

Thoughts on Leadership in the Nonprofit World

Are you living up to your true leadership potential?
Use these questions and tips to release the leader within.

BY MARY ANN SIEGEL

**Leaders are best
When people barely know that they exist,
Not so good when people obey and acclaim them;
Worse when they despise them.
“Fail to honor people,
They fail to honor you;”
But of a good leader, who talks little,
When their work is done, their aim fulfilled,
The people will all say, “We did this ourselves.”**

—Lao Tzu, edited

The above quote, reproduced in the North Carolina Outward Bound School’s Book of Readings, has inspired many a tired backpacker on an Outward Bound expedition. Through Outward Bound’s rigorous experiential initiatives, students learn that leadership is developed. By learning to trust their ability to solve problems, they develop their skills in both leading and working alongside their team members.

It is while climbing a mountain, shooting the rapids, walking a balance beam, or rappelling off a cliff that Outward Bound participants discover what they’re made of. The hallmarks of success in the program are the hallmarks of a leader—the ability to believe in oneself, to trust others, to endure by taking one step at a time, to support others, and never to give up. Outward Bound’s motto, from a poem by Tennyson, represents the best of the character of leadership and of volunteerism, so vital to the nonprofit arena, “To Serve, To Strive, and Not to Yield.”

The battle to let go of fear, doubt, and ambivalence is an inward and personal one. Each individual must learn to turn a challenge into an opportunity. Individual success becomes even greater when people learn to ask for help while supporting their teammates.

Develop leadership qualities by accepting an individual challenge.

The qualities of a good leader are the same whether you’re in the woods or a nonprofit boardroom. The road can be lonely

when you’re chairing a campaign, unifying a board, surviving a loss of funding, advocating a new issue to a donor, or recruiting volunteers. Working as a team increases the chance for success. You can meet challenges more easily when you have moral support and a wealth of different ideas.

Good leaders understand the advantage of leading “with” their teammates. They set the example, the tone, and the pace. All must stroke together to win.

But you can’t be a strong leader until you focus on and clarify your own goals. You develop and strengthen your leadership skills by deciding what you want and motivating others to follow you.

Create a vision of the challenge by clarifying goals and objectives.

Whether you’re a new board chair, a seasoned board chair with immediate challenges, an executive director, a development director, or a committee chair, you will find your experience tested. Before you start your journey of leadership, you must be crystal clear—to yourself and to your team—about your goals and objectives. Begin by asking yourself these questions:

- **Will you accept the challenge of going for your goals?** Are you prepared to move beyond your comfort zone—to make a sacrifice in your own contributions of time and money and ask others to do the same?

- **Who will you ask to serve on your team?** What strengths do these people have? Do they complement your weaknesses?
- **What are your goals?** How are they prioritized? Have you let yourself think big when making your plans?
- **What are your objectives?** Have you created a long-term and a short-term strategy for achieving your goals? Who will do what?
- **Have you communicated** your goals, objectives, needs, and desires to a wide audience? Have you sold your ideas to a small circle of supporters and asked for input before taking your message to this broader audience?

Exercise leadership by articulating your vision to others.

If you can answer yes to the above questions, it's time to start your leadership journey.

The stuff you're made of determines how bumpy the journey will be. Character is the foundation of everything you dream, suggest, articulate, and motivate your teammates to do.

Here are 10 leadership tips to make the journey easier:

1. Think with integrity.

Everything else flows from this. Because leadership is instilled through action, you must earn people's respect and trust. There are no shortcuts to being honest and honorable.

2. Act with integrity.

As John D. Rockefeller, Jr., said in his classic booklet on soliciting gifts, treat others the way you would like to be treated. Be sincere and straightforward. Don't make promises you can't keep. Practice what you teach.

3. Communicate and teach.

Convey a vision and mission to your team. Provide workshops for staff, board members, and volunteers. Be sure they have a clear understanding about what to expect, how to carry out their responsibilities, and how to fulfill the organization's mission.

4. Listen to—and learn from—each team member.

Whether people want to share an idea or explain why they're unhappy, hear what they have to say. Teach your team members to do the same. It's in your best interests to have as many knowledgeable advocates as possible on your side.

5. Surround yourself with good people and good workers.

Delegate clearly and often. Coach and motivate team members by expressing why you have faith in them. Such

coaching will empower them to practice new behaviors and exceed goals.

6. Appreciate the efforts of others,

including your volunteers, board, staff, and donors. Thank people for their contributions, and make sure they feel valued. Be there for them. Expressing your faith in them will encourage them to carry out new behaviors and to exceed goals.

7. Be tenacious.

Follow through in your efforts, and motivate your teammates to do the same.

8. Have courage.

Be willing to take risks. Set your sights high.

9. Be prepared.

Do your research about your prospective board members, donors, and the public.

10. Commit yourself.

Demonstrate your commitment in everything you do. Remember that your attitude affects those around you, and their commitment will flow from yours. The exciting thing about leadership is that examples of courage and victory serve to educate, motivate, and inspire us all. ■

Resources

Burnham, Katie, "What Skills Will Nonprofit Leaders Need in the Future?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 3.

Jenson, Donna, "Sharing the Vision: Every Leader's Obligation," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 8, No. 5.

Temkin, Terri, "Nonprofit Leadership: New Skills Are Needed," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 5.

Muehrcke, Jill, "Are You a Collaborative Leader?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 2.

Nathan, Maria, "Do You Have What It Takes to Be a Chief Learning Officer?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 16, No. 2.

Vanden Berk, Kathryn Collins, "Is Your Organization an Opportunist?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 3.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, www.snpo.org.

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