

Finding A New Kind of Leader

In a global, knowledge-based economy, those who recruit and develop the right kind of leaders will have a huge competitive advantage. Despite the investment of millions of dollars in leadership development by *Fortune* 500 companies, experts warn of a growing leadership gap as an entire generation of baby boomer executives retire. The challenge is further complicated by a next-generation workforce that is unimpressed with position-based leadership or management by declaration. Growing up in an environment where their opinion has been sought on almost everything, and where a forum to express it is just a few keystrokes away, this group responds to a different type of leader.

As Jim Collins described in his bestseller *Good to Great*, “Level 5” leaders share common characteristics that are attractive to both current and future generations of knowledge workers. After spending years coaching and developing leaders from a variety of disciplines, I’ve learned that one sector of our economy is uniquely positioned to create this kind of leader.

Some of the most talented leaders on the planet are those leading associations, nonprofits, or volunteer-based organizations. With little or no executive authority, these amazing individuals employ a wide range of gifts and talents to influence and inspire others. Masters of influence and persuasion, they build personal relationships, invest in others, and motivate people to achieve. Leveraging a compelling vision, these leaders build great teams, introduce fresh ideas and strategies, and light a fire of optimism that burns brightly throughout their organizations. What makes this phenomenon even more intriguing is that these leaders generally do this without two of the biggest motivators in the history of civilization: money and power.

Gone are the days when working for a volunteer-based institution meant you could shift into neutral and coast. The

pressure and demands on the social sector have risen so dramatically in recent years that those who don’t deliver don’t survive. If nonprofit leaders can’t demonstrate to funders a measurable return on investment, they’re out of business. Since social-sector leaders face the challenge of motivating people to work hard and deliver results without the benefit of financial reward, they’re forced to discover what truly motivates each individual to perform. Someone who finds success in this environment develops knowledge and



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experience about human behavior that could never be learned in a traditional corporate setting or even in business school.

So what are the gifts, talents, and attributes that make successful social-sector executives great leaders?

They’re **skilled listeners** who ask great questions, then carefully mine the responses to unearth the nuggets they need to inspire greatness. This is especially critical with a generation that is accustomed to being heard.

They’re **determined problem solvers** who don’t believe there is only one right path or solution, and they rarely accept “no” as the final answer. When you can’t spend or hire your way out of a problem, you are forced to develop a problem-solving mindset.

They’re **passionate advocates** with a deep-seated commitment to the mission that is highly attractive to volunteers and staff. When a leader burns with a passion for the cause, you can’t help but be drawn to the warmth of that fire.

They’re **vision casters** who inspire and motivate an entire organization to follow them to the future. To accomplish this they must be able to see what others cannot yet see and then be able to describe it in a compelling way.

They’re **change agents** who provide the stability an organization needs to operate while serving as a catalyst for transformational change.

They’re **master communicators** who cultivate conversations, storytelling, and compelling dialogue that maintain the interest of all the stakeholders.

While I do not suggest that the answer to the global leadership challenge is to raid our associations and hire their leaders, I do believe there is a competitive advantage for those who are willing to learn from the social sectors.

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