



Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations

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Introduction

This is a book about exemplary leadership, which, in any society, is a precious resource that must be identified, nurtured, and celebrated. Good leadership can be found in both corporate and nonprofit organizations, though its corporate forms are generally taken as our culture's ideal—widely researched, broadly revered, and, as we see it, routinely misapplied to nonprofit organizations.

We began our thinking and research with a simple concern: Nonprofit leaders rarely get their due. In classrooms, government funding agencies, and charitable foundations, in their own boardrooms, and throughout the vast literature on leadership, they are regularly required to lead like their corporate colleagues—or as the popular imagery about corporate leadership would require them to lead. The distinctness and complexities of their own worlds tend to be ignored. We intended to take up the mantle in their defense—to study them, to learn from them, and where deserved, to praise them.

Along the way, we discovered that our original intent had led us in unforeseen directions. We discovered a great variety among nonprofit leaders, as befits the great variety of challenges they face and circumstances in which they find themselves. It soon became clear that it made no more sense to try to identify or impose the finest, one-size-fits-all leadership style in the nonprofit world than it had in the corporate world. Rather the fit between leaders and their organizations seemed the key to effective leadership. Many different leaders and leadership styles were required for many different kinds of organizations. The difference between corporate and nonprofit leadership ceased to be our focus. Drawing a clear boundary around “nonprofit leadership” served as a launch point and not a destination.

As we unpacked and elaborated the idea of fit, we observed how effective organizations had aligned the character, skills, values, and personal objectives of leaders with the character, resources, culture, and objectives of their organizations, and how the qualities of leaders and their organizations were aligned

with the communities or markets they served. When organizations were aligned in this way, they hummed with productivity, collaboration, and satisfaction. So we came to see alignment as the fundamental task, the fundamental measure of effective leadership.

The Journey

The ideas in this book emerged gradually, through a circuitous and sometimes difficult journey. The journey itself has been instructive to us, and we want to introduce the book by inviting readers to join us. In our careers as organization development consultants (both of us) and psychotherapists (Barry Dym), we have worked with many leaders in both the corporate and nonprofit worlds. The leaders we have come to know vary enormously. Some are executive directors of large nonprofits or CEOs of major corporations; others head small grassroots or high-tech startup organizations. We have worked with family-owned businesses and public-private partnerships. Some of the leaders we know wear corporate attire and speak in crisp, crafted sentences honed at Ivy League colleges and business schools. Others speak in the tones and vernacular of ethnic or professional communities. Still others speak and act with the sense of noblesse oblige and the sonorous tones of feudal lords. Some, having founded their own organization, work with a passionate fury—almost unaware of their appearance and sometimes barely aware of the people around them. Others trust their minions to do the bulk of the work, and spend time with family or charitable causes, or keep their golf game in good repair. Leaders are short and tall, smart and not so smart. They are men and women. They are from black, white, Latino, Irish, Jewish, Chinese, Italian, and many other cultural backgrounds that help shape the ways they think and behave, the dreams, the fears, the ambitions, and the inhibitions that define their character and their actions.

Often this variety seemed a matter of fact—the way things are—but just as often the variety struck us as interesting, challenging, and the stuff of creative tensions. At the very least, the variety among leaders needs to be supported, affirmed, and utilized. We are a nation defined by our diversity, invigorated and ennobled by the waves of new and different people who come to coexist and contribute. As Americans, we dislike and mistrust efforts to ignore differences or to merge people into a single standard in which one type of person is said to be better than others. We appreciate the jazz of life—free-form within form.

In our consulting travels, on the other hand, we couldn't help but notice a certain homogenizing process with respect to leadership. More and more of the books we read insisted on a single best way to lead. Organizations followed

suit, developing programs to identify and train young leaders in the “correct” approach. The archetypal leader they celebrated was something of a bold manager or an entrepreneur with a solid grounding in modern management techniques, as taught in MBA programs. Foundations, management consultants, and nonprofit boards almost all seemed to accept this MBA-like prescription, and insisted that nonprofit leaders either fit themselves to the mold or make way for those who could.

This homogenizing process seemed to us an enormous waste. It left out many talented people and potential leaders. It squeezed other leaders into a mold that made use of only some of their talents, and often made them so uncomfortable—trying to be people they were not—that they were rarely at their best. And it replicated itself through leadership training programs in which people are measured against the right way to lead rather than encouraged to build outward from their innate character and strengths.

Like the multicultural/diversity consultants who emerged in force during the 1990s, we tried to communicate the importance of being inclusive, of nurturing a variety of leaders and leadership styles. In parallel with the diversity consultants, we generally received token responsiveness and programmatic rejection. Usually we did not speak as complete outsiders; we would already be working with senior executives in large corporations, and we had their ear. They would agree that there are many different ways to lead, that diversity in method and point of view could be creative, that it might also be ethical, and that it might even be good for business; but they did not let it influence how they selected, trained, promoted, or rewarded organizational leaders at the highest levels.

We were satisfied neither that we were making adequate headway on behalf of our clients nor that we had done our homework. We wanted to be able to point to other models of leadership that were both successful and deeply different. So we turned away from the corporate world to make our case.

Two consulting experiences spurred us on. One took place during a two-year consulting experience with a large urban newspaper in the Midwest. Call it the *Standard Tribune* (ST).¹ Recently purchased by a still larger and more prestigious newspaper, the ST was being pressured to modernize its operations. Like most newspapers, the ST had long been a family-owned, paternalistic organization, with virtual lifetime employment guarantees and a stable network of employees who were in place as much for who they knew as for how well they could do their job. It was not a contemporary, hard-driving meritocracy disciplined by market forces. During difficulties, for example, the publisher would simply contribute his own money to tide them over until good financial times returned.

To spearhead the ST’s modernization, the parent company introduced a new publisher, one who had earned his spurs at the parent company as a disciple