

# Leadership: Looking at what works and what doesn't

When I graduated seven years ago with a minor in leadership development, I really thought I knew it all: Leadership theory, group stages of development, change management tactics, etc.

My professional career has always been tied to "leadership," but the more experience I have in the field, the more I struggle with what "leadership" really means. I get frustrated daily when I hear phrases such as "we build leaders," "we develop leaders for tomorrow," "leadership is our mantra."

What do we mean? Are we building positional leaders for corporations? Are we developing good communicators for the PR sector? Are we setting visionary goals for the future?

Define it—tell me what "leadership" really means, because nine out of 10 people will have a different interpretation.

## By the book

When asked about my life goals, I usually share that I would like to write a book titled "Leadership: The Bottom Line." In this book, I plan to show the similarities of all leadership approaches and discuss why different people and organiza-



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tions are drawn to different frameworks. I find it intriguing that some organizations will so wholeheartedly embrace a model of leadership that it is not flexible enough to realize that it usually cannot be all things to all people.

I urge organizations to work with their employees to determine which leadership competencies really matter and figure out how they can support and provide opportunities for them to develop the needed competencies.

And, by the way, some of these competencies will always be changing to keep up with our changing world. This is a process—not a one-time plan.

Speaking of process, I also struggle with the traditional way we develop leaders. We send people to classes. We do a good job in training people to understand their personal strengths and weaknesses, listen better, work together in teams and develop visions for the future, but when does the rubber meet the road?

How do we actually engage people in applying these skills? Just because we have "blessed" someone as a leader since they have "learned" some skills indicative of leaders, how do we help them process what happens to them when they actually use these skills? How do we support the learning and need for further learning? We must figure out how to have applied learning for the greatest impact.

In today's world, our most valuable asset is human capital. We need as many

people as possible seeing themselves as leaders (however they want to define it). Together, we can make our community a place we all want to live, work and play. This means everyone is a leader and a follower in their own right.

I have recently been involved with a significant neighborhood-planning initiative in Indianapolis. What I have valued the most about this experience is that all residents have been given an opportunity to be involved.

Although there are significant not-for-profit organizations that could probably write this plan over a few days time; the value of true engagement (read leadership) of residents for the impact they truly want to create is vital. It requires intentional action. It takes more time. It takes an openness to diversity. It takes courage to let go of the process.

## The more the merrier

I think what works is inclusive leaders in action for the betterment of our organizations and community. What does not work is exclusive leadership that is inaccessible for others to engage.

To further this point, I would like to applaud some local not-for-profits that have recognized the need to engage young professionals in their work. As someone who is considered a "young professional" in the community, I am pleased to see opportunities open for me and for my colleagues to be "at the table" in positional

leadership roles in community initiatives. At the same time, I do not think there can ever be enough spots at the table or enough leaders mentoring and learning from my generation.

Take on a "the more the merrier" attitude, make room at the table; take time to be intentional about it and you will be amazed at the results.

During my first job in "leadership" development, a colleague asked me these two questions that have become my mantra: Leadership for whom? Leadership for what purpose?

These get to the core of what impact is wanted from leadership and who is engaging. This is what should be promoted to the community, and the community should push to support and encourage inclusive leadership in action.

Proclaim and affirm true leaders and leadership today.\*

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