

Cover Story

Leadership: Autocracy Is Out, Teamwork Is In

By Nancy Macduff



"Managing people is like writing rhymed poetry: people need the widest possible freedom within a disciplined structure."—Jim Britell, *Whole Earth Review*, Fall 1992

Do you remember the old days? In many organizations the leader was the boss: He (and it usually was a he) told others what to do; appeared confident and self-assured; followed the rules and climbed to the top of the organization. There was something predictable and orderly about what it took to be a leader. Then came Toffler's *Future Shock*, the book that said the new world order was learning to deal with a rapidly changing environment. It was followed by the successes of the Japanese style of management, not only in Asia, but with North American workers. The early 1990s unleashed information on the ethical and financial errors in all types of organizations. The rule book on leadership had some new chapters and recommendations.

Leaders have to be planners, cheerleaders and adult educator/teachers. The leader of the 1990s effects change, builds mutual respect with staff and is a courageous risk taker.

These requirements of leaders apply in government, business and the volunteer sector. Today, there are five qualities that distinguish leaders.

Honor. Ethical standards for those who work in volunteer programs are high. Publicity on scandals involving salary and benefits, mismanagement and the misuse of tax-exemption status within nonprofits has highlighted the need for leaders with firm ethical values. These include integrity and commitment to the mission of the organization, agency or program.

A leader's job is to build excitement through involvement with a confident and committed work force of volunteers and employees.

Empathy. Productive and effective work environments benefit from the presence of an empathetic leader. An environment of mutual respect

and concern for both the personal and professional life of volunteers and employees is essential. For example, a volunteer in a youth agency had worked 10 years in administrative leadership positions to save the organization. The agency's executive director knew she faced a personally difficult year and suggested that the volunteer take a year's sabbatical. The volunteer was kept informed and invited to all social activities, but not expected to work. At the end of the year she returned refreshed and took up a new and exciting project. The leader of the agency had understood the volunteer's family needs. Her actions encouraged the volunteer to take time out, but in a way that kept her connected to the program.

Reliability. A leader can be "counted-on." Leaders do not abandon volunteers when there are mistakes. A hospital volunteer association sponsored a benefit which annually raised thousands of dollars. One year the association experienced severe internal problems within the volunteer corps. Instead of abandoning this association, the volunteer coordinator helped them solve their interpersonal problems and carry on with their project. This volunteer coordinator provides leadership because she is known as someone who is reliable and helpful.



Congruity. Tom Peters suggests that leaders "walk the talk"; put into personal and professional practices the things others are told to do. Volunteer directors who set up exemplary models of volunteer programs within their own agency are more believable when making recommendations to others.

Courage. The rule of the '80s was "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." The new rule is "If it ain't broke, it is time to fix it." The world of volunteerism is dynamic and the effective leader takes risks to change and improve programs—especially when everything seems stable. Episodic or short-term volunteer programs are still only haphazardly available, despite the evidence that people want to give short-term service. Volunteer directors who plan and organize episodic volunteer opportunities are taking a risk, but one with the potential for huge dividends.

Consider these ideas to get you started on the road to effective leadership:

- Review ethical codes. Is there an ethical code for volunteers and employees in your organization? If yes, review it. Put a note about it in the newsletter. Post it where people can see it. If not, volunteer to take a leadership role in developing one for your program, organization or agency.

- Empathetic leaders build teams. The ability to help people work together efficiently and effectively distinguishes leaders. Nancy Austin, a corporate management consultant, says, "Next to cars, Honda's hottest product is its autonomous work-team structure, where people dedicated to 'lifelong learning' regularly shatter productivity and quality records. Anybody can buy a robot. Honda figured out how to get thinking people to work together to produce a better automobile." (*Working Woman*, July 1990)

The days of autocratic leadership are over. Real leaders are those who team-build. Not everyone knows how to be a team player. The leader provides learning opportunities for teams and then gives them real responsibility and authority to complete tasks. Involving members of the team is an important empathetic leadership decision. At the Colorado Symphony, board members include a high percentage of musicians—who have a powerful stake in the success of their orchestra.

Think of a project you are working on now. List *all* the stake holders. Next to the names of people or organizations, list the ways in which you are currently involving them in the decision-making process. Be sure to include the leaders in your own organization as stake holders. Develop specific strategies to include those whom you might have left out of the decision-making process.

- Reliability and consistency are an important part of the vision for an organization. In the day-to-day operation of any volunteer program it is easy to forget what you set out to do. It is the effective leader who consistently brings everyone back to the real purpose.

Keep the mission of your organization or agency prominent in the eyes of volunteers and employees. Review the purpose statement for the volunteer program. Recruit some volunteers to help with this job. Assess your purpose and activities for how they further the mission. Share your assessments with volunteers, employees, management and the community. The contribution of the

volunteer program to the larger vision of the organization builds credibility.

The volunteer director who consistently keeps his/her eye focused on what is important is a key touchstone for everyone in the organization.

■ Congruity means feeling the same obligation toward those who work for you (volunteers and/or employees) as those to whom you report (management). A key part of this is learning to manage *up* and *down* in the organization. Most volunteer managers are good supervisors of volunteers. They listen, provide feedback and help people grow in their jobs. But managing down means more. It is moving real power and authority into the hands of volunteers.

One aspect of managing up means actively working to support the empowerment of volunteers at all levels. There are governance volunteers who serve on committees and boards, and there are direct-service volunteers who raise money and provide service to clients and members. The manager of direct-service volunteers needs a seat at the leadership table of the organization.

The volunteer coordinator or director who provides information to upper management on demographics trends, social needs and citizen concerns as it relates to the mission of the organization or agency soon becomes an invaluable member of the leadership team. A volunteer coordinator in a social welfare government program, for example, learned that community organizations did not

receive key information on such things as changes in telephone numbers and appointments of new personnel within the government department. She developed a newsletter for community organizations to provide information about programs and people. Her knowledge of facts, both inside and outside the government agency, made her an invaluable member of the management team.

■ Leaders have the courage to take people where there are not yet maps! Trend-tracking is a skill most effective leaders possess. Knowing trends means having an understanding of what is happening in the world and how your organization and the volunteer program deal with the changes around the corner.

A good first step is to monitor the media. Know the trends and know how you want to respond. Read at least two daily newspapers, one weekly news magazine, one volunteer journal and this magazine. Keep volunteers and employees informed about the trends that influence how you function as an organization. Leaders are out in front when it comes to information.

There is no mystery in leadership. It is developing an ability to deal with a rapidly changing world. It is rooted in seeing change as both an opportunity and a challenge. ■

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