

# ALUMNI STORIES: TWO PERSPECTIVES

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## Tom Thompson

Tom Thompson, former Deputy Minister, Department of Human Resources, Government of Nunavut, has attended five Leadership Development programs at The Banff Centre. Not long after receiving his Certificate of Excellence in celebration of that achievement in 2006, Thompson took an important step in his career path, one that took him from the rugged arctic environment of Iqaluit, on an inlet of Frobisher Bay, to the rugged mountain beauty of Canmore, Alberta, where he has opened a guitar shop, Harvest Moon Acoustics. We asked Thompson these questions about leadership.

### **What do you think is the biggest challenge facing leaders today?**

The greatest challenge facing leaders today is to be adaptable, responsive, and as predictive as possible to change.

I think leaders today need to develop the ability to adapt quickly to rapidly changing situations and work environments, and more importantly be prepared to be really innovative. I know it's a cliché, but it's true. I'm not talking about thinking outside the box; I'm talking about going to an entirely new place, which is often difficult to do in certain work environments.

The solutions are not going to be found by falling back on tired old systems and methodologies. The workforce is different today, the work is different, and the workloads are certainly different. People want to be valued team members, contributing not only work, but new ideas and solutions to the challenges they already see, or new ones that emerge. I really like the idea of being able to create a risk free or at least a reduced-risk environment were my work colleagues could learn and grow at their own pace, and where it was okay to make an honest mistake as long as you learned and grew from it.

### **How did our Leadership Development programs influence your decision to retire from the Government of Nunavut?**

Our retirement plans to come to Canmore were already in place, but as a life-long learner, I returned to Banff and the leadership



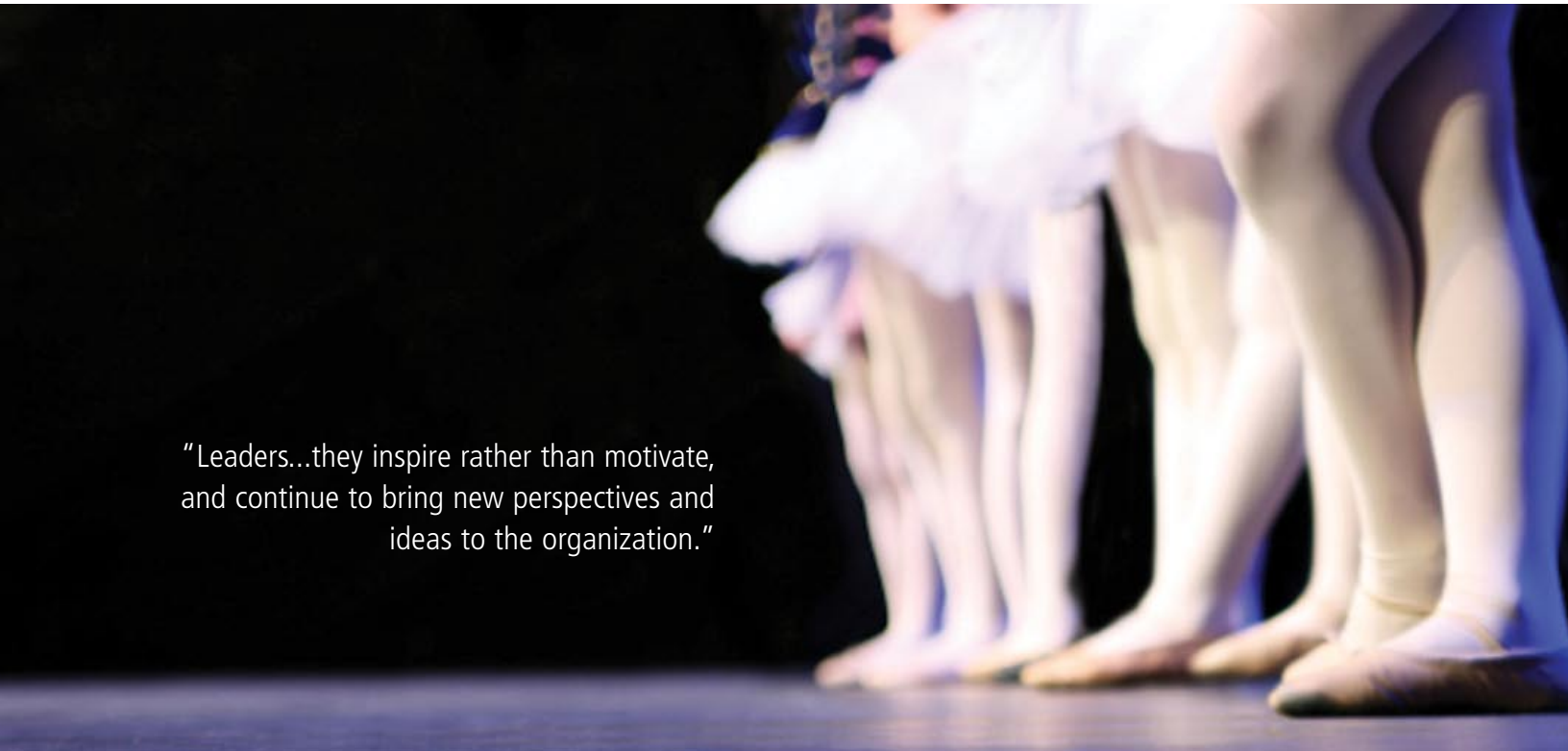
programs every year, and always in the fall (my favourite season) for a number of reasons. One was to continue to grow and develop my professional skills and practical applications for my role in government. But I also wanted to re-establish myself personally for the significant changes and challenges I knew were coming with my pending retirement. I always gleaned something new and profound from each program – things that I could apply not only in my professional work setting, but in my new planned venture into the private sector as well. I also got to meet some pretty terrific people from a wide variety of professional and life experiences and took advantage of that opportunity to discuss ideas, plans, and things to watch out for in my new life.

The annual programs also recharged me spiritually and always served to re-connect me with people. I have taken many lessons from the leadership programs and I see their application daily in my new role, particularly since I am meeting so many new people on a daily basis. I'm also teaching again, which was my first occupation, and I am very much enjoying that aspect of my new role.

### **What plans do you have for continuing your leadership journey over the next few years?**

I plan to become active in the community in a number of areas that interest me. I'm currently in observation-mode on those fronts, and I'll have to see how much time and energy the new life takes. I also plan on taking some courses around my other outdoor interests. I'd like to learn to climb, although my spouse isn't very thrilled with that idea, and I want to find out as much as I can about this new environment I live in. I have a long list of hikes, scrambles, ski trails, and bike rides I want to experience as well.

The trick to retirement, I think, is to find lots of things you really enjoy doing and to go and do them. I might even take another Leadership Development program because they were each so different, so rewarding, and so very much fun to do.



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## Jessica Lax

Jessica Lax, Executive Director, The Otesha Project, attended the Leading Teams for High Performance program in 2005. A graduate of Bishop's University, she has studied at Rhodes University in South Africa, as well as working with the Canadian Field Studies program in Kenya. She co-founded the youth-run charitable organization The Otesha Project in 2002, with colleague Jocelyn Land-Murphy after both met in Kenya. Drawing its name from a Swahili word meaning “reason to dream,” The Otesha Project’s education programs and bicycle tours use theatre, multi-media, and storytelling to engage a wide range of audiences. Otesha’s objectives are to increase awareness about the impacts of the products and resources we consume, increase the number of responsible consumer choices made by young Canadians, and increase the number of young role models and sustainability advocates. We asked Jessica about her thoughts on these questions.

### **What do you think is the biggest challenge facing leaders today?**

I think a big challenge for today’s leaders is looking at how access to information changes dynamics in a team. Anyone who puts the time into research on the Internet can easily become an expert. Leaders need to capitalize on this, and use it to build collaborative teams, rather than a group with a typical hierarchical structure. More than ever leaders need to ‘ask’ rather than ‘tell,’ and to lead rather than manage – a challenge that I learned a lot about at The Banff Centre.

### **What was the impact of the Leading Teams for High Performance program on you, and your organization?**

The program gave me the time, space, and tools to reflect on my leadership style. In the fast-paced environment I was used to at a small and growing non-profit, this was something that I was lacking. We just didn’t make time for it at my organization. After the program I worked with the team to make time for reflection as a group – we held a retreat with bike-tour members to reflect on their program, and we take time as a staff on a quarterly basis to focus on how we relate to each other, and our own personal goals.

I remember leaving the program thinking about dance floors, of all things. We were told that a manager is on the dance floor, directing the dancers, making small corrections. A leader, however, stands on the balcony, they see the overall vision, they see how the work of the organization fits into a larger movement, they inspire rather than motivate, and continue to bring new perspectives and ideas to the organization. I took this image with me, and I continue to strive to take on this role in my work with The Otesha Project.

### **What are your leadership journey plans for the next few years?**

I want to continue to build my capacity as a leader and build the capacity of The Otesha Project to act as a leader in our field. I plan to diversify my experiences, and will spend 2008 working with different organizations to see how they structure their team and their programs. I also have plans to return to school and receive more training in leadership and management in the non-profit sector.