective delivery of a life skills program depends largely on the training and experience of the life skills coach. But teaching life skills is an unregulated profession, and it may be difficult to recruit a competent coach.

Recruiting the participants can also be difficult. After all the program asks that the participant perceive his/her need for new knowledge and skills before enrolling.

Unfortunately, funding agencies will often insist that programming be delivered to specific target groups, for instance youth or single parents or Aboriginals or men receiving Income Assistance. But the learning environment can benefit hugely by being inter-generational and cross-cultural.

***Some practical steps***

1. Consider the same practical steps suggested for the two entries under the topic of **Developing Leadership**.
2. Explore partnerships with community colleges, service clubs, band councils and churches which might provide access to facilities and/or financial support.
3. Choose between hiring a life skills coach to head the program and training one or more local people to do that job. If hiring a life skills coach, look for one whose style and philosophy are in tune with the community needs and objectives. There are a variety of styles of coaching, and a good coach can come from any style, but it may be that one or another style does not fit your community. Whether sending someone from the community for life skills coach training or bringing a coach-trainer to the community, investigate carefully to find the program or person that has a style and philosophy of coach training that are in tune with your local objectives.

***Resource organizations & contacts***

The national body for coaches is the Canadian Alliance of Life Skills Coaches and Associations (email: info@calsca.com), but there is also an association for the Maritimes, and many individual provinces have their own associations.

***Publications***

- **\*Case Study:** “Stop the World – I want to get ON.” A lifeskills coach explains how many people who want to improve their lifestyle are stuck emotionally and behaviorally. They need a process through which they can take a good look at themselves before trying to organize their lives or communities.
- The YWCA of Greater Toronto (email: lifeskills@ywcator.org) publishes a series of Life Skills Manuals, available in some seven volumes of detailed lessons, including a video.