



# I've Been Thinking about ... Leadership in Turbulent Times



**Faced with many pressures, how does a nonprofit executive lead effectively? Who nurtures the nurturer?**

By Martha Golensky

**W**e're all coping as well as we can while the economic yo-yo goes up and down. Some nonprofit CEOs are breathing a sigh of relief that they're still able to pay the bills and maintain a normal level of services. Others have received the dreaded phone call from a major funder, or two, to say the grant request to continue a valued program has been denied or the anticipated gift to the capital campaign must be deferred indefinitely.

If you happen to be in the second group, do you have a backup plan ready to go? Or are you more of a crisis manager who waits until disaster strikes before coming to terms with reality? By my choice of words, it's probably obvious I favor the tortoise's approach over the hare's, but in an updated version of the fable to fit the times. Rather than being slow and steady, the tortoise wins by having the gift of foresight, the ability to anticipate a decision's likely consequences, and then progressing steadily toward the finish line.

*Foresight* is one of the 10 characteristics associated with the late Robert K. Greenleaf's concept of

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the servant-leader, which can be summed up in one fundamental question: "How do we get the right things done?" In this type of leadership, the number-one priority is serving staff, clients, and the community at large.

In his classic essay "The Servant as Leader," Greenleaf stated: "Foresight is the 'lead' the leader has." Once leaders lose this lead, they're not leading; they're reacting. Foresight means moving forward creatively, following a plan developed after carefully listening to others and then capturing the will of the group.

These *are* difficult times for many voluntary organizations, for the expectations of key stakeholders never seem to diminish even as the competition for scarce resources grows. It's in just such times, however, that true leaders are revealed. Such leaders recognize that it's as much about the journey as the destination, and that sharing power is a sign of strength.

The most intelligent, naturally gifted nonprofit CEO I ever worked with had one fatal flaw, an inability to understand he needed to surround himself with senior

managers whose talents complemented his own. He drove away those he perceived as a threat and ended up having to carry the full burden of his role virtually by himself. Yes, he received the kudos when things went well, but despite his many accomplishments, his approach ultimately took its toll on him physically, causing him to opt for early retirement even though his desire to lead still seemed keen. I often wondered what this man might have achieved with greater self-awareness and the ability to rely more on others.

With all the pressures today, leaders must find a personal safety valve. This valve might be exercise, a support group, or meditation. Or it might be a sympathetic friend in whom they can confide their doubts and fears.

It's a basic truth that you cannot nurture others from a position of weakness, whether mental, physical, or spiritual. It's vital to recognize this fact and take steps to ensure you're fully prepared to be an effective role model. ■

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