Leading the Way: Developing People Leaders at Every Level of a Public Utility



By the Learning & Development Team, Seattle Public Utilities

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What we'll cover today



- Why shared leadership language matters
- Building consistency in a unionized environment
- Aligning leadership development with culture and values
- What we learned and what's next



When Everyone Calls It Something Different, Nothing Changes.

- Without a shared language, "good leadership" means something different to every people managers.
- Feedback becomes personal. Accountability feels arbitrary. Trust erodes.
- SPU shifted the focus: **from individuals to behaviors**
- Instead of "that's just how they are," we ask "what does the behavior look like, and what do we expect?"



From "Problem Person" to "Here's What We Need to See"

- The implementation of a Situation-Behavior-Impact framework for navigating conversations supported People Leaders to have conversations with employees which improved performance and drove change
- Behavior-focused language reduced defensiveness and increased follow-through
- Leaders reported feeling *more* supported not just held accountable
- Shared language also makes it easier to **recognize and reinforce** good leadership

Same Expectations, Every Team, Regardless of the Contract

- Public sector leaders operate within defined constraints: union agreements, HR policy, labor law
- The mistake: treating those constraints as reasons *not* to lead
- SPU's approach: ensure every people leader **knows the guardrails** and is prepared to work within them confidently
- STP grounds supervisors in operational policy *before* they're in a difficult situation

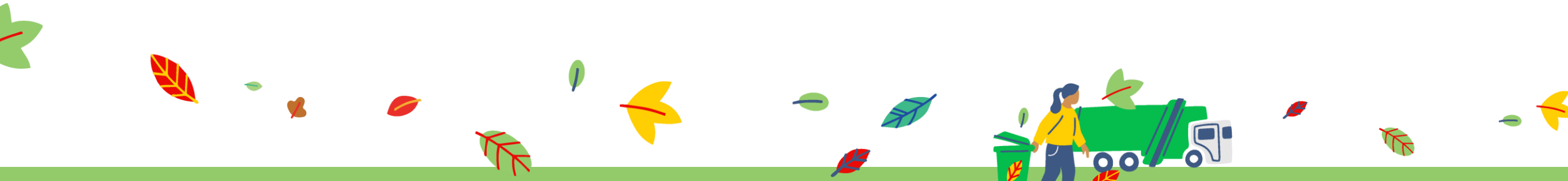
Mixed Teams and Consistent Process

- SPU has leaders managing teams across multiple union agreements
- A performance conversation looks different depending on the CBA but the *principles* don't change
- Our processes are **HR-informed and union-agnostic at their core**: built on fairness, documentation, and clear communication
- Leaders aren't left to figure it out alone, the programs built a HR partnership into the model



Leadership Development Isn't Separate from Culture

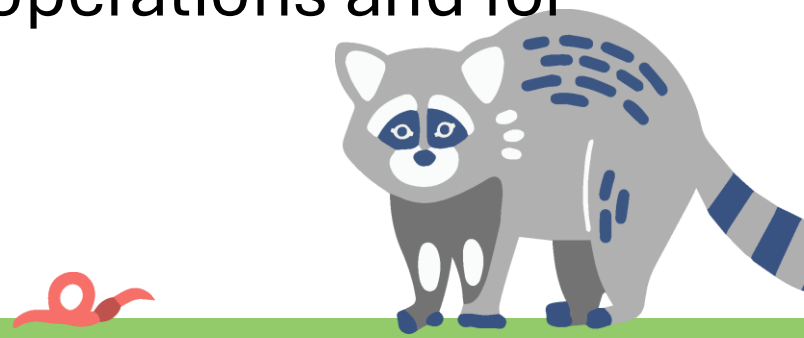
- SPU's programs aren't just skills training; they reinforce what we believe leadership *should look like* here
- LDP focuses on coaching, psychological safety, feedback, and performance management
- These aren't abstract; our programs connect directly to SPU's organizational values
- When leadership behavior is consistent with stated values, trust grows both internally and with the communities we serve



When Values Show Up in How We Lead Day-to-Day



- [PLACEHOLDER: Example of a team or program outcome that reflects values alignment e.g., improved safety conversations, stronger compliance culture, reduced grievances]
- Leaders who feel equipped lead with more consistency
- Consistency builds psychological safety, people speak up, problems surface earlier
- Early problem-surfacing = better outcomes for operations and for people



Three Things to Take Back to Your Utility

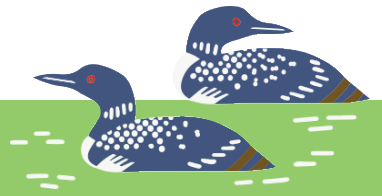


1. **Build a shared language:** define what good leadership looks like in *your* context, behaviorally
2. **Prepare leaders for the environment they're actually in:** don't assume they know the guardrails
3. **Connect development to culture:** programs that reflect your values reinforce them every time someone completes one

Strong Leadership Protects More Than Performance — It Protects People



- Water utilities run on trust: trust in infrastructure, trust in process, trust in each other
- Leadership development isn't a luxury, it's part of how we deliver reliable, safe service
- **Start somewhere.** A shared framework, a conversation guide, a cohort. It doesn't have to be perfect to make a difference



Thank You and Questions

