



Lead and empower others

Leadership builds on strengths, minimizes weaknesses

Compiled by Sara Reynolds, training and outreach coordinator

What comes to mind when you think of "leadership"? What type of person do you envision? Perhaps you think of a political leader, like a president or

prime minister. Maybe you think of a business leader, a president of a Fortune 500 company. Or maybe you think of cultural or spiritual leader, someone who inspires change. These individuals have charisma and confidence. They are intelligent, and somehow always know the right thing to say. They make good decisions – in fact, they rarely seem to make any missteps. Somehow, they just seem to fit into leadership naturally, their list of strengths is many, and their list of weaknesses – well, do they really have any?

Of course, everyone has weaknesses, and everyone makes mis-

takes. Some people do have some natural qualities that make leadership come a bit more naturally. But most of us have what it takes to be a good leader. And public officials have a unique responsibility to do what they can to develop leadership skills. The community does, and should, expect nothing but an elected official's best efforts to be an effective leader. The good news is that most people have basic, common core competencies that provide the "raw material" for good leadership.

What makes a great leader is the ability, through deliberate actions and experience, to shape and hone those core competencies to

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maximum benefit.

A quick look in any bookstore will demonstrate that leadership is a hot topic. Leadership isn't as elusive as it seems, though, and at the end of the day there is no better way to learn than to draw from personal experience. It doesn't happen overnight, it takes time and it takes reflection and honest personal assessment of one's abilities, conduct and, yes, mistakes!

The dynamic role of a leader

Leadership is a dynamic process in the continuously shifting environment, it is important that leaders be able to adapt and change in response to the world around them. This means being able to use one's position as a leader in strategic ways. There are times when leaders need to provide clarity and direction on an important issue. As the issue pro-

gresses, the leader may need to be less "hands on," stepping back and allowing others to use their expertise and resources to solve the problem. When problems have been successfully addressed, leaders should acknowledge those who were involved and credit their efforts. Leaders do not need to be static in their role and their style – and there are many ways for every one to lead – identify those different situations and view them as opportunities to use one's position as leader in constructive and effective ways!

Assessing strengths and weaknesses

Does it seem high-profile leaders have very few weaknesses? Of course, everyone has weaknesses, yet others seem more adept at minimizing them. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, but few take the opportunity to fully inventory what

they are. A true inventory, beyond the obvious, takes careful consideration and time. Many weaknesses are "covert" and only come out in specific circumstances. Yet they have a detrimental affect on one's strengths and can have a significant impact on leadership ability.

Consider yourself as a "whole person," strengths and weaknesses. Acknowledge your weaknesses rather than spending an inordinate amount of time trying to change them. Instead, find ways to mitigate their affect on your stronger leadership qualities. Weaknesses that are acknowledged and controlled become increasingly irrelevant as you learn to manage them and prevent them from impacting your leadership decisions.

Decisiveness

In the dictionary, the term decisiveness is described as conclusive, firmness, resolute. Being decisive means taking a position. When it's a tough issue, taking a position is one of the more uncomfortable situations you will likely experience. This is, unfortunately, all part of the role of a public official. While sometimes decisions will be painful and controversial, elected officials could be doing the community a disservice by endlessly hemming and hawing over an issue and dragging out the decision, thus allowing emotions, resources and discord to gain further momentum. There is a time and place for careful consideration of all the facts; then there comes a time when a decision must be made and leaders have an obligation to do so. Among leaders, stand-out traits are decisiveness and the commitment to a decision or a position once it is made. There is no question that the decision is final, thus allowing everyone involved to accept the position or direction and move on to more productive pursuits.

Problem-solving

Leaders are problem-solvers. Whether it is balancing next year's budget or constructing a new recreation center, leaders are constantly balancing the needs of community and available resources. Each decision is a problem-solving process. Leaders must approach these challenges from two perspectives: always bearing in mind the "big picture," yet understanding the importance of meeting immediate needs without allowing the process to be overwhelmed and distracted by obstacles. Effectively leading through a problem-solving process requires clarity; in many cases, a clearly defined problem is a half-solved problem. In addition, leaders acknowledge the importance of conflict and welcome it as part of the problem-solving process. Conflict, when respectful, is a natural and necessary component to achieving the best solutions. Leaders understand the necessity of conflict because it can reveal aspects of a problem and tangential issues that may not have otherwise surfaced if everyone was in agreement.

Responsibility

Even the most effective leaders can never get absolutely everything they want – there are "compromises" and "agreements." This is understandable, in any leadership position, there are numerous interests and priorities to balance, and there are some things that simply cannot be done, no matter how much an individual or a constituent group wants them. Leadership is easy when things go as desired, but an individual's skills are tested in the face of disappointments and failed efforts. There are both good and bad examples of how to explain these missteps to the citizens. Rather than assuming the role of a "victim," a responsible leader copes, takes full responsibility for

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his or her actions, and shifts the focus toward dealing with the problem rather than complaining or making excuses for why it didn't go their way.

So how does one become responsible leader?

1. Be aware of victim behavior, and consider some examples of this behavior you have witnessed. Think of what some more appropriate responses might have been.
2. Be dependable. Be cautious of the commitments you make – once you make a commitment, follow through. If you can't guarantee a certain outcome, then don't make the commitment!
3. Understand that there will be times when you are conflicted – you'll be stuck between two equally important and valuable options. Remember, as a public official you have a special obligation to your city or town, and there will be times when you will need to do what's best for the community, even if it involves a personal cost.

Leadership is an on-going and deliberate process of self-development – it doesn't happen overnight and mistakes are a natural part of the learning process. True, some people are blessed with charisma and may seem to gravitate more naturally into a leadership role, but good leadership is far more multifaceted, requiring many skills and traits. The topics discussed here are highlights on

some of the traits and characteristics of good leaders – personal experience provides the opportunity to learn and develop many more.

Consider the many good examples of leadership you've demonstrated – use these positive examples to inspire personal confidence and fuel your efforts toward becoming an even better leader. By entering public office, you have taken that first step toward leadership – by applying common sense, careful study and reflection, and a personal commitment to self-development, you are well on your way to exceptional leadership and true service to your community. ■

Information found in this article was excerpted from CML's new Modern leadership for municipal elected officials booklet. To order a copy of the publication, contact the League at 303-831-6411 or visit the Web at www.cml.org under "Publications."