

ASSOCIATION BRIDGE, LLC

Leading community associations over deep waters

The L Word

By Thomas L. Willis, PCAM®

IN HIS SEMINAL 1978 BOOK, *Leadership*, James MacGregor Burns wrote: "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 and encouraged serious scholarship in that field. Over the next quarter century, his call was answered, with innumerable studies, analysis, and books published on the subject. Academia and corporate America have embraced the discipline.

Still, evidence of poorly led organizations and businesses abounds. Community associations are not immune. In fact, they're particularly vulnerable-the quality of volunteer leadership will make or break a community. In the original vision of associations, volunteers bore the brunt of responsibility for both governance and operations, but as the industry matured and realities of life set in, the burden shifted more toward professional community managers. Now, the success or failure of association is frequently linked to the quality of the relationship that exists between the board and manager.

It has been very encouraging to see our industry actively look outside itself over the past few years to identify business and life lessons that apply. Bottom line? Success will depend on principled and effectual leaders who understand that where there is great challenge, there is great opportunity.

LEADERSHIP 101

Over the last few decades, many myths about leadership have been overturned. We now know that leaders are not born, for example, but rather choose to create themselves through a combination of willpower and opportunity. Also, leaders don't necessarily need to be charismatic personalities. In fact, as Jim Collins thoroughly explains in his bestseller *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*, charisma can be a liability for leader who aspires to be effective. A "cult of personality" is no substitute for the promotion of action based on sound principle.

We also know that leaders who provide long-term benefits to their organizations aren't autocratic-they're inclusive. As Burns wrote: "A leader and a tyrant are polar opposites." An organization is healthier when it doesn't rely exclusively on one great leader.

Perhaps the most dangerous myth that has been debunked was the assumption that leaders must control matters, force action, and manipulate those who follow them. Successful leaders understand that control over people is an illusion, and that motivation is the key. And they're keenly aware of the thin line between motivation and manipulation.

What characterizes a leader? To borrow from Collins, writing in *Good to Great*, 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 egocentric needs, but on the principled desire to benefit others in the organization so it can achieve its goals. Case studies and other published experiences indicate that successful leaders typically view themselves as servants of those in their organization. They help crystallize its vision, communicate that vision, then focus on making sure that others in the organization have what they need to accomplish their goals.

AT-A-GLANCE

The quality of volunteer leadership will make or break a community. So what make a good leader?

LEADERSHIP 101

Leaders are not born to lead, but make themselves, are not autocratic but inclusive, and inspire people through motivation, not manipulation.

HOW NOT TO FAKE IT

True leaders pursue wisdom and self-awareness, and dedicate themselves to be greater good.

THE PAYOFF.

In the end, leadership means choosing to be a "servant-leader"-which is part of the process of becoming a wholly integrated person.

HOW NOT TO FAKE IT

As you read through the leadership concepts above, you probably saw some of yourself. Your challenge is to apply these ideas in your role as a board member. You're already a leader in title. It's your choice to become a leader in thought and action. In its purest form, leadership is the expression of one's true self-the natural outworking of a person dedicated to service, to the greater good, to the benefit of the whole.

Warren Bennis, the author of *Geeks and Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders* and many other excellent books on leadership, once recommended being wary of "how-to" leadership books, because you can't just take a recipe of special ingredients, stir them together, and make a "McLeader." Indeed, listen to successful leaders, and you'll hear stories of life learning, self-awareness, the humility of wisdom, passion for things bigger than self, and an understanding of how the individual fits into that vision.

Leaders can't fake it. Your community members will spot a phony a mile away. There will be no trust, just alienation, ill will, and possibly rebellion. Conversely, if you're true to your principles and service for the right reasons, you'll earn respect and encourage others to come along for the ride-and continue your efforts after you've stepped down.

Effective leaders also resist the temptation to micromanage, and remain focused on the greater goal. They help others take care of their responsibilities and allow them to grow. The learning process inevitably includes failures and missteps. Leaders exercise patient persistence-a tough balance between allowing others to do things their own way and making sure the group achieves the ultimate result. This extends to the dynamic between a board and its manager. The best managers exhibit leadership qualities, and wise community leaders partner with them. They collectively embrace accountability and celebrate results and successes.

THE PAYOFF

All of this means choosing to adopt the model of a "servant-leader"-which requires a resolve you don't find in many people today. You have to have a solid sense of self, a confidence in your abilities, and an inclination toward learning.

The process of being a leader is the process of being a wholly integrated person. To quote the late Jim Valvano, the legendary college basketball coach: "A person really doesn't become whole until he becomes a part of something bigger than himself." The person who has chosen to live a well-rounded, consistently principled life is more valuable professionally, and is a better parent, a better spouse, a better friend. As Bennis observed in *Geeks and Geezers*, the very factors that make a person a great leader are the ones that make him or her successful, healthy human being.

Reprinted by permission from the July/ August 2006 edition of *Common Ground*, a CAI publication