

# LEADERSHIP AND THE PLANNING PROFESSION

By Natalie Persaud

## SUMMARY

Planners are often not perceived to be leaders because the common understanding of leadership centres around decision-making, and planners make recommendations to those responsible for making decisions. This article discusses what leadership is in the context of our profession, the need for great leaders, and provides perspectives gained from the Emerging Leaders Program.

## SOMMAIRE

Bien souvent, les urbanistes ne sont pas perçus comme des leaders, car la compréhension commune du leadership est centrée sur la prise de décision, et les urbanistes font des recommandations aux personnes chargées de prendre des décisions. Cet article traite de ce qu'est le leadership dans le contexte de notre profession, de la nécessité d'avoir de grands leaders, et présente les perspectives acquises dans le cadre du programme des leaders émergents.





**T**he call for action is loud. We hear about it daily. In our work and in the communities we live in, we are constantly being reminded that climate change is causing catastrophic events worldwide, housing and daily needs are becoming increasingly unaffordable, and each day it seems like the safety and security of people, particularly those members of equity-seeking groups, is slipping away. Faced with all of this, I'm constantly asking myself: what will it take to change our course?

We all know it will take leadership. But what is leadership exactly? A leader is defined as someone who leads a group, organization, or country, and by that definition, is often seen to be a person at the top making decisions that affect everyone else. However, to limit our understanding of leaders to those in charge denies our own power as professionals and as people to influence others and bring about change. Ultimately, leadership is influence and this perspective of leadership is the foundation of CIP's Emerging Leaders Program.

The Emerging Leaders Program (ELP) was created from a shared interest between myself and CIP in developing leadership qualities among CIP's membership, particularly those who are early to mid-career professionals. Content for continuous professional learning often focuses on trendy topics of interest in the planning

field, such as 15-minute neighbourhoods, resiliency, infill and intensification, enhancing biodiversity, housing affordability, etc., but we fall short on personal development and nurturing the skills and qualities of the people who do the work of fostering sustainable and equitable places. How do we inspire and encourage others to keep going and growing? We all work in professional settings whether public or private, individually or with teams, but not all organizations invest in their people nor is it easy to find training for these soft skills. The goal of the ELP is to fill that gap, support career development, and inspire participants to assert themselves as leaders.

Program participants were selected through an application process to ensure diversity and representation from across the country, including a balance of public, private, and not-for-profit sectors to facilitate broad discussion on various topics covered. The curriculum, consisting of eight modules, focused on concepts faced by leaders such as the importance of equitable, diverse, and inclusive teams; communication; conflict resolution; and strategic planning. The program also provided participants with the opportunity to understand themselves through modules on mindful leadership, finding purpose and establishing goals, and the importance of self-care. A module on accountability and ethics had participants take an inventory of their life values and apply them to their leadership aspirations.

Facilitators of each module were selected to be representative of our membership and for their experience and advocacy of the concepts covered in this program. Many of the facilitators discussed the importance of knowing yourself, your values, and your worth, demonstrating how vital these themes are to personal and professional growth.

The program was delivered virtually over the course of a year and concluded with participants submitting reflections on three questions: Why were you interested in the program, what have you learned that you will implement in your life and work, and what is the role of planners in achieving a sustainable future in the context of individual leadership? The responses received were incredibly inspiring.

Many of the participants stated that they had interest in the program to expand their

network by meeting other like-minded professionals with common goals. Several participants had career goals that include being a manager in their workplaces, while some had goals of starting their own practices or expanding their teams. Almost all believed that leaders were those in positions of authority. The program examined the difference between a leader and a manager, and participants expressed that the program dispelled the notion that leaders are managers and inspired them to express their own leadership qualities regardless of their positions.

Achieving a sustainable future will take bold action. Leaders in this profession should not only be those willing to take a stand for equity and sustainable development but more importantly, be those who inspire and empower others to act as well. Traditional leaders or 'top-down' approaches overlook the people aspect of organizations. It may work in areas that require process and order for success, but planning is creative, subjective, and dynamic. It is collaborative and human-centric. Servant leaders are those that share power and put people first. Their success is tied to the success of others. These leaders enroll others in their vision, and they may not necessarily sit at the top.

Program participants learned that leaders are inspirational and by being inspired themselves, they are now sharing their voices. They are keen on providing suggestions and ideas where they didn't feel able to do so before, they are taking a stand for others and for issues that are important to them, and they are encouraging others to see their own values as well.

In the closing session that focused on strategic planning, the guest facilitator stressed that success is rooted in togetherness and teamwork. It is important for us all to remember that we are part of a community, whether that be the place where we live, the place where we work, or any of our other affiliations. We cannot sit back and wait for someone else to take the reins. We must all be willing to work collectively to achieve our common goals.

The labour landscape in Canada is changing. This year saw more retirements than previous years with age being only one contributing factor. Many people are retiring earlier than planned or have



made career changes as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have shifted personal and professional priorities. As people leave their positions, corporate knowledge and experience goes with them. This has implications for the planning profession where time is typically spent on developing technical competencies over leadership skills, making it challenging to fill managerial roles that function much differently than day-to-day planning. Developing leadership qualities should begin as early as possible, not only to ensure that there are people ready to step into senior roles, but more importantly to inspire and empower planners to bring about the change necessary to advance equity and sustainability in our communities. This also includes ensuring that the organization, its leadership, and the professional body itself is diverse in order to obtain more equitable outcomes in the work that we do.

In 2021, CIP launched a survey on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion to gauge how inclusive the planning profession is and provide information that could

support decision-making around inclusivity. The report offered several key insights, including that the profession lacks diversity compared to national demographics; younger generations report low levels of inclusion; there is less racial diversity in higher levels of seniority; and representation of women drops significantly at the executive level. A priority for the ELP was to ensure its participants were diverse because of the lack of representation that exists at these higher levels and to promote the understanding that diverse leadership and diversity in this profession are key components to ensuring an equitable future for the communities that we serve.

Leaders are made. We all have the capacity to learn the skills and develop the emotional intelligence possessed by great leaders. We are all capable of being great leaders if we want to be. It begins with self-awareness and consciously choosing to act with integrity and intention, having empathy for others, and above all, mentoring others so that they feel supported in their goals and are ready to step in when others



choose to move on. We do this and together we will achieve our sustainable future.

**FOR FURTHER REFERENCE**

More information about the Emerging Leaders Program can be found on the CIP website at [cip-icu.ca/ELP](http://cip-icu.ca/ELP).

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