

A portrait of Jerri LaHaie, a woman with short, styled blonde hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a black blazer over a dark top, a pearl earring, and a necklace with a pearl pendant. The background is a soft-focus indoor setting with light-colored walls and a window on the left.

Jerri LaHaie,  
CAE, and  
the Society  
of Municipal  
Arborists  
help their  
members  
learn to lead  
people as  
well as they  
care for  
trees

# Thinking

BY SHERYL S. JACKSON  
*Photos by Mark Escher*

"TREES DON'T GIVE *me* problems, *people* do." This sentiment, expressed by members of the Society of Municipal Arborists (SMA), is the reason that Jerri LaHaie, CAE, director of the society, started looking for a program that would help her members to develop leadership skills needed for their jobs.

"This group of people knows a lot about trees but most have never learned about leadership," explains LaHaie. While society members attend educational conferences and training opportunities to maintain certification, the primary focus of the training institute is development of skills that relate to tree biology and arboriculture. Even if the arborist is not a manager, leadership skills are necessary, she adds.

"Time management, organizational skills and people skills will help everyone do their job better," says LaHaie. "We are all leaders, whether we are talking to one person, a large group or a department that we manage. We all need leadership skills to be effective," she explains.

Although LaHaie has always believed in and conducted strategic planning for organizations for which she's worked, she doesn't like the standard approach of looking at the current status of the organization first. Instead, her approach to strategic planning is future-focused, and it works so well, she decided that the leadership seminar should help participants look first at where they want to be, then work backwards to see what they need to do to get there.

"If you start with where you are now, you limit yourself because you get caught up in negatives such as insufficient budget, staff limitations or other reasons you can't change the way things are today," LaHaie explains. "If you look first at where you want to be, you can focus on what you can do to get there."

Because it is impossible to thoroughly teach in one week all of the leadership skills participants might need, the team that developed the Municipal Foresters Institute (MFI)--the SMA leadership program--focused on helping participants identify skills that they need to develop to improve their leadership capabilities. "People want to do their jobs better, but it is hard for them to identify what they need to learn without some direction," LaHaie says.



# Outside the Bark

The first MFI was held in February 2006, and timing was important to the excellent response that resulted in 78 registrations for the first seminar. "We developed this program at the time that a new certification from our certifying organization, the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) was introduced," says LaHaie. Of the six domains addressed by the certification exam, only one is "tree-related." The other five domains focus more on people skills, something that most people don't learn in college courses, she points out. "Because many municipal arborists or urban foresters go into the field because they like trees, they have not developed the 'non-tree-related' skills they need to be effective community tree managers," she adds. To make sure that the course

is focused on content that is applicable to the certification exam, SMA partnered with ISA to develop and present the program.

## CHOOSE TOP-NOTCH VOLUNTEERS

LaHaie is SMA's only paid staff member, which required her to rely upon the volunteer efforts of 10 extraordinary people to help develop the curriculum, oversee the logistics of location and registration of people and teach the course. "It was very important to find the right 10 people for this job," LaHaie says. "They were all people who were enthusiastic about the idea and were willing to stick with it to make it happen." Monthly conference calls that became weekly calls the month prior to the first MFI, along with significant

individual effort, resulted in a weeklong session that went so smoothly that the nightly debriefing sessions were not what the group expected.

"We planned to get together each night of the institute to talk about problems we encountered, things we needed to change or a review of what was working," explains LaHaie. "Instead, we looked at each other and asked, 'Can you believe this is going so well?'"

The curriculum was based on a training program developed by an SMA member in Oregon for communities in his area, LaHaie says. While his program focused more on trees, he also incorporated leadership elements into the training. "We were able to take these elements and expand upon them for MFI," she explains.



The Oregon program brought participants together one to two days at a time, four times during the year, with assignments between sessions. "MFI is one weeklong program, so we developed pre-work assignments that participants completed prior to the conference," LaHaie says. These assignments were posted on a Web site and included required reading and a chat room that enabled participants to discuss issues prior to the seminar. Photos and biographies of the conference faculty and participants are also included on the Web site so that everyone can "meet" before the institute, she adds.

The pre-work included assignments from members of the teaching cadre, as well as futurist Ed Barlow, the keynote speaker who kicked off MFI on the first day. His presentation, "Leading Through a Continuum of Change" began by looking at the future on a global scale, then worked down to national, community and personal scale, explains LaHaie. His pre-work included a survey sent to all participants, asking them to identify trends and changes that will affect urban forestry in the next five to ten years.

Once participants arrive at the institute, they are divided into smaller groups that include representatives from organizations of different sizes, different localities and different challenges, LaHaie says. Because the entire week is very interactive, the smaller groups and the diversity enhance the peer-to-peer learn-

ing that takes place during discussions, she says.

Adults learn best by doing something, so if your weeklong program is going to be successful and keep all participants engaged, you need to keep it lively and avoid situations in which people just listen to speakers, LaHaie notes. "We discourage the use of PowerPoint presentations and prefer to use interactive sessions to teach," she says.

## PLAN FOR BUSY WEEK

Participation in all sessions and projects is required, making for a busy week. "There is no staying in their rooms during class because we take attendance regularly," LaHaie says. "We keep them busy most of the day and most evenings, with assignments they work on together in small groups."

In fact, participants don't just attend MFI; they are completely immersed in the educational experience. "It is held at a remote mountaintop retreat, where there are no televisions in the sleeping rooms. Participants are housed in 'condolets,' which is a building with two separate bedrooms and bathrooms, but one shared living room. This encourages them to 'live' MFI all week long," LaHaie explains.

In addition to receiving copies of materials presented during the week, each participant leaves with a "learning journal." The journal is with them throughout the week, and they reflect and record each day what they learned

## The Inside Story

### Knowing your audience can help you develop the right leadership program

If she could explain the exact ingredients for the Municipal Forester's Institute's (MFI) huge success, she would bottle it and sell it, laughs Jerri LaHaie, CAE, director of the Society of Municipal Arborists. It is not any one thing that has been done but a combination of approaches, philosophies and hard work.

#### FOCUS ON SKILLS NEEDED

"We think about leadership in terms of getting the skills you need in order to do your job better, rather than just a theoretical concept," LaHaie explains. "There are lots of good leadership programs already in existence, but don't assume your members are availing themselves of available courses or workshops. They might not even understand

what skills they are lacking or why they should care about being a better leader," she points out.

#### RELATE TRAINING TO JOBS

If you can relate your leadership program specifically to the training your members need in order to be more effective in their jobs, you will have a distinctive program, LaHaie says.

#### CREATE SAFE PLACE

"I think MFI creates a 'safe place' for our members to feel that it is okay if they aren't already the leaders they would like to become," LaHaie says. Because the course focuses on what is needed to develop them-

selves for the future, the process is positive and focuses on how to improve, not what is missing.

#### CHOOSE FACULTY CAREFULLY

While the peer-to-peer learning that occurs during class and within project groups is valuable, participants like learning from a teaching cadre of people who have "learned by doing," LaHaie says. Not only did the 10 MFI faculty members spend countless hours developing and preparing for the conference, but several used vacation time to be at the conference. "I was able to find exactly the right people needed for this project," she says. "If you have the right people on the bus, you can go anywhere."

and how they will use this information when they get back to their jobs, explains LaHaie. "During the week, they are applying what they learn to their actual situations back home. For example, if they don't have an urban forest management plan, they learn all the elements of one during MFI. If they do have one, they learn how to improve it," she says. "It doesn't matter if they are new or experienced, if they come from a large or small city, have a huge budget or very little budget. They will be able to adapt what they learn, and our teaching cadre helps them do that all week long."

Because being able to communicate well is an important part of effective leadership, MFI includes sessions taught by The Ammerman Experience, a Texas-based firm that specializes in improving communications skills. "They teach things like messaging, public speaking and media relations," LaHaie says. "A highlight of the week is filming participants as they practice and playing it back to the whole group as a teaching aid."

Evaluations from MFI participants have been very positive, says LaHaie. The attendee comments speak for themselves: "MFI delivers

on its promise to mold leaders in urban forestry." "MFI gave me the information and tools that I needed to grow my urban forestry program; I have been unable to find this information anywhere else." "As a community without an urban forest program, I learned the fundamentals of establishing a great program."

Rather than just relying upon participants' evaluations, SMA will also have data to show how the skills developed or identified at the institute affected the participants' behavior in their jobs. "One member of our teaching cadre is working on her Ph.D. and has chosen to study the effects of the institute on participants' job behavior as her thesis," LaHaie says. "We ask each participant to rate the institute and identify what they learned, but this institute teacher is also contacting employers six and twelve months after the end of the conference to have them evaluate any changes in the participants' behavior or approach to their job." The combination of the participant and employer evaluations will help identify ways to improve the effectiveness of the institute, she adds.

"This program is proof that you don't need

a big staff and a big budget to develop a leadership program," LaHaie says. "You just have to take the first step and, as we like to say, 'Think outside the bark.'" ●



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