

Nonprofit Leadership: Making a Difference

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Leadership

It may seem unusual to begin a primer on nonprofit management by first looking at the matter of leadership. The reality is that no discussion of management concepts, techniques, or mechanics can have practical meaning without understanding that ideas and initiatives must be implemented – and implementation requires leadership.

Quite simply, without leadership, results cannot be accomplished. Without leadership, nothing can or will happen. With it, almost magical things can be achieved.

Much has been written about leadership and how an individual can become an effective business leader. It would be a fool's task to try to capture this body of literature in a few pages. Instead, the discussion that follows is focused on providing a perspective on the personal attributes and techniques needed to lead a nonprofit enterprise – either in whole, or just a part of it.

From a pragmatic perspective, everyone knows what it takes to be a good leader. This is so because each of us has had the experience of being a follower. As followers, we have seen good leaders and bad leaders. The challenge is to distinguish between the two and then adopt the practices of those leaders who were able to make us willing followers.

History demonstrates that leadership opportunities, like political popularity, are fickle. Even so, opportunities will occur and individuals, if they wish, can capture them and become successful leaders if they are willing to:

- work hard
- exhibit personal courage – the courage to take action, even if that action is simply stepping forward and saying, “I’ll take that on.”
- learn leadership techniques and even arguably, some tricks.

Managerial leadership is influencing people to voluntarily work toward the accomplishment of common objectives. It is energizing and unifying the efforts of people to achieve commonly understood goals and objectives.

Recognizing that leadership requires voluntary followership, the central question is – how does a potential leader begin to generate this level of commitment? The starting point is recognizing that one leads through knowledge.

Traits

Competence is the key to leadership, and knowledge is the root of competence. Frankly, no one wants to follow a fool, someone who does not know how to solve the problem being faced. *Leadership, therefore, requires the*

ability both to conceive the path that will lead to the goal, and to share that vision in an understandable, albeit compelling manner.

This does not mean that leaders always have to be at the head of the line. Remember, no one wants to follow a fool – and quite simply, no one can “know it all.” A self-proclaimed expert on all things, who always wants to take charge, will fail as a leader because people will realize that they are actually being asked to follow a fool – and no one will voluntarily do so for long.

Second, as noted, leaders must exhibit the courage to take action. They must have a bias for action. A bias for action means that leaders must be decisive. It is often said that leaders can be right, they can be wrong, but they can never be unsure. Leaders must be decisive, but not stubborn. When events demand a change in course, leaders must have the self-confidence to recognize their error and be willing to take the required action to put the enterprise on a new path.

Third, leaders must subordinate themselves to the tasks to be accomplished. The effort is not about the leader, it is about the goals and objectives of the enterprise. As a “rule of thumb,” the only time leaders should use the pronoun “I,” is when they are taking the responsibility for failure.

Fourth, leaders must be comfortable with themselves. They must have the self-confidence to be willing to trust the strength of their organization to achieve success, admit mistakes and make changes to either the overall plan and/or the tactical approach, and be humble.

Finally, leaders must establish a bond of trust with those that they hope to lead. Followers must come to accept the potential leader as their actual leader. To do this, they must trust the person who wishes to lead them. One can only begin to lead through knowledge and continue to lead through trust.

Trust

The obvious question then is – how does one create trust? Part of trust is honesty. However, real trust involves more than just honesty. It requires that the people who one hopes to lead believe that the potential leader can get them successfully to the common end and will do it in a manner that protects them, enhances them professionally and personally, respects their skills and abilities, and honors their accomplishments. In a word, trust requires unflinching personal integrity.

Integrity is the product of personal decisions and consequent actions. In the context of leadership, integrity must be translated into a belief by those who are to be lead that their leader will always do the right thing with respect to how he or she relates to them. Obviously, no one can be infallible. Infallibility is not the criteria. Rather, it is a belief by those who are to be led that their interests will always have their leader’s priority. This belief can only exist if there is first a foundation of trust.

To achieve this level of trust, leaders must develop certain basic skills.

Leaders must be good listeners. Listening requires more than the discipline of not interrupting when someone else is speaking. It is an active skill, requiring the ability to draw people out and understand what they are trying to say, as well as helping them to better understand the meaning and implications of what they are saying.

They must also be able to communicate clearly. A leader must be able to express ideas that are easily understood, evoke a positive reaction, and also are memorable. This requires face-to-face interaction so that the speaker can see if the message is being understood and accepted. E-mail may be efficient, but it does not assure that communication is actually taking place.

Leaders must have the insight to anticipate possible crises. Reality does not always cooperate with the enterprise's plans. Leaders cannot prevent these kinds of variations. They can, however, plan for matters to "fail-safe" – so that people will feel both protected and confident that their leader can successfully get them to the common end.

Crises might not be able to be averted, but leaders plan for the actions that will be taken when things do not proceed as planned/hoped.

Tricks

In addition to the above, there are certain actions that leaders take, that at first blush, may seem to fall more in the category of tricks than skills.

The most important of these "tricks" is to always hire good people. This may seem obvious, but insecure leaders are often afraid to hire people who may be able to do their particular job better than the leader can do that job. Over the long run, no enterprise can achieve sustainable success if the people in leadership positions avoid building strong staffs. To be successful, leaders must hire good people, commit to them, nurture them by offering opportunities to grow and develop skills, and then trust them to do the work – driving decisions down to the lowest actionable level.

Leaders must also be predictable in both word and action. If people know how the leader will react in any given situation, then they will be more willing to take action and make decisions on their own. Key to this is people knowing that they will be supported in their decision making, even if it turns out that a poor decision was made.

As a corollary to predictability, people must have confidence that their leaders must also do what they say they are going to do, when they say they are going to do it.

Leaders must encourage critical debate, understanding that dissent is not disloyalty. To encourage critical debate, leaders must allow themselves to be swayed in their decision making by the debate, so that people know that their opinions matter and that their arguments can make a difference. In terms of "tricks," for critical debate to work, leaders should plan on occasion to lose an argument.

Leaders must be flexible. Everyone has their own interpersonal style. For example, some people prefer one-to-one relationships. Others like to work in groups. Some prefer to talk things through, while others would rather rely on written documentation. Learning styles also vary, with some people learning best visually while others

prefer verbal explanations or open-ended questions that enable them to explore alternatives. No style is better or worse; they are just different. The problem is not the differences, but rather the mismatches.

To enable people to function to their potential, leaders must recognize these differences and adapt to them, relating to each individual within the context of their style. It is the leader who, within limits, must adapt because it is the leader who has the most freedom to make changes. Essentially, leaders must meet people where they are, in a way that is comfortable to them, and then take them on a path of guided discovery to the common end.

Leaders must also be a bit of a character, creating a “human side,” that people can believe in. Leaders must create a persona that people can tell stories about and relate to – so that they can psychologically commit to the leader in the same fashion as the leader commits to them.

Being a character does not require outlandish behavior. Rather, it may involve as little as simple things like: walking around the organization and telling personal stories, as well as listening to personal stories, supporting the candy sale – but not taking the candy, dressing casually on “dress-down days,” wearing the organizational logo at public events, etc.

As a leader, how does one test oneself to assure that he or she is exhibiting and enhancing these traits? The simple answer is that objective self-evaluation is very difficult. A better approach is to explicitly include a review of leadership performance as an element of managerial performance assessment. As a complement to this ongoing evaluation, exit interviews can also be used to explore leadership performance.

Achieving Success

Emerging research suggests that high performing nonprofit organizations share some common characteristics. Outstanding nonprofits demonstrate the following features:

- a focus on mission
- an openness to feedback – new ideas and criticism
- a commitment to continuous performance improvement
- an accountability for results – at all levels
- a commitment to their employees.

These values produce successful organizations. The following chapters will examine how to make these values come alive, becoming part of the enterprise’s governance and management fabric. The first step, however, is leadership by both management and the board.

In today’s society, with growing demands on nonprofit organizations and relatively shrinking available resources, the difficulties of achieving success and the consequences of failure have never been greater. To manage these enterprises well is a challenge worthy of society’s best and brightest leaders.

Welcome to the beginning of solving the most interesting management problems in contemporary American life.