

## **American Red Cross Academy: Team-Building and Leadership Development**

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This research explored and validated value-based organizational indicators in order to enable coconstruction of the American Red Cross Leadership Academy. Participation in the leadership experience would foster deeper membership accountability toward fulfilling requisite disaster response functions. Through an appreciative inquiry method, a cohort discovered and acknowledged individual, collective, and organizational strength-based values. An emergent cohort profile was generative in nature and cultivated vision statements that synchronized collective strengths and values with organizational responsibilities. Self-identified strengths and values provided tangible traction upon which associates could foster design and deployment accountability strategies. The cohort was able to create a customized leadership curriculum to endow skill and capacity development germane to organizational obligation.

### **Introduction**

The American Red Cross (ARC) chapters in Ohio were seeking a method to explore team-building and leadership development among top state executives. The Ohio General Assembly awarded an Ohio Disaster Readiness Project grant that funded the ARC Leadership Academy of Ohio. This researcher partnered with ARC stakeholders to envision the formation of the academy as one that would foster organizational accountability through targeted leadership.

### **Significance of the Study**

Meeting responsibilities through capacity development is inextricably linked to accountability because the ARC executes an essential role in all-hazard situations, and therefore is held to a high standard of accountability by entities and the public served. In 2008b, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) published the *National Response Framework* to establish a comprehensive, national, all-hazards approach to domestic incident response. The framework presents guiding principles for professionals to prepare for and provide a unified national response to disasters and emergencies, from the smallest incident to the largest

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catastrophe. Under the framework (FEMA, 2008b), the ARC is accountable for Emergency Support Function Six (ESF6; FEMA, 2008a). Areas of responsibility under ESF6 include mass care, emergency assistance, housing, and human services when local, tribal, and state response and recovery needs exceed their capabilities. According to the Department of Homeland Security (2008), municipalities may be on their own for upwards of 96 hours following a disaster; therefore, it is imperative that communities address local all-hazard systems. Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) maintained that leaders foster disaster-resilient communities by inquiring out loud, ensuring transparency, and accelerating feedback. This research employed the appreciative inquiry (AI) method as a way to maximize inquiry regarding ARC leadership and the fulfillment of ESF6 functions during all hazards.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This research was conceptualized under the hypothesis that the exploration and validation of value-based organizational indicators would construct the customized ARC Leadership Academy, which would foster deeper accountability toward fulfilling ESF6 requirements. The potential impact on the cross-sector network is twofold. First, the ARC cohort participating in the ARC Leadership Academy would customize strategic plans toward ESF6 accountability through organizational values validation. In essence, ARC professionals would be operating from a strength-based foundation as they identified specific leadership skills required to execute aspects of ESF6. Second, a heightened awareness regarding nonprofit accountability with citizen advocates and community stakeholders would likely occur as the result of internal organizational value alignment with ESF6 functional roles.

### **Methodology**

The participative action research method of AI was applied in this study. Previous AI research by Drabczyk (2005, 2007, 2008) and Drabczyk and Schaumleffel (2006) pertaining to shared organizational values among disaster management partnerships afforded assurance that the AI method would foster the recognition of and accountability for self-identified organizational values, and expand the capacity to manage ESF6 functions. The method and treatment originated collaboratively from an ARC cohort of practitioners assembled for the ARC Leadership Academy in Ohio and occurred under the guidance of an academic researcher.

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Customizing leadership skill development around the accountability areas identified by the cohort supported successful fulfillment of the ESF6 function. Psychometric data for the study were generated by the participants' completion of the processes applied through the AI 4-D phases of discovery, dream/visioning, design, and destiny/deployment, as well as an online value assessment survey.

#### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

Participative action and social change are included within an AI theoretical lens. The theoretical underpinnings of AI were a true fit for the research objective, which was to enhance ARC leadership skills toward ESF6 accountability. Following is a brief description of each of the five principles of AI:

1. The constructionist principle represents how individuals evolve and construct the world around them. To construct or build a reality, human beings often will seek knowledge as they learn how to perform tasks. In this research, wrapping leadership needs around ESF6 responsibilities enabled the cohort to construct a customized experience.
2. The principle of simultaneity builds on constructionist notions and announces that "inquiry is intervention" (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003, p. 257). As soon as one inquires, one learns. When the cohort posed a question about role accountability, action toward a solution was launched.
3. The poetic principle implies that every life is a story and that every group or organization tells a different tale. All of it is poetry. The participants in this study explored organizational culture, values, and strengths, which allowed them to acknowledge a unique ARC story.
4. The anticipatory principle represents the connection between positive thoughts and hopeful outcomes. The premise is grounded on progressive action toward a goal.
5. The positive principle goes beyond an individual or an organization's optimistic outlook on life to full participation in the journey.

### **Ohio ARC Leadership Academy**

The 20-member cohort comprised executive directors and disaster coordinators from urban and rural communities throughout Ohio. The commitment to the ARC Leadership Academy entailed seven 2-day face-to-face sessions held every month at a central Ohio location. The combined 14 sessions yielded 84 contact hours. The curriculum was grounded in an AI research method, that is, each AI 4-D phase was paired with a complementary leadership skill development segment. For example, the initial session, Discovery, meshed with Values-Based Leadership; the second session, Dream/Vision, corresponded with Visionary Leadership; the third session, Design, linked to Transformational Leadership, and the fourth session, Destiny/Deployment, allied with Authentic Leadership.

Beginning with the initial session, and in subsequent experiences with the cohort, deliberation around the group activity findings and variables enabled members to coconstruct a self-portrait and seek a meaningful Leadership Academy to meet their needs. Based on recommendations from the cohort, identification of several leadership topics rounded out the Leadership Academy curriculum. Because motivation imparts positive encouragement and recognition to staff and volunteers, cohort members were encouraged to examine classic and contemporary models in an effort to identify which ones were most applicable to the ARC environment and culture. Storytelling, persuasion, personality assessment, diversity, public speaking, and technology were just a few addendum topics, identified and customized to the curriculum, based on the cohort needs

Blending the AI method with traditional theoretical and contemporary models of leadership provided the cohort members with an excellent opportunity to start the process of understanding the spectrum and breadth of leadership theory and its relationship to the ARC. Learning was reinforced through the in-session analysis of a series of case studies germane to ARC problems and issues. A debriefing of the case studies reinforced the cohort's learning and understanding of leadership theory and its practical application in real-time environments.

Evaluation of the Leadership Academy occurred through data generated and analyzed within and in-between sessions. The AI method generated valuable data that were analyzed by the cohort and applied to subsequent AI phases. Kirkpatrick's Four-Level Evaluation (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006) was applied as a bonus assessment for the AI 4-D component of the Leadership Academy. Session 1, AI Discovery, was measured by Kirkpatrick Level One-

Reaction; Session 2, AI Dream/Visioning, was calculated using Kirkpatrick Level Two-Learning; Session 3, AI Design, applied Kirkpatrick Level Three-Transfer; and Session 4, AI Destiny/Deployment, was appraised using Kirkpatrick Level Four-Results.

### **Session 1: Discovery Phase**

The perception of organizational values and the reality of value indicators were revealed by the cohort throughout the Discovery Phase, the first of the AI 4-D phases. Four separate group processes were facilitated on Day 1 of Session 1 to facilitate conversations around values and strengths. Each of the four activities instigated the opportunity to interweave discussion and the acknowledgement of shared values. The repetitive nature of the activities served to reinforce that the discussions were true and that the cumulated data were being coconstructed by the group. With each activity, there was ample opportunity for the participants to own or dismiss the evolving, strength-value self-portrait.

#### ***Field Stories***

The first session commenced with an activity called Field Stories. The story-telling forum consisted of a panel of five individuals, four from ARC chapters and one from a local health department. Chronicles included the 2007 northwest (NW) Ohio floods, as well as experiences with another flood, a fire, a tornado, and an ice storm. Following the panel presentations and small-group discussions, the participants identified potential values embedded within the stories. The values were recorded on a flip chart as one or two-word statements. For example, under the heading of NW Floods, one value was creativity, referring to an emergency responder who made rounds on horseback because all of the roads were washed out. The themes that emerged from the Field Stories activity resonated with the cohort's self-identified values and strengths associated with teamwork, service, and creative and competent response to challenge. The Field Story panel served to generate a sense of shared history among the cohort and promoted a collective profile of values and strengths.

#### ***ESF6 Values***

The second activity facilitated group discussion around the values associated with ESF6 responsibilities, and the participants recorded the identified values on a flip chart. The conversations surrounding organizational responsibility for ESF6 further clarified the values of

the cohort. Values around service and the requisite teamwork to accomplish the services were identified and validated.

### ***VIA Survey Debrief***

The third activity debriefed the pre-course assignment to complete the online Value in Action (VIA) Inventory of Strengths (“VIA Institute on Character,” 2007). The VIA classification identifies 24 universal character strengths that define what is the best about people. Each individual in the cohort disclosed his or her top five value-strengths identified by the VIA and recorded on the summative printout provided. The individual values were next compiled into a profile of the collective. By labeling each person’s value strength, and then combining and labeling the entire team’s value strengths, a complete portrait emerged. This critical step allowed individual ownership yet demonstrated that the sum is stronger than the parts. In order of importance, the top five values were recorded as fairness; kindness; love; citizenship, gratitude, humor, and spirituality; and perspective and wisdom. The true worth of the exercise was realized in the talking points surrounding the VIA analysis.

Lively discussion ensued regarding meaning making around top individual values and how the strengths contributed to a collective profile. For example, the Ohio Cohort fairness value directly corresponded to existing ARC national values of unity and universality. The Ohio Cohort citizenship value was consistent with ARC national values of humanity and voluntary service. Further debate regarding the Ohio Cohort perspective/wisdom value aligned with the ARC national value of independence. Accountability resolve was strengthened because the group acknowledged that they already possessed the same corresponding core values as the parent organization.

### ***Paired Discovery Interviews***

The last activity in the Discovery Phase was the paired interviews. The facilitator guided the participants through a process in which the interviewer became the interviewee. Each took a turn as the interviewer and posed the following three discovery questions:

1. Will you share with me a peak experience you had when working with the ARC - a time when you really felt alive and involved?
2. What do you value about yourself, your work, and your ARC?
3. If you had three wishes for your ARC, what would they be?

The inquiries around shared experiences enabled the cohort to discover value connections that guided the journey toward increased accountability.

Debriefing the paired discovery interviews yielded values related to peak experiences, self and work values, and a future vision for the ARC. Peak experiences rendered three value themes associated with relationships, teamwork, and service. The cohort expressed pride in and understanding of the role of the ARC during times of disaster. Acknowledging the value of partnerships will likely strengthen the goal of leadership development and accountability toward fulfilling ESF6 requirements.

In response to the second discovery question of values rooted within self and work, identity was identified as a core shared value. The cohort labeled themselves as Crossers, Champions, and Most Valued Players. One experience seemed to resonate with the cohort regarding an incident when the local chapter was picketed for seemingly discriminating against the homeless victims of a fire. A picket line formed outside the organization during a cold winter day, and the media were in place for live coverage. A chapter representative offered hot cocoa to the individual protesters. The media zoomed in on the Styrofoam cup, which was emblazoned with the Red Cross logo, and the story spin was changed from a potential negative to a positive: The Red Cross was seen as continuing to do what it does best.

Quality of the organization and staff, and the (positive) impact of services delivered were two additional values revealed in response to Question 2. The cohort expressed satisfaction felt in the tangible proof derived from services rendered. Acknowledging quality and competent staff reinforced an internal capacity to respond to ESF6 requirements placed on ARC staff.

The final inquiry seeking three wishes for an optimal organizational future resulted in a desire for increased awareness and understanding. The cohort placed a priority on increased public acceptance of the ARC. The need to nurture such understanding derived from recent institutional experiences with Hurricane Katrina and a sense that some image repair may be required. A similar appeal was expressed for internal awareness and appreciation of the status of local chapters on the part of leadership at the (national) ARC headquarters. Issues of stability and sustainability were tied to the wish and made sense, given the series of leadership changes at “National.” The third wish was for improved integrated technology and was linked to improving awareness of how technology can impact service delivery. All three organizational improvement wishes were grounded in perspective and wisdom, one of the identified top five values of the

cohort. The point of view expressed by the cohort demonstrated the participants' astuteness in understanding that making internal and external connections would improve awareness and yield the best possible organization.

Kirkpatrick's Level One Evaluation, which measures reaction and determines the participants' perceptions of the training response to an evaluation survey question regarding relevance of the Leadership Academy to job responsibilities, was positive, with 72% of the participants stating *excellent* and 23% stating *very good*. A question about interest in attending the remaining sessions of the Leadership Academy also were positive, with 83% stating *excellent* and 17% stating *very good*. The participants' positive reactions likely will have consequences for learning. Although a positive reaction does not guarantee learning, a negative reaction may reduce its possibility.

### **Session 2: Dream/Visioning Phase**

An essential intention of the AI Dream/Visioning Phase is to bridge the identified current organizational state with ascribed aspirations for the best possible future of the entity.

Involving group members in the shared experience of aligning values constructs higher-level consciousness for the team (Barrett, 2006) and contributes to internal cohesion and transformation. Therefore, in keeping true to the tenets of action research, the facilitator guided the cohort through two meaning-making procedures to code the value themes emerging from the Discovery Phase interviews. The first step was an analysis of a timely article on ARC redesign, and the second was a newsworthy future map exercise.

#### ***Current Status***

The participants were asked to reflect on aspects of a take-home reading assignment on the national redesign of the ARC (Hamner, 2008). The article referred to three broad goals for ARC transformation: flexibility, adaptability, and competency-based management. Through an analysis of the Field Story-related values, the cohort had already identified collective strength-based values that demonstrated a creative and competent response to challenge. The group could verbalize a direct linkage between a national goal and collective strength.

The article further stated that ARC transformation would include three major categories: decentralization, organizational culture, and technology (Hamner, 2008). The Ohio Cohort identified improved integrated technology as one of three wishes for the future of the

organization. Again, there was alignment between a national objective and an Ohio response or call to leadership and ESF6 accountability. This method of cohort-driven data analysis enabled the participants to realize their voice and ensured that “their research was data driven, credible, accurate, and trustworthy” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 59).

### ***Newsworthy Future***

Next, the cohort participated in a newsworthy future activity. The exercise guided the cohort to imagine an optimal ARC in 2015 and map the positive core of the agency in that remote timeframe. Based upon a clear sense of the collective strength-based value variables derived from the Discovery Phase group process, a vision statement was developed based on an informed foundation: ARC SERVICE LEADERSHIP IN ACTION. The cohort further deliberated that four essential elements would enable realization of the vision statement: high tech-high touch, heritage of service, community awareness and engagement, and strong and meaningful partnerships.

The high tech-high touch element was further clarified by the following statement: With compassion, the ARC will streamline service delivery by utilizing innovation and personal interaction. Note that creativity and innovation were acknowledged as collective values and strengths of the cohort. These sentiments were woven into the statement.

The heritage of service element was illuminated by the following statement: With fairness, kindness, and through the quality of our staff, we pledge to honor our heritage of service. Again, preidentified and acknowledged values and strengths of the cohort were incorporated into the phrase. The “quality of our staff” statement was drawn directly from a debriefing of the peak experience interviews and a reflection of lessons learned from the Field Stories activity.

The community awareness and engagement element led to the following statement: The ARC is committed to building community awareness of our mission and will engage volunteers to serve humanity. The key component of the phrase was “engagement,” which captured the vision of citizen advocates and staff as active partners. The phrase also captured an existing organizational slogan of “Red Cross Ready.” The cohort verbalized leadership skills to bring the slogan to life.

The strong and meaningful partnerships element resonated for the group “as is.” The decision was made to let the phrase stand alone as inclusive and representative of the essence of accountability toward the ARC SERVICE LEADERSHIP IN ACTION vision statement.

A didactic lecture on various leadership styles, with special attention to visionary leadership, followed the Dream/Visioning Phase group activity. The leadership skill-building session coached the cohort on qualities, abilities, and actions required to bring stakeholders into and along the path toward realizing the vision statement that the cohort had just coconstructed.

Kirkpatrick’s Level Two Evaluation, which measures learning, endeavors to estimate advancement in attitude, knowledge, or skill. There was an 87% educational gain by the cohort relevant to new knowledge about the skill of mapping the organizational positive core. There was a 67% educational gain by the cohort applicable to crafting a vision statement. There was an 87% educational gain by the cohort regarding visionary leadership traits and skills. A final check on relevance and interest in attending remaining sessions of the Leadership Academy remained high at 74% *excellent* and 26% *very good*, respectively.

To reinforce learning, members of the class were instructed to share the vision statement and element phrases with key stakeholders in their home chapters, and continue to wordsmith the intent and content. Collective data were circulated in the form of group e-mails so that all parties would benefit from the work in progress.

### **Session 3: Design Phase**

Session 3, the Design Phase of AI, began with a group activity called Rapid Prototyping. Working with the vision statement generated in Session 2, the teams crafted a more tangible prototype of what the vision looked like. The Design Phase can be accomplished by building models and collages or by engaging in word art, role-play, or skits to depict the statement. The intent is to make the vision and elements of the vision probable and more likely to become reality.

In order to make the element of community awareness and engagement more concrete, for example, the group initiated a real-time training rather than a simulation, videotaped the event, and intends to use the product as an awareness-building and training tool. During Session 3, a newly acquired van that serves as a mobile food kitchen during disasters was staffed by volunteers and activated to serve lunch to the cohort.

Instructional materials on transformational leadership that were introduced during Day 2 of Session 3 had more significance based on what the cohort had just experienced with the corresponding mobile kitchen exercise. A key component of transformational leadership is the skill of keeping the momentum alive for the stakeholders as the journey toward the goal continues. Because the cohort had the opportunity to view the videotape of the disaster kitchen van exercise, it served to enhance the teachable moment.

Given the fact that the cohort had identified value-based organizational indicators through the Discovery Phase and had clarified a collective vision in the Dream Phase, the subsequent step of constructing accountability toward fulfilling ESF6 requirements was rendered palpable in the Design Phase.

Kirkpatrick's Level Three Evaluation, which measures transfer, attempts to gauge whether the learners can apply a newly acquired attitude, knowledge, or skill as the result of the educational treatment. Certainly, attitudes were affected by observing the volunteers in action. A complete assessment of the impact of the design state will register as the chapters roll out similar experiences for their volunteers.

#### **Session 4: Destiny/Deployment Phase**

In the fourth phase of AI, the cohort participants continued to refine products, practices, and protocols developed during the Rapid Prototyping activity in Session 3. An essential component at this step was to identify the requisite partners to co-create action plans to sustain accountability associated with ESF6 functions. The cohort established a social networking website to stay connected with each other and the leadership objectives of their cohort. Kirkpatrick's Level Four Evaluation, which measures results, will be gauged by mentoring protégées recruited for the Cohort II ARC Leadership Academy. Members of Cohort I and II also played an active role in a functional exercise drill to measure ESF6 responses during the state conference in June 2009.

#### **AI as a Springboard for Leadership**

Although the academy had not yet concluded at the time of this writing, it was apparent that the cohort participants grew closer to owning their emergent profile of strength-based individual, collective, and organizational values as each of the AI 4-Ds was facilitated and

debriefed. Clearly, the individual and group techniques were generative in nature and focused realistic discussions around leadership responsibilities and ESF6 functions. Self-identified strengths and values lend traction upon which to develop accountability strategies.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

One conclusion about the conceptual framework used to originate the Ohio ARC Leadership Academy was that AI continues to lend voice to active participants in the process. Transparent inquiries that are repeated and validated establish a pattern that individuals will be heard. Closing comments from the cohort validated the AI approach: “In a word–stretch, this was unlike anything I’ve ever been involved with, new and different,” and “Read our vision statement – it says it all.” Another conclusion was that the positive nature of AI was an appropriate application for the organization, especially in a period of uncertainty and extreme challenge within the national ARC.

Based on the value-added results derived from the VIA, a recommendation for continued exploration of the synergistic nature of coupling the VIA with AI in the study of teams was evident. The introduction of the VIA into this study resulted in an extension of a typology of values associated with emergency management/all-hazard organizations beyond the original work of the researcher (Drabczyk, 2005, 2007, 2008). In addition, this amplification and validation of values will likely contribute to a deeper understanding of the functioning, cohesiveness, development, and stability of these organizations. The findings derived from this study will be forwarded to the VIA Institute on Character, and the AI Commons at Case Western Reserve University to advance current understanding and build validity of the instrument and potential affiliation with AI.

### **Next Steps**

Cohort I profiled in this study actively recruited a 30-member Cohort II, whose participants began their leadership experience in February 2009. Both classes plan to meet in June 2009 at the statewide conference to participate in a functional exercise and continue to strengthen organizational accountability. A request for the facilitation of an abbreviated version of the Leadership Academy during the June conference has resulted in the registration of 48

participants. The Cohort I and II graduates want to spread this experience as far afield as possible, gain critical mass, and continue to build accountable leadership for the organization.

The innovative journey experienced by members of the Ohio ARC Leadership Academy has the potential to serve as a template for national ARC chapter affiliates. The recommendation will be that the AI 4-D phases, coupled with leadership skill development, can crystallize the understanding and accountability of ESF6 and other vital responsibilities with state and federal government partners. Presentation of the ARC Leadership Academy model and its outcomes will be disseminated at upcoming venues within the organization.

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