



# Dream Catchers:

## *How to Lead Your Association to the Gold*

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Imagine a community association where members respect and appreciate their boards, committee members, and management team. Meetings are productive and upbeat. Different opinions are welcomed and lead to interesting discussions and innovative solutions. The board has a plan and gets things done. Volunteers are not hard to find, and the leaders celebrate passing the baton to their successors. Community members love where they live.

I see some of you smirking out there, thinking to yourselves, "That guy's living in a dream world!" This is no dream. True, most community association leaders are so involved in day-to-day business that they cannot imagine elevating to more rewarding level. Yet highly-functioning communities around the country have reaped the benefits of doing so.

How do they do it? How do they consistently promote good organizational habits and a commitment to continuous improvement?

### Learning to Lead

It starts with the understanding and application of sound leadership principles and practices. Effective leadership is an inside job first, an expression of who you are in the service of others, hence the concept of the servant leader. It is recognizing that you serve a greater good. When you do, you realize why the great thought leader Warren Bennis called leadership "the art of being more fully human."

One of the best guideposts I've come across is from Kouzes and Posner's seminal work, *The Leadership*

Challenge, which identifies characteristics of leaders performing at their best. The resultant five practices provide a great checklist for community volunteers:

- Clarify values. Affirm the shared values of the organization and teach others to model them.
- Inspire a shared vision. Imagine the possibilities, find a common purpose, and animate the vision by appealing to common ideals.
- Challenge the process. Search for opportunities, revisit old assumptions, experiment, generate small wins, and learn from experience.
- Enable others to act. Foster collaboration by creating a climate of trust, facilitate relationships, and strengthen others by developing competence and confidence.
- Encourage the heart. Recognize contributions, expect the best from others, personalize recognition, and celebrate the value and victories, creating a spirit of community.

Think about leaders you've admired. I suspect they employed these five practices. All apply to community association leadership. The question is, how can you do it?

## Culture – The Missing Link

The culture of an organization either creates the space for sustainable, defined success or makes it difficult, if not impossible. A healthy culture allows the organization to tap into the knowledge, talents, experience, energy, and intellectual capital of participants. It does not permit ego, politics, or dysfunction to get in the way. And yet...community association boards almost never talk about culture.

In this context, culture can be defined as the environment that establishes norms for behavior for the people in the organization. It involves the connection between individuals' goals and values and those of the group. Culture is embodied in author Seth Godin's statement: "People like us do things like that."

Organizational culture provides the context in which the stakeholders understand their roles and can concentrate on doing their best. Healthy cultures in community associations put boards in a position to establish desired results and provide the necessary resources to achieve them. Focusing on those results delivers rich payoffs. Building a healthy culture yields exponentially compounded interest in terms of time, energy, progress, and community spirit.



## Three Cultures

Organizational culture tends to fall into one of three general categories:

- **Intentional Culture.** Values, goals, and norms have been identified, codified in some form, and provide the basis for principled action. People in the organization are clear on "The Why."
- **Unintentional Culture.** Values, goals and norms are left to chance. Defining them depends on who the influential people are in an organization at a particular time. Frequently, decisions are made and actions taken on an ad hoc basis. Sometimes leaders focus on rules and written procedures without explaining why they matter. Other times, there is no focus at all. Everybody works too hard reinventing the wheel or making it up as they go. If such a community is fortunate, things will go well riding on the backs of a few good people.
- **Actual Culture.** Values, norms and goals have been identified. There may be mission, values, and vision statements with lofty aspirations printed on glossy marketing materials and plaques on walls. Yet, leaders and members of the organization violate those ideals on a regular basis without correction. The inherent hypocrisy of the organization destroys morale and trust.

Most organizations fall into the unintentional category. Their leaders may have no concept of culture or fail to recognize the benefits of the time investment necessary to build a successful one. They cannot see that the hard work up front will significantly decrease their time and effort in the long run. They are so caught up in the day-to-day operation that they miss the bigger picture.

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## Let's Get Intentional

Organizations create and perpetuate effective and sustainable culture in which principled action is fostered. They tend to employ some version of the following hierarchy:



Why do many community associations tend to have an unintentional culture? First, boards can be mired in tactics, too busy putting out fires and being stuck in the weeds to elevate their perspective.

Second, exclusive devotion to the standard board meeting model can cause an unintended consequence. Leaders and managers are trained to follow the legal requirements for board meetings. They correctly do the association's business in accordance with open meeting requirements and the standard meeting agenda. Well planned and executed board meetings are highly effective in handling the day-to-day business of the association. However, regular board meetings are horribly ill-suited to address bigger picture issues, complicated projects, and strategic planning. These discussions will never fit into a standard board meeting agenda in the best of times. Change it up by scheduling some town hall or special meetings to listen to what members have to say, get ideas flowing, and deal with big picture issues.

## Beware Culture Killers

There are some insidious traps that will destroy good habits and crush the culture of continuous growth.

Beware ego and fear of looking stupid or making a mistake. The truth is, if you try new things and work

towards progress, mistakes will be made. Admitting mistakes and allowing for some vulnerability will earn you more respect than pretending to be perfect. Humility is a huge asset for effective leaders. It builds trust.

Management consultant and author Patrick Lencioni's comprehensive work with teams yields a useful model that is a guidepost for analysis. According to Lencioni, effectiveness starts with trust. Trust allows for healthy conflict, which in turn fosters commitment. Commitment sets the stage for acceptance of accountability. These four elements naturally lead to results. Lencioni also offers a converse approach that can be used as a scorecard. Check out the "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team". Hopefully you won't experience too many "uh oh" moments!

Finally, pay attention to how leaders act when mistakes are made. If the first question asked is "Who is responsible?" something's wrong. Organizations with healthy cultures react with the following questions, in this order:

- **What?** Determine exactly what happened. Make no assumptions.
- **Why?** Was this a performance issue, a systems issue, or a combination?
- **How?** What factors contributed to the issue? And only then...
- **Who?** Now you can address the matter, take the appropriate action and help people to grow and learn.





## That All Sounds Great, But...

The concepts all make sense, but where can you start? What practical steps can volunteer leaders take to create and promote a culture of good habits and sustainable progress?

**1. Adopt the three word mantra.** One of the reasons I stuck with my main professional mentor for over 30 years was because he consistently stressed three powerful words. Best idea wins. No politics. No ego. A great idea is a great idea, no matter who came up with it. Be prepared to hear it. Any board that adopts that mantra encourages participation and collaboration.

**2. Start with shared values.** Begin the process of identifying the shared values of the community and board. They can be accomplished with a series of work sessions. An outside facilitator can help. You can also back into it with another process I will describe below. Listening to members is crucial, whether it be at board and annual meetings, by soliciting input through town hall meetings or surveys. Quantifying shared values may seem daunting, but it doesn't have to be. A few key questions can get the ball rolling. Borrowing from the affirmative inquiry method, you could try these:

- What were the factors that drew you to this community?
- What do you enjoy most about living here?
- When things were at their best, what did it look like?
- What is the most valuable thing about living here?
- What was the best thing the board ever did?
- How do you describe the association to your friends or family?

Look for common themes. Find what resonates. Start writing. Any resultant statement of values, vision, and/or mission that will provide context and a guidepost for the decisions and actions of the organization would be beneficial. It doesn't have to be perfect. You will periodically adjust as needed anyway. Baby steps are OK.

### **3. Hold an annual board orientation/tune-up.**

Consider an annual training session. The ideal time for such a session is soon after each annual meeting. The session can reinforce industry-specific and leadership fundamentals and help new board members get up to speed quickly. The management team should attend. Boards have found these sessions helped their group gel quicker, promoted principle-based discussions and decisions, and increased efficiencies especially early in the board year. Some boards include committee members.

### **4. Schedule annual planning sessions.**

Schedule an annual brainstorming session with key team members to set goals for each upcoming year. Reverse-engineer the goals to identify the steps needed to achieve those goals. Create a realistic timeline of events to get them done. Priorities will be set and a trackable plan established. Boards that follow this discipline are focused, productive and forward-thinking. They also establish expectations for themselves, their support staff, and the community. Some boards find that the process also helped them identify or clarify their values, vision or mission. It makes sense – if you listen carefully to what people want to do, you'll know what's most important to them.

## Make it Happen!

Great leadership and a healthy organizational culture are infectious. They create success cycles. It's not easy to get it going. In *Good to Great*, author Jim Collins likens progress to a massive metal flywheel. It takes time and energy to get the wheel turning. But once it starts and inertia kicks in, it gets easier and you reap the rewards of your hard work. Elevate and go for the gold. Don't give up. It will pay off.



Tom is the owner of Association Bridge, LLC, dedicated to creating spaces where community association leaders and the professionals who serve them can successfully navigate the challenges they face, reach the goals they choose, find satisfaction and joy in their service, and make raving fans of association members.