

PRAIRIE MEADOWS UNIVERSITY: COLLABORATION, COMMUNITY, AND CONFIDENCE

THE EVOLUTION OF A LEADERSHIP AND CULTURE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM



CASE STUDY

Excellence with Integrity Institute & The Ray Center at Drake University

2020

INTRODUCTION

Prairie Meadows Casino, Racetrack, and Hotel is one of only two non-profit casinos in the United States. It was launched in 1989 to provide a much-needed economic development boost to central Iowa, and was formed in partnership with the Polk County Board of Supervisors. Why a nonprofit approach to what is typically thought of as a for-profit venture? Prairie Meadows raises funds for charitable organizations and community improvement projects in order to reduce the burden on government.

By all accounts, Prairie Meadows has been incredibly effective over its 30-year history in reaching its intended goals. It currently employs 1,300 people year-round with an additional 200 seasonal employees added in the spring and summer months. Becoming a premiere entertainment and tourist destination has allowed Prairie Meadows to contribute more than \$1.8 billion to the local and state economy in the form of taxes, grants, and charitable donations. It supports a broad range of nonprofit proposals and projects in arts and culture, education, economic development, and human services through its scholarship program, community betterment grant program,

legacy grant program, in-kind donations, and sponsorships.

The **Robert D. and Billie Ray Center at Drake University (The Ray Center)** has been a past recipient of support from Prairie Meadows for its work to advance character, ethics, and civility. It has also had the unique opportunity to assist the award-winning non-profit entertainment venue with efforts to shape its workplace culture. The Ray Center worked with its partners at the **Excellence with Integrity Institute** to create for and with Prairie Meadows a unique and intensive leadership development experience known as *Prairie Meadows University (PMU)*.

In July of 2019 interviews and focus groups were conducted at Prairie Meadows to better understand how the *Prairie Meadows University* experience had impacted its graduates. Three consistent areas of impact emerged from their reflections. Graduates believe that Prairie Meadows University significantly impacted their *professional confidence*, their *sense of community*, and their *overall leadership capacity*.

Before discussing the impact of the experience, it is helpful to understand the background of the collaborative partnership along with an overview of the specific elements of the experience.

PMU BACKGROUND AND DESCRIPTION

Prior to collaborating on the development of Prairie Meadows University, there was an existing relationship between Prairie Meadows, The Ray Center, and the Excellence with Integrity Institute. The foundation for Prairie Meadows University was established through a preceding multi-year initiative that gathered data from 300 managers using the *Excellence With Integrity Workplace Culture Assessment* from the Excellence with Integrity Institute. The data then guided the development of customized training focused on communication, collaboration, and teamwork to 1,300 employees. Then, around 2015, Prairie Meadows sought to expand the collaboration, seeking assistance from The Ray Center on the creation of a new leadership training program focused on succession planning and internal leadership development following the departure of several key personnel and the impending retirement of several others.

The original biannual trainings of managers, supervisors, and front-line employees had breadth. But what Vice President of Human Resources Michele Wilkie envisioned in the new deliverable was something that would go much deeper with a select group of people. In the vision she and her fellow leaders had, this experience would look and feel more like a “University” experience to its participants. It wouldn’t simply be a class, or result in simply earning a certificate. The experience would be personally transformational and would have the power to engender the kind of indelible

mark of shared formation and community that many experience with fellow college or university alums.

Because Prairie Meadows was already very satisfied with its training partnership with The Ray Center, Michele and fellow Prairie Meadows leaders thought it made sense to keep that collaboration going in developing the Prairie Meadows University concept. Having an outside partner with experience working with a wide variety of companies and organizations resonated with Prairie Meadows. The partnership brought outside expertise and credibility informed by internal knowledge about their current- and desired-state goals. In particular Prairie Meadows sought the design expertise of The Ray Center and its consortium partners at the Excellence with Integrity Institute who share an extensive portfolio of custom-designed experiences tailored to meet very specific customer needs, and to continue evolving it based on feedback from participants and the client organization.

Prairie Meadows University was created through an iterative, multi-year process that involved customized design of the *Excellence with Integrity* knowledge and tools built around the unique workplace challenges and opportunities at Prairie Meadows. Prototypes were first developed, followed by implementation feedback and revision from Prairie Meadows stakeholders. The quality and overall impact of the user experience has been consciously driven by successive loops of planning, implementation, and feedback.

ELEMENTS OF PMU

Prairie Meadows University (PMU) has now graduated its third cohort of participants. While PMU has evolved and changed a good deal in terms of specific content and programmatic details, the overall components of the nine-month program remain the same. The following features form the core of the Prairie Meadows University experience:

- » **SELECTION:** Participants and mentors are selected in January/February. PMU participants are specifically selected to participate in the program either by nomination or by applying and being accepted. Selected participants are immediately impacted in a positive way when they realize the organization sees their potential and wants to give them an opportunity to further develop themselves as leaders. All participants must have worked at the assistant director, manager, or supervisor level in the organization, which limits the actual pool of available employees. There were 20 participants in year one, and another 20 in year two. Year three featured a smaller cohort of nine individuals. (As a selective program aimed at employees of particular levels, filling cohorts can be challenging).
- » **ORIENTATION:** The program kicks off in February with an orientation for all participants as well as mentor training.
- » **LEADERSHIP EVALUATION:** Participants are evaluated by five colleagues (usually their director, their mentors, and two supervisees) twice during the university process (once at the beginning and again at the end) using the Optimal Performance Assessment (OPA) process focused on leadership skills. Results are provided to participants and their mentors for discussion. Mentors and participants are expected to identify areas in need of improvement and strategies to make those improvements throughout the year.
- » **LEADERSHIP LUNCH:** Participants have a luncheon session with the company's executive management team (CEO, COO and CSO) to hear about company history and leadership lessons they have learned along the way. This session includes a Q&A session for participants to learn more about leadership and management at Prairie Meadows.
- » **THE RAY CENTER LEADERSHIP CLASS:** A series of four sessions on different leadership-related topics, tailored to the cohort based on data collected at the beginning of the program through assessment tools.
- » **HR SESSIONS:** Two group sessions with Human Resources in which one is focused on Prairie Meadows in terms of its history, culture, philanthropic focus, management philosophy, and similar. A second session then goes into more detail about the Prairie Meadows model of being a nonprofit corporation and how it does its budgeting and financial reporting, as well as the framework of Iowa Racing and Gaming Regulations.

- » **MENTORING:** Each participant has two mentors they meet with on a regular basis. The mentors, who are typically (but not always) director-level employees, receive training so they know what is being covered in PMU classes and potential topics of discussion when meeting with mentees. Participants meet with each of their mentors on a monthly basis. Mentors have wide latitude in terms of the content of those meetings.
- » **JOB SHADOWING:** Participants must spend a substantial number of hours job shadowing in a minimum of four departments other than their own, spending time in each department across all shifts (1st, 2nd, and 3rd) in order to get them out of their own silos to see the bigger picture of the organization and develop understanding and appreciation of the work that takes place in other departments. This has the added benefit of showing them pathways to move around in the organization to advance their career if there is not an opportunity to do so in their current department.
- » **CAPSTONE PROJECT:** Participants are divided into groups to develop an action plan to resolve a company issue identified by the executive team. This not only applies their leadership learning in a collaborative team effort but could also bring value to the organization. Not all projects get selected for implementation, but some have made a real impact on the organization.
- » **RECOGNITION:** Participants are celebrated at a dinner event and receive both a certificate of completion and a special name badge that indicates they are a graduate of PMU.
- » **PORTFOLIO:** PMU participants accumulate tools, strategies, and resources throughout the experience and assemble those resources in a portfolio binder that acts as a reference manual and as evidence of leadership qualifications for future job interviews.

OUTLINE OF THE RAY CENTER LEADERSHIP CLASS CURRICULUM

In essence, the development and continuous improvement of Prairie Meadows University is a case study of the consortium-style collaboration practiced by The Ray Center and the Excellence with Integrity Institute. The power of the partnership rests within the research-based tools and strategies, which have been tested and vetted in diverse workplace, athletic, and educational settings. However, these tools and strategies find their transformational force when they are applied in the service of each particular client organization, with its unique culture, circumstances, goals and personnel. The culture development solutions vary client to client, context to context; therefore, success begins with the ability to accurately understand the current- and desired-state of each organization.

Transformational culture change then requires a calibrated culture assessment and development solution that is capable of

developing on the core culture strengths and opportunities that drive optimal performance, while also addressing culture weaknesses that threaten optimal performance.

The following represents an outline of the four main sessions that integrate the Excellence with Integrity research-based knowledge and tools delivered in alignment with the grounded theory and application of the Prairie Meadows culture.

Session I: Leadership 101

The topical focus is an introduction to leadership, including a leadership self-assessment in which participants reflect on their leadership strengths and weaknesses, as well as identifying opportunities for improvement. Participant takeaways include an understanding of who they are as a leader, who they want to be as a leader, and their leadership values. Participants learn how to create and utilize a “compact,” applying the concept in their assigned capstone groups. The session also addresses social networking and positive and productive relationships with a focus on utilizing these skills in conversations with mentors and other leaders at Prairie Meadows.

Excellence with Integrity Tools used in this session include a Character SWOT, Moral and Performance Character Values Assessment, a group norms Compact for Excellence, and tools for interpersonal Social Networking. Homework includes Social Networking questions to work with, creating a Compact for their department and us-

ing it in their work, and looking for action and reflection opportunities around their personal Character SWOT self-assessment.

Session II: Communication and Collaboration

This session focuses on communication and collaboration, with an emphasis on discipline, conflict resolution, and coaching positive behavior, including time spent on coaching teamwork and leading a team. The session also introduces the Optimal Performance Assessment (OPA).

Excellence with Integrity Tools used in this session include the Communication Suite, Prepare to Communicate, Care-frontation, Win-Win Negotiation, and the Clarity, Habits, Accountability, Mindset, Performance (CHAMP) process. In addition the Optimal Performance Assessment process is introduced. Homework assignments include creating a CHAMP tool for their department on one aspect of JACKPOT guest services and completing a 360-degree feedback with their mentor and three co-workers using an Optimal Performance Assessment.

Session III: Stress and Time Management

This session focuses on stress management. Each participant creates their own stress management plan, but also discusses how as a leader they can help their department manage stress. The session also introduces the Excellence with Integrity Elevator Speech tool.

Other *Excellence with Integrity Tools* used in this session include the Stress Management Plan and Elevator Speech. Homework includes discussing their stress management plans and implementing them, connecting with another leader at Prairie Meadows (not a mentor), preparing an elevator speech, and using communication and conflict resolution tools in their capstone groups when and as needed.

Session IV: Leading Self-Leading Others

The final session covers leadership style and philosophy, culminating in the creation of a personal work/leadership touchstone. Elevator speeches are presented and discussed.

Excellence with Integrity Tools used in this session include the Character Touchstone, Praise and Polish Guide, and Core Leadership Practices Profile.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT FEEDBACK PROCESS

Making adjustments to the PMU curriculum, including The Ray Center Leadership Class, based on participant feedback has been an important part of evolving the program. For example, one of the leadership class sessions was all about goal achievement, but the participants believed that given the fast-paced, high-stress nature of casino work, a session on stress management was essential. Based on the feedback, a customized session on stress management was developed for the second and third cohorts.

A second area of choreographed collaboration centered on finding the optimal group pairings to ensure the most effective capstone experience. For the capstone the original pairings and topics for the groups were randomly selected. Participants felt that this experience might be enhanced by a more intentional selection process for partners and topics. A more intentional process has the potential to produce the high levels of trust and communication needed for an optimal participant experience and capstone project impact. Adjustments like this also continue to demonstrate the synergy and trust between Prairie Meadows and The Ray Center, which is an important and defining feature of the collaborative relationship.

Another important example that speaks to the deep collaboration between Prairie Meadows and the Ray Center was the tailoring of the *Excellence with Integrity Optimal Performance Assessment* to specifically incorporate the core values of Prairie Meadows (Jackpot Values, Jackpot Guest Services, Jackpot Culture). The placement of Prairie Meadows content in the Excellence with Integrity Assessment and Development tools serves to drive those core values home even more deeply, helping them to be seen as part and parcel of the Prairie Meadows culture.

The science of the Prairie Meadows University experience is built upon the research-based knowledge and tools. But the art is based on facilitators' ability to continuously measure, monitor, and make adjustments based on participant feedback.

THE IMPACT OF PRAIRIE MEADOWS UNIVERSITY

To better understand the impact of Prairie Meadows University on its participants a combination of interviews and focus group methodologies were utilized. A one-on-one interview was conducted with Human Resources Vice-President, Michele Wilkie, and a focus group was conducted with PMU graduates sampled from the three participating cohorts. Focus group of participants represented all three PMU cohorts past and present, and was diverse in terms of departments and levels of employees.

In reflecting on the impact PMU has had on its participants, especially in leadership development and succession planning, Michele Wilkie noted that while there aren't always a ton of opportunities for upward mobility, being a PMU graduate definitely gives participants a leg up when such opportunities do arise. This aspect of the experience was something noted by many in the focus group. One PMU graduate said:

Before PMU you're stuck in your own department. You didn't have the chance to expand your knowledge of other departments or show your knowledge to other departments. But now being able to present different ideas that your department may have in front of our Directors is a huge stepping stone.

Another graduate echoed a similar sentiment, saying:

The lasting impact of PMU for me was evolving leadership throughout my career. It's an experience that provided the tools that helped me continue to grow.

Just being part of the program shows their willingness to go above and beyond their normal job duties to improve themselves. PMU requires a substantial amount of time and effort on the part of its participants, which they must accomplish on top of all their normal job duties. It shows their commitment to their own professional development and to the company that sees them as worth the effort. One graduate said:

Before PMU, most of us in this room wouldn't have been involved with committees. It was going to be Director and VP level people on these committees. After PMU, we are given the opportunity to be in some sort of committee.

The participants get a lot of visibility from being in the PMU — from a session with the executive management team to mentoring from director-level employees to the leadership evaluations — which gives an immediate boost to their organizational credibility. The PMU experience also gives them a vast amount of important insights into the big picture vision of and the extensive initiatives happening within Prairie Meadows. Meeting with the Executive Team helps in this regard, as does having mentors from departments different than their own, and the job shadowing. Everyone thinks their job is the hardest until they go out and shadow jobs in four other departments, which gives them a fuller appreciation of the wider organization. As one graduate said:

There are so many different pieces that go into the puzzle and being able to understand all of that through mentoring and job shadowing, it's been very beneficial.

Strong relationships have been borne within PMU. Some capstone groups from the first cohort still get together on a regular basis to just talk and hang out. PMU have people they can turn to for advice or to talk through issues they don't want to take to their boss because of those relationships. And the PMU participants learn a lot about each other through open and candid dialogue – a big part of which is realizing everyone is facing similar challenges and similar stresses, and that they are all in this together.

The lasting impact of PMU was seeing the bigger picture, guidance and knowing who to go to for support or to build my career in the future. I also gained perspective and experience.

The PMU curriculum is heavy on collaboration, and to the extent that participants become more used to reaching out and collaborating with others from different parts of the organization, there's no doubt a ripple effect that goes far beyond just the PMU grads themselves.

One graduate explained:

First of all, before PMU I wouldn't have even been involved in that kind of high level meeting. Second of all, my people wouldn't have had any involvement in it because I wouldn't have been able to pass on our message. So it's a trickle-down effect that's involving more people throughout the whole company.

Michele Wilkie notes that there have definitely been several promotions within the company that can be traced directly to PMU participation. The PMU experience

seemingly creates a sense of confidence and the belief that being a leader is an aligned expectation. A graduate explains:

The lasting impact of PMU for me is confidence and comfort. They were both meshed together with the unique opportunity to get to know the Directors and the Vice Presidents.

In addition to promotions earned, there are very specific changes that have come out of the work of the PMU participants. For example, the first PMU cohort had a capstone group that suggested changing what the letters of JACKPOT stand for in terms of Prairie Meadows' values. Their project was not implemented, but the following year the company created a Jackpot Committee, and it was this committee that saw the capstone work and strongly advocated for implementing it, and eventually their work was incorporated in redefining JACKPOT values. One graduate said:

Just the fact that something from our capstone project or from our committee meetings is acknowledged and a little piece of that makes it into the final product, that's huge. That's motivating. I'm part of a team.

And Prairie Meadows promotes these opportunities for PMU grads to move up and/or around the organization, ensuring grads know that Prairie Meadows sees them as potential candidates for a position outside their wheelhouse because Prairie Meadows knows the PMU gave them the skills and knowledge they need to succeed.

The following are some of the impact themes emerging from out of the collective experiences of Prairie Meadows University graduates:

- » **VALUES:** Whether it was exploration of the Prairie Meadows core values or an intrapersonal reflection on participants' own core values, the consideration of moral and performance character values was an important takeaway for participants. Learning about the values that drive colleagues, and making intentional choices about which values are the most important or relevant.
- » **MENTORING:** The development of mentoring relationships (especially mentors from different departments and those with diversity of experiences) was an essential benefit of the experience. In particular, graduates found value in the opportunities to discuss relevant issues, strategies, tactics, and tools—all in the management and advancement of their Prairie Meadows careers.
- » **JOB SHADOWING:** Participants found it incredibly useful to spend time in other departments, which effectively broke down barriers between departments in very real ways. The job shadowing doesn't stop when a person graduates PMU; several mentioned various departments they would still like to examine more closely and learn more about their inner-workings.
- » **CAPSTONE PROJECT:** Working on a relevant project related to a real-world company issue and then presenting

an action plan to the leadership of the company was noted by many to be both nerve-wracking and a significant stepping-stone in their own confidence-building. The collaboration and sense of camaraderie emerging from this experience is a distinguishing feature of the formation and community.

- » **COMMUNITY:** The sense of community that develops among the participants of a PMU cohort is a strong, impactful, and inherently lasting value to the participants. Graduates continue to support each other after completing the PMU, finding that the shared experience breaks down the silos—for those within a PMU cohort, and between PMU cohorts—for more communication and collaboration. Participants believe the community formed through PMU has a positive ripple-effect throughout the organization. As one graduate put it, *“The lasting impact of PMU for me was building relationships. If you have relationship with those people then the interactions are more comfortable and you're more confident in what you have to say.”*
- » **COMMITTEES:** One artifact emerging from the PMU experience is the instrumental use of ongoing committees. There are company committees that get formed to tackle particular issues or ongoing challenges (e.g., the Jackpot Committee, Master Plan Committee, Technology Committee, Employee Branding Committee, etc.). The preconceived notion prior to PMU establish-

ment was that these kinds of committees would be for upper level people (VPs and directors), but now people from all levels can get involved in these committees.

- » **CONFIDENCE:** All of the personal growth and professional networking empowers participants with confidence. They see firsthand the opportunities they have for input on the direction of the company. Having assistant managers sitting with vice presidents on committees is valuable and instills confidence. As one graduate said, *“I am not a supervisor or in higher-up position. When I first got into PMU I thought, ‘I don’t know what I’m going to get out of these leadership classes, I don’t have people that report to me.’ So it’s kind of a surprise. I came out of it knowing that I was a leader and that I have something to contribute.”* Participants learn that if you can talk to, work with, and even disagree with a VP, you have the confidence to communicate more directly and clearly with everyone in-between.
- » **FEEDBACK LOOPS:** Several PMU participants noted that feedback loops are working better in the post-PMU environment. More solicitation of input from front-line employees is happening, and that input is working its way up to decision-makers faster than before. And the decision-makers are paying more attention because PMU graduates are coming to them with better proposals and evidence to back

up their ideas, and more confidence in presenting them.

- » **STRESS MANAGEMENT:** Participants noted that the stress management session was very good, especially in terms of distinguishing between good stress and bad stress. Looking ahead and anticipating upcoming stresses and doing things now to potentially alleviate the stress you know is coming down the pike is also helpful. The stress management tool is one that participants highlight continuing to use. One graduate asserted, *“One of the things I really appreciated was the content of the Excellence with Integrity tools around stress. It helped to define good stress and bad stress. It puts it in perspective to where I can use that in my day to day job to manage stress. Before PMU I don’t know if I managed my stress very well. I gained a lot of knowledge that I didn’t have beforehand.”*
- » **COMMUNICATION:** Some participants highlighted how useful the various exercises around communication were, especially in terms of illustrating how different people see things differently from each other, and being aware of those differences. A graduate explains, *“I really like the Excellence with Integrity communication tools. I thought it was cool realizing that everybody sees something differently and we need to learn how to adjust to better understand how others think.”*
- » **USEFUL TOOLS:** Many graduates cited various *Excellence with Integrity Tools*

that had shaped their thinking, tools that have become for many their go-to personal and professional habits. One graduate expressed it succinctly, saying, “PMU gave me tools to be able to transition into the new role I was taking.” Another said, “There are a lot of great Excellence with Integrity tools that we covered. But the one tool I found that I love and I use hopefully every day is the Excellence with Integrity Elevator Speech. It really showed me how to Hit ‘em hard, hit ‘em fast, get your point across, show your passion, be done with it, step out of that elevator and see where that seed grows. Whether it’s your supervisor or someone that reports to you, if you can create some passion or show your passion, that’s a powerful thing.”

CONCLUSION

At its inception the goals for *Prairie Meadows University* were lofty. The organization hoped to create a unique and transformational university-like experience that would assist leadership development for succession planning, and continue the intentional integration of Prairie Meadows values into workplace culture.

Based on the feedback from participants it seems as though the goals have been met, if not surpassed. Specifically, participants indicate that PMU positively impacted: **confidence, communication, camaraderie, guidance, support, perspective, and experience.** Further, participants believe that PMU provided opportunities for:

- (1) building relationships and evolving one’s leadership abilities at all phases of their career;
- (2) developing leadership capacity for succession planning; and
- (3) establishing in-depth understanding of the bigger PM organizational picture.

When thinking about what might come next to Prairie Meadows in terms of learning and development, Michele Wilkie is beginning to think about an even more extreme or intense form of job shadowing as a management associate program (e.g., 12-18 months of job shadowing in multiple departments to really understand and learn the whole business inside and out). Successful completion of a program like this would again set up graduates to seize opportunities for advancement and promotion no matter where employees come up in the company.

There are always opportunities for improvement, including improved assessment strategies, enhanced opportunities for post-PMU training, and even PMU-related service experiences. But what is clear is that the collaborative, iterative, multi-year process that involved customized design of the Excellence with Integrity knowledge and tools for the unique workplace challenges and opportunities at Prairie Meadows has significantly impacted graduates’ **professional confidence, their sense of community, and their overall leadership capacity.**

ABOUT THE CONSORTIUM

More than a decade ago the Excellence with Integrity Institute and The Robert D. and Billie Ray Center at Drake University created a consortium partnership to advance our respective visions and missions. Together, we pursue strategic opportunities in youth leadership, employment and STEM readiness, athletics, education, and organizational development in community and workplace environments. The Institute's main focus is on research and development of instructional resources, assessment solutions, and tools and strategies for organizational culture development. The Ray Center's main focus is on coaching, training and expanding our collaborative implementation projects across Iowa and the nation.

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