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Leading community associations over deep waters

GETTING THERE – LEADERSHIP

Raising the Bar

A Leadership Perspective for Professional Managers

by Thomas L. Willis, PCAM®

James MacGregor Burns wrote in his seminal 1978 book *Leadership*, “Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth.” He decried what he saw as the failure of leadership on a large scale. He encouraged serious scholarship in that field. Over the next quarter century innumerable studies, analyses and books and have been published. Academia and corporate America have embraced the discipline.

Still, it is not uncommon to read about organizations and businesses that are well managed, but poorly led. It is clear that this observation can apply to our industry. The overall success or failure of community associations relies heavily on the quality of volunteer leadership. In the original vision of community associations, volunteers bore the brunt of the responsibility for both governance and operations. As the industry matured and the realities of life set in, the burden of success has shifted more and more to the professional managers who are employed by these volunteer organizations. The relative successes or failures of the community association are now frequently linked to the quality of the dynamic relationship that exists between managers and client boards of directors.

It has been very encouraging to see our industry actively look outside of itself over the past few years to identify business and life lessons that apply to us. It is in that spirit that this article is written. This will become more important over time, as we address what appears to be looming critical mass in the talent pool of available managers, who are willing to embrace the challenges of our industry.

Leadership 101 – What It Is, What It Is Not

Many myths about leadership have been overturned over the past decades. Leaders are not born; they choose to make themselves through whatever combination of will and opportunity they find themselves in. Leaders need not necessarily be charismatic personalities. In fact, as Jim Collins thoroughly explains in his book *Good to Great*, charisma can be a liability for a leader who aspires to be effective. Cult of Personality is not the same as the promotion of action based on sound principles. Leaders who benefit their organizations over the long haul are not autocratic; they are inclusive. Burns opines, “A leader and a tyrant are polar opposites.” An organization is healthier when it does not rely exclusively on one great leader. Successful leaders allow others to lead in concert with them and grow the future leaders of their organization. Perhaps the most dangerous myth was the assumption that leader must control matters, force action, and manipulate those who follow. Successful leaders understand that control over people itself a myth. Motivation is the key, and successful leaders are keenly aware of the thin line between it and manipulation.

Page 1 of 3

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What characterizes a leader? To borrow from Collins, the effective leader, “catalyzes commitment to and vigorous pursuit of a clear and compelling vision, stimulating higher performance standards.” His or her actions are based, not on satisfying personal egotistical needs, but on the principled desire to benefit others in the organization so that the organization can achieve its goals. Case studies and other published experiences indicate that successful leaders frequently view themselves as servants of those in their organizations. They help to crystallize the vision of their organization, communicate that vision, and then focus on making sure that others in the organization have what they need to accomplish its goals.

Can You See Yourself as a Leader? Should You?

As you read through the leadership concepts above, I suspect you may have seen traits or habits that you demonstrate to one degree or another in your day-to-day activities.

The professional manager certainly needs to exhibit good leadership qualities in working with those he or she is responsible for in the line of staff. The question is whether or not the manager had a leadership role in the context of the relationship with the client’s board of directors and membership.

We understand that we are first and foremost in the service business. We will and should be held responsible for how well we carry out client business. Any discussion on a leadership role for the professional manager does not subvert our role as a service provider. Rather, it recognizes the dynamics of the manager-client relationship when it functions at its highest and most effective level. And, as Wes Roberts states in *Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*, “A chieftain can never be in charge if he rides in the rear.”

In the book, *Leaders – The Strategies for Taking Charge*, Warren Bennis contrasts the difference between a manager and a leader. He observes that while the manager is focused on “doing things right,” the leader is primarily concerned with “doing the right thing.” It’s the difference between focusing on efficiency and effectiveness, the difference between function and the reason behind the function. Interestingly, it has been stated that the best managers are leaders first. The professional manager operating at the highest level in our industry understands both perspectives.

We can categorize the duties within the range of our responsibilities into one of two basic functions. Our actions are either supervisory or advisory in nature. As managers, our basic function is to carry out our supervisory functions capably and dependably. While these functions may not be directly related to leadership in the context of our client relationship, our carrying them out in a professional manner goes a long way toward establishing the trust needed to put ourselves in a position to lead. Collins observed that before one can be put in a position to effectively lead, one must first demonstrate one’s abilities to be a “highly capable individual,” then a “contributing team member,” and finally a “competent manager.” We cannot ignore the fundamentals of doing good business.

It is those advisory actions that make the difference. Our active interest and attention in the business and community of our clients should lead us to offer our experience and expertise. Once we have begun to earn the trust and confidence of our clients, a positive cycle begins. The more we provide our valuable input and well-informed recommendations, the more we are trusted. Opportunities to demonstrate a leader’s vision, ability to motivate others to work toward common goals, and influence organizational principles will open up. The relationship takes on the nature of a partnership. As a partner in the process, we are in a de facto position of leadership – not over our clients but with them. This is a pure form of servant-leadership. The high level relationship is a win-win for all involved. Our clients receive the best value, we achieve a high level of fulfillment, and everyone grows and benefits.

Worth It or Not?

Choosing to manage in the model of a “servant-leader” requires a resolve not found in many today. One must have a solid sense of self, a confidence in one’s abilities, and a bias for learning. Bennis’ “Strategy IV: The Development of Self Through Positive Self Regard” in *Leaders* is highly recommended reading. The process outlines will help you to handle the personal challenges that are sure to come your way in this business.

Our industry needs to frankly consider the viewpoint of managers who may not feel comfortable thinking of themselves as leaders. Lack of experience, lack of self-confidence, lack of training, negative experiences with clients, burnout, and lack of time due to being over-extended are all possible factors. These need to be addressed on a personal level if managers are to succeed individually. We need to continue to address these factors collectively if we are to continue to grow as an industry.

Dedicating yourself to professionalism at a high level, accepting a leadership role, and raising the bar of performance brings with it personal benefits that no one can take from you. You make yourself more valuable in the marketplace. You enjoy the highest level of relationship with your clients. You will even find that you enjoy more satisfying professional relationships. Choosing to take a leadership position also puts you in a position of helping to accomplish something special – you may find yourself agreeing with the late Jim Valvano who said, “A person really doesn’t become whole until he becomes a part of something bigger than himself.” Invest and allow the rewards to come to you.

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