

Reflections on Leadership

Al Condeluci
CEO – CLASS
1400 South Braddock
Pittsburgh, PA 15218
412-683-7100 x 2122
acondeluci@classcommunity.org

CLASS is a multipurpose, nonprofit organization that provides services and supports to over 2800 individuals with all types of disabilities and their families in Allegheny County (Pittsburgh) PA. With a budget of \$15 million dollars and a staff compliment of 300 folks, CLASS is working towards a community where each belongs. The agency was founded in 1951 and serves folks with all types of disabilities and issues. I became the CEO of CLASS in 1991.

In nonprofits as in most all organizations, the CEO is responsible for the overall operation of services and accomplishment of the agency mission. Of course, to do this requires the development of a culture and community of people dedicated to the vision and mission. To this end, I believe my most important role as a leader is to articulate the mission is a clear and compelling was so as to have the community and all key stakeholders invest in the cause. This means to communicate, nurture, empower and validate all the stakeholders in their efforts to achieve the vision/mission. Given the full participation of all the people with varying types of disabilities that we serve, the culture and community we create must accommodate to all levels. To this extent we must be fully accessible in architect as well as attitude. This means slowing down the pace and jargon of communication to assure that everyone can participate.

In thinking about the traits/characteristics/behaviors of leaders five words came to me fast. These are to be: Flexible (nimble and able to adjust), Focused (to keep your eyes on the tasks and challenges in front of you), Fair (to create a culture where people feel valued, listened to, and treated fairly), Firm (to hold your principles and values firmly in hand when making decisions) and Fun (to create an environment where people can find happiness). John Kotter (1996) talked about mental habits of leaders. He identifies risk-taking, humble self-reflection, solicitation of opinions, careful listening, and openness to new ideas as key habits that successful leaders show. Regardless of the format organizational leadership requires that all these things be balanced.

As to the question, are leaders born or made, the answer is probably both. There are some people who were destined to be leaders, though I would assume that this is a small group. Their destiny, however, was clear from the time they were children. Yet, most people, when given the challenge and using key principles and strategies, can emerge as leaders. Most of leadership strategies are ones that can be developed and practiced. One can clearly get better as a leader if they work on it. I study, think,

and have written (Condeluci, 2002) about leadership actions and strategies every day. To this same topic, Donald Krause (1997) says that: “The power to lead is a function of character, not an accident of birth or a prerogative of position.” This suggests that character traits can be developed and leaders can be shaped.

Leadership is definitely about orchestration. I have a dear friend who is Professor of Jazz and Orchestration at Rowan University’s School of Music in New Jersey. He constantly talks about musical success in terms of orchestration. Certainly you need good musicians, and a variety of instruments, and well written musical scores, but a truly great orchestra is more than this. The conductor is the key to bringing out the best in all three elements. The same is true for the successful leader in a business. No one person can do it alone – they need to hire basic talent, have a good variety of skills, rally around a clear and compelling vision and then guide those players into a strong and successful orchestra for success.

Successful leadership is the ability to make clear and focused decisions. To this end, decision making is one of those strategies that leaders can develop. When any of us are confronted with a challenge, there is usually an instinctive (intuitive) alternative you are leaning towards. Current research suggests that intuitive decisions, on average are as good as long drawn out decision making (Gladwell, 2004). For me, timing is critical. If I have the luxury of time, I will put my intuitive decision through the classic decision making steps. If time is of the essence, intuition plays a key role. Always, information not just from staff, but any reliable source is welcomed and considered.

Team development is critical at CLASS. When I became the CEO in 1991, we put together a leadership team that essentially makes key agency decisions. Each person on the leadership team (7 total, from all the major departments) has their unique perspective, and when time allows, decisions are processed at this level. If we are pressed for time, we try to get consensus from at least 3 members of the team. Developing teams is about developing social capital. The more people get to know each other, and find similarities, the easier it is to bond and to bend with each other (Putnam, 2000). Our management team tries to mix social and personal growth, with our professional work as best as we can.

I am a strong proponent of emotional intelligence as a key factor in leadership. There is no question that people who can relate and respond to each other on an emotional level will create a deeper bond. The more bonded people are the more tolerant and flexible they will become. Emotional intelligence is usually associated with Right-Brain thinking and it is important to note, that although this type of thinker is strong in emotional intelligence, they can be light in other important aspects. Left-Brained thinkers often have critical leadership aspects such as data, focus, precision and objectivity as strong attributes. As stated earlier, leadership is more about balance, but emotional intelligence is one of the more important facets of leadership.

Ethical behavior is a must in leadership. If a leader accepts, or adopts a direction on an issue that is unethical, key trust and respect will be lost. Leaders who stay focused on the mission/vision and use honest, forthright principles will never really go astray. This is not to mean that every decision will be successful, or that ripples and fallout might not occur, but the culture and integrity of the community that leaders must create will remain strong if the leader stays principled. Steven Covey (1900, 2004) has written extensively on principle-centered leadership.

Organizations must always try to be current and correct, but to change or adjust, just to appear transformational is wasted energy. Certainly visionary leadership is a key component for a forward thinking CEO. Sashkin (1992) writes about visionary leadership, but his basic framework revolves around the vision itself. If the vision is not compelling and focused the organization will flounder. What is more important is for the leader to keep the mission/vision fresh in the eyes of the key stakeholders.

Is there luck associated with the successful leader, probably so, but I am convinced that the good leader makes his/her own luck. Gladwell explores this concept in his book Outliers, and suggests that some leaders were just lucky. I am not sure about this – I know in my career I have had some luck, but I believe it is more about when preparation meets opportunity success occurs. So is true for the leader. Luck might play a role in opportunity, but it is the preparation that will carry the day for the leader.

The biggest challenge for leaders in the future will relate to building and maintaining a strong organizational culture and community. Changing demographics and newly emerging workers will have different perspectives on work. What will remain constant, however, is that people will always long for community, connections and social capital. If your organization can offer a strong sense of community and the leader continues to build these capacities in their workers and settings, the more people will invest in the organization.

Leadership is one of those topics, like communication, that people sort of think is automatic and simple. Yet the concept of leadership is more akin to the Asian concept of Shibumi. The notion of Shibumi is when a concept is both simple yet complex. A good example of Shibumi would be found in the concept of a bridge. Often bridges are built to simply connect two places. Yet, as any engineer will tell you, a bridge is a very complex principle. To safely connect two places requires a detailed and well thought out plan. I think this same notion of shibumi applies to leadership. Most of us get chances to lead something or another in the course of our lives. Someone must make the decision and some of the issues discussed in this paper may seem simple. Yet, leadership is complex and full of detail, nuance and feel. In many ways leadership is an art and you can bet that any successful leader you know has thought very deeply about their actions.

Reference:

Condeluci, Al. Cultural Shifting: Community Leadership and Change. (St. Augustine:TRN, 2002).

Covey, Steven. 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. (New York: Simon Schuster, 1990).

Covey, Steven. The 8th Habit. (New York: Free Press, 2004).

Gladwell, Malcolm. Blink. (New York: Little, Brown, 2004).

Gladwell, Malcolm. Outliers (New York: Little Brown, 2008).

Kotter, John. Leading Change. (Boston: Harvard Press, 1996).

Krause, Donald. The Way of the Leader. (New York: Parigee, 1997).

Putnam, Robert. Bowling Alone. (New York: Simon Schuster, 2000).

Sashkin, Michael. "Strategic Leadership Competencies" in Phillips, R.L. and Hunt, J. G. (Eds.). Leadership: A Multiorganizational-Level Perspective. (New York: Quorum, 1992).