



## ASCENT: “All of us have the potential to lead”



Director Fariborz Pakseresht (third from left) with OYA employees who graduated in July from the ASCENT Aspiring Leadership Program. Left to right: Kevin Nygren, Kelly Crain, Pakseresht, Colynn Elder, Susanna Ramus and Sanjuana Cantu.

By Kelly Crain  
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When my supervisor first told me about the ASCENT Aspiring Leadership Program, I was frankly motivated to apply to enhance my prospects for promotional opportunities. I figured ASCENT would teach us the usual management and problem-solving skills.

Boy, was I wrong.

On the first day of class of the nine-month program, ASCENT graduates shared with us their experiences. They all showed intense emotion as they talked about their time in the program. It became very clear that this would be a deeply personal journey that I wasn't sure I wanted to take. I wondered if it was too late to ask for a refund on my tuition!

Fast-forward nine months and I will tell you that the program was worth every cent of that tuition. ASCENT's focus was on personal, interpersonal and systemic transformation. We spent the better part of six months of the program focusing inward, figuring out our personal purpose and

values and deciding if the life we have built for ourselves is in alignment with our core beliefs.

We also received feedback from 20 of our co-workers about how they see us, both professionally and personally. Although that feedback was sometimes hard to read, we all realized what a gift it was for us to be able to see ourselves through the eyes of the people we work with every day. As we learned during our time in the classroom, feedback is an essential part of any kind of transformation. It's a catalyst for positive change.

We then moved on to interpersonal and systemic transformation. We learned that you don't have to be in management to be a leader. All of us have the potential to lead from where we are. Being a leader is less about your job title and more about the impression you leave on people.

We were given models and tools that could aid us in creating positive change. One of my favorites was "Performance Mindsets." In our line of work, we are very aware that how we think about things often drives our behaviors and outcomes. But how often do we take time to recognize whether we are seeing things through a negative lens?

This model encouraged us to be intentional, authentic, have abundance (seeing the world as rich in resources instead of focusing on what's missing), focus on oneness with others (realizing that we are all in this together and that taking time to build relationships is essential to progress), and that we all have power beyond measure (we are limited only by our own thinking).

OYA Director Fariborz Pakseresht was very involved in our learning and spoke with us on several occasions. Here's what he shared with us:

- The Power of Impression – How we leave an impression on everyone we meet and the importance of being intentional in your interactions with people.
- The Difference between Power and Force – Leaders often make the mistake of using force, which rarely works well. True leaders are powerful without the use of force.

- The Illusion of Control – We have control over very little in life, so we need to focus on controlling our own reactions to events and circumstances.
- The Power of Love in the Workplace – This is about having authentic caring and compassion for your co-workers. If the work environment is not nurturing, then we don't do our best work.
- Finding Meaning and Purpose in Life and Work – It's imperative that we figure out our purpose and live intentionally.

I was especially struck by one comment Fariborz made: "The cause of suffering is the illusion of separateness. Life is about connections." It made me realize that I need to spend time fostering my connections, both professionally and personally, and not be so busy that I forget that the people around me are what matters most.

Department of Administrative Services Director Michael Jordan spoke with us as well. "Technical expertise is crucial, but takes a back seat to emotional intelligence," he said. "It's much more about the people than the logical nuts and bolts."

ASCENT is not your typical leadership program. Yes, we learned about organizational change, how to collaborate with co-workers and how to deal with difficult situations. But it's so much more than that. It's a wake-up call to start living the life you are meant to, to start being the person you want to be. I am well on my way to figuring that out for myself and would encourage anyone to embark on the ASCENT journey if given the opportunity.

State employees who wish to learn more about ASCENT should contact [Nataly Huerta](#), [Beth Enos](#) or [Laura Leshner](#).