

What Makes a Great Board Leader?

By Glenn H. Tecker

Many words have been written about leadership. From Machiavelli to Warren Bennis, good and not-so-good counsel about leadership styles, strategies, traits, and behaviors abound. Less has been written about the leadership of groups at work, but insightful guidance is available, from Aristotle to Peter Senge.

Much less, however, has been written about leadership in a voluntary context. Relatively little has been authored about leading collaborative groups in the organizational cultures of associations.

In fact, most effective association board leaders have had to instinctively discern that many of the approaches and behaviors that bring success in other environments—such as a business corporation, professional practice, or public institution—can be counterproductive in the unique dynamic of an organization dependent on voluntary participation.

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The usual tools of motivation, such as extrinsic promises of reward or penalty, offer limited leverage in a voluntary context. When engagement is self-selected, people have to explicitly say “yes” and can implicitly say “no” simply by not acting. In such conditions, great leaders find a way to use what Daniel Goleman calls their “social intelligence” to enable others to ascertain the value of what is being proposed to them. Realization of the opportunity to access such intrinsic reward is the premise underlying “influential leadership.” For great association board leaders, this is the approach of choice for getting things done with others.

Great board leaders in a voluntary enterprise understand that no one really enjoys the authority to order another to act in a particular way. Recognizing that perceptions serve as the basis for beliefs and behaviors, the influential leader uses truth, insight, dialogue, and example to inform the perceptions of others.

We observe three interrelated sets of competencies practiced by board leaders who achieve distinguished contribu-

tions and reputation: intellectual competencies, emotional and social competencies, and behavioral competencies. These competencies can be learned and refined over time with practice, introspection, and honest feedback from trusted sources.

Warren Bennis offers many insights into the complex landscape of the intellectual competencies of leadership. But in the interest of respecting the space available, here are three essential principles that seem to be commonly exhibited by accomplished association board leaders:

1. Learn to ask people for their opinions before you decide, not after.
2. Learn how to help people understand what they need to be thinking about without telling them what to think.
3. Especially in times of change, learn to spend as much time working on the organization as you spend working in the organization.

Similarly, Daniel Goleman has offered clear, research-based but not easily applied explanations of the emotional and social competencies of effective leadership in groups. Association board leaders who earn a reputation for greatness commonly display three “world perspectives”:

1. Everyone has the capacity for good.
2. No one is perfect.
3. Evil cannot be tolerated.

You can do a lot of reading as you settle into your leadership role. Peter Senge has provided plenty of innovative thinking about the processes employed by effective decision and work groups. Jim Collins has described the quality of behavior demonstrated by individuals successfully leading large groups with what he labels “Level 5 Leadership.” The behavioral competencies of great association board leaders are not easily synthesized or summarized, but Cynthia Nowicki Hnatiuk’s *Mentoring the Stars* presents an up-to-date and cogent delineation of behavioral competencies that are especially relevant to leadership of an association board. I feel that good board leaders will find it useful; great board leaders will find it an enlightening, powerful tool. (I feel so strongly about the book that I wrote its introduction.)

Greatness as a board leader is not defined or declared by an individual seeking it. It is the recognition bestowed by others for a role extraordinarily well played and a job exceptionally well done. While the knowledge of what will make the difference is never a guarantee of one’s ability to apply it purposefully and successfully, it is a necessary prerequisite.

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