



## Building Courageous Community Case Study: Association Leadership Virginia

*"Association Leadership Virginia is more than leadership development. One of the best parts of the program is the supportive community of like-minded professionals you develop over the course of the year. I discovered I had way more in common with people than I initially realized, which made fostering further connections throughout the year so much easier. I still keep in touch with my fellow ALVers and we continue to support one another and hold each other accountable as we pursue our professional goals."*

Michelle M. Runge, Director, American Inns of Court

The Virginia Society of Association Executives was interested in creating a cohort style leadership experience that would forge deeper relationships between members, dive deeper into specific industry knowledge and increase their value offerings to appeal to members and prospective members outside of Central VA.



Upon review of their proposed format, we felt strongly that it would take a different, more immersive format to meet their stated objectives.

VSAE exclusively serves the Commonwealth's association management industry. VSAE focuses its resources on the professional development needs of its members by providing information, education, ideas and networking opportunities to assist association executives in their careers. VSAE has over 400 members, which includes executives from various trade, technical and professional associations, as well as associate/supplier members.

Based on our experience customizing leadership programs for companies and organizations, we outlined a design process and collaborated with key stakeholders to:

- Articulate program benefits to VSAE, the sponsorship organization and the participant
- Create a model/format for an annual program with prioritized learning objectives and potential content providers that would best utilize resources
- Develop an annual budget, marketing calendar and recruitment plan
- Identify the selection criteria for a diverse participant cohort
- Brainstorm ways to create VIP level connection with industry CEOs, content providers and other thought leaders

We knew that one of the most critical success factors would be striking the right balance between providing industry related knowledge, resources for leadership development and opportunities to build strong peer relationships. So many organizations build the program and content structure but assume that the relationship building will be a byproduct of the program.



We believe that creating community is foundational to the success of the program. We are intentional about prioritizing time throughout the program to help the participants get to know one another, break down barriers, build trust and begin to truly see each other as trusted advisors.

VSAE listened to our ideas and concerns and understood the lifelong value to the participants of their peer cohort and the value to the association of membership engagement and developing a leadership pipeline.

VSAE invited us to not only design the program but to lead the annual leadership experience, be the leadership development content providers and serve as moderator for the discussions/sessions with other content providers in order to create continuity across all six sessions. They supported our approach to creating the breathing room required to connect and cultivate a sense of community.

Association Leadership Virginia launched in 2019. The ALV Class of 2020 met in person two times before the COVID-19 pandemic forced the transition to a virtual format. VSAE entrusted us with rethinking how we would create an experience that would stay true and deliver on promised outcomes of the program. When we all look back, we are confident that the experience will be looked at as a bright spot in a challenging year. The virtual format increased connection and exchange with the previous class, inspired us to reach out to content providers far and wide and created real-time applied learning and sharing opportunities and the program was better for it.

We are confident that with strong, committed VSAE leadership, the Association Leadership Virginia program has the potential to grow each year, build on the momentum and engagement of the previous classes and be flexible and resilient enough to adapt to emerging challenges.

**It is an honor to do this work with these fine people. We feel especially grateful for ALV ... it is an example of an incredible community of leaders that we helped cultivate ... a community with deep connections that will withstand the ebb and flow of our careers and our lives.**

**Let this be the moment you create community.**

*"The Association Leadership Virginia (ALV) program has been a tremendous investment in the team at the Associated General Contractors of Virginia (AGCVA). Five of the nine current staff, including myself, have gone through the program. As a result, these individuals have a better sense of the different facets of association management (e.g. finances, membership, advocacy, and so on). Each of us are also now part of a strong community within the broader association space that becomes an invaluable resource when serving AGCVA and its mission. Finally, with over half the staff having gone through the program, we can all speak with a similar language about how to tackle the various leadership and organizational challenges within our own organization. I would highly recommend this program to any fellow CEO looking to invest in building a staff of association leaders."*

Brandon Robinson, CAE, CEO  
Associated General Contractors of Virginia

*"You will learn things, you will meet people and grow your network, but you will also gain an insight into yourself and others that will not only make you a better leader, but I believe a better person generally. It's hard work, but all good things worth doing are hard."*

Sarah Mattes Marshall, MA, Executive Director,  
Virginia College of Emergency Physicians



*"Working with Melissa and Tom has been an incredible experience for me, both personally and professionally. They have a wealth of knowledge, experience, and insight between them – but more importantly, they walk the talk. They are some of the most authentic people I have ever met and I knew upon meeting them that they were passionate about their work. Individually, they are incredibly different in both personality and leadership style; this brings a breadth and strength to what they offer as a team. They approach everything they do with creativity and energy balanced with strategy and knowledge, allowing those of us who work with them to go farther than we could have imagined and see solutions that otherwise would not have been apparent. I am so grateful for the work they do and for the growth I've experienced because of them."*

Carter Hope Lyons, CAE

IIAV Director of Education and Professional Development

VAIA Executive Director

*"What stood out most for me during my year with Tom and Melissa was the passion they brought to the program, which was evident as they shared their expertise, best practices, and lessons learned, with humility and humor. They consistently demonstrated the importance of being honest, vulnerable, and totally present as crucial leadership skills. They proved by example that those same attributes are equally important in our personal lives. Throughout the program, Melissa and Tom consistently challenged us to be emotionally self-aware and to be accountable for the responsibility we have as leaders to influence the culture of our teams, our organizations, and our circles of influence through our own actions."*

Sydney Thomas, Director, Member Services & Operations

LeadingAge Virginia

*"Tom and Melissa are immediately and clearly invested in their clients' success. I've learned to be much more intentional about developing my leadership skills and having that personal commitment and their support has really helped me to grow as a leader. At first glance, some of the activities don't seem tied to leadership development, but that's where Tom and Melissa's expertise and ingenuity shine! They develop your skills holistically, from many different angles and using many different techniques, so that I grew personally and professionally in ways I was not expecting. I've grown a lot in my confidence as a leader; I've learned to see my strengths and use them to my advantage. And Melissa and Tom have gently pushed me in areas of weakness and helped me to grow and improve in those areas, providing practical tools and skills in areas where I needed help."*

Susan Park, Executive Director

Coastal & Estuarine Research Federation

*"Tom & Melissa are a fun and comfortable presence. They have the ability to encourage you to push yourself and/or your team in a relaxed but direct manner. They make you want to get beyond the surface."*

Connie Bruce, Manager, Member Services & Programs

Virginia Council of CEOs