The Advocacy Arena: Who Shall Lead Us?

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INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, my leadership, consulting, volunteer, and advisory roles in nonprofit institutions have led me to believe that many of these advocacy organizations are living in the past and, surely, are lacking the strategic capabilities needed to create dynamic let alone viable futures. Simply said, our future in nonprofit advocacy organizations is confronted with a rising tsunami of ever threatening forces. Not only are we awash in political, cultural, and economic challenges; at the same time, too many of the nonprofits are

- caught in a time warp by continuing to define volunteers as members of the "great generation" who want to put in post-retirement time based on clear command/control directions from the top of the organization, rather than as the new plethora of proactive "Boomer/Generation X and Y" volunteers who, as "leaders" on the front lines, want to be engaged in the decision-making process in order to have the power to make choices that make a difference in the lives of their clients.
- overmanaged and under-led, that is, having too many layers, rules, and regulations anchored in managerial maintenance, rather than collaboration, cooperation, and caring based on team leadership, structural transparencies, and open communications.
- not strategically capable of blending mission with margin in these tough fiscal environments.

- mired in history, hindsight, and reaction at the expense of imagination, innovation, and insight.
- drifting reactively into the future, rather than creating their futures by "thinking in the future tense."

At the same time, our role as social stalwarts, professional advocates, and committed volunteers is being diluted in the current context of philanthropic scarcity, financial dislocations, intergenerational tensions, and cultural/political transformations. If we, as leaders, expect to continue to participate in actively facing these forces and directing these sweeping tides, we must clearly define—and design—the leadership perspectives, processes, and competencies needed to ensure both the viability and vitality of nonprofit advocacy organizations during the years ahead.

The new volunteer mantra in public and nonprofit organizations is "Get out of the way." Consequently, the ultimate task of the contemporary nonprofit leader is to create values and vision that unleash the dynamic energies of both in-house professionals and committed volunteers in the not-for-profit arena. Organizations that operate in this new model of engagement will rely more and more on self-managing teams of volunteers. These skilled, dedicated, and motivated volunteers will make now-time decisions by themselves, "out-in-the-trenches," based on the articulated values, passionate visions, and empowering/enabling trust emanating from the formally designated advocacy leaders.

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Clearly, the successful nonprofit organizations in the current decade (and beyond) must be led by individuals who (1) have a bias towards action; (2) motivate volunteers to produce measurable results, rather then simply encouraging them to "show up"; (3) share power with volunteers in order to unleash "values-in-action" energy throughout the system; (4) develop goals based on the power of positive purpose; and (5) put in place an operating culture anchored in powerful symbols and reward realities that accentuate caring and commitment through a sophisticated blending of mission and margin, along with the systematic development of leaders throughout the entire decision-making and delivery processes.

In sum, it doesn't really matter what advocacy leaders say if they have not considered how their messages are received, internally and externally. The issue is not simply disseminating information or ensuring the coverage of geographical territory; rather, the bottom line is to make an impact on the perceptions of the volunteers, the donors, the clients, and the media.

Everyone involved in the organization, especially the in-house professionals and the volunteers, must be advocates who share the vision, engagingly interface with the clients, and lead by example. In essence, we must always remember that the capital "L" formal Leaders of the organization must mentor, develop and unleash the small "l" leaders throughout the organization: only under these circumstances will volunteers follow the formal institutional "Leaders" with more energy, confidence, and become better "leaders" themselves.

Fundamentally, the primary task of the nonprofit leader is to make sure that everybody sees the mission, hears it, and lives it. Without effective advocacy leaders, our organizations will enter the future bereft of allies, buffeted by brutish economics, stymied by structural rigidities, abandoned by action-driven volunteers and, worst of all, cease to be the providers of hope, services, policies, assistance, and visions needed by our respective constituents.

CRITICAL LEADERSHIP AXIOMS

Here then are the critical axioms that can help to define effective leadership for our nonprofit advocacy organizations:

- Imagination is more important than memory—too much hindsight drags down creative foresight; too many advocacy leaders look backward for a stimulus rather than forward to a reconstituted purpose; unlearning is as important as learning.
- We are in an age of confluence—the old boundaries are vanishing—crossover capabilities and boundary-spanning perspectives become leadership necessities for reconstructing new parameters and guidelines; horizontal linkages must be nurtured; this is the end of both organizational silos and narrow focused ideologies, and the beginning of the coalition-building age in the nonprofit world.
- Who you are is more important than what you know—an effective leader guards his/her own heart because everything important in life comes from the inside out; practice can correct theory, but theory is powerless to correct practice.
- What gets measured gets resources—we must measure the things we care about and we must care about the things that we measure; we must turn sporadic donors and part-time volunteers into sustaining contributors by producing measurable results and furthering humanistic sensitivities and citizenship values in a democratic society.
- Never give up, especially in the tough times—don't quit; don't wait; don't whine; no matter who is in the governor's mansion or in the White House; no matter who controls the political agenda, advocacy leaders must be interactive engagers and proactive shapers of the context, content, and climate of both the advocacy arena and the overall social milieu.
- What in context beguiles, out of context mortifies—there is no one best way; change agents change contexts; culture, situations, and political realities are critical anchors for creative change and strategic positioning.

- Strategic vision must be anchored in operational performance—the leader must project an adaptive capacity that can clearly translate macro-level strategic visions into concrete flexible scripts for performance on the front lines and in the trenches, both for co-workers and volunteers.
- Always build on values—leaders preserve core values, accentuate the power of positive purpose, and sophisticatedly blend mission with margin; they never allow mission to become subordinate to operations, fund-raising, or egocentric hubris.
- Passion, not prejudice—leaders must be passionate about what they are advocating but they must never confuse ideological rigidity with compassionate rigor.
- We must emphasize what's right rather than who's right—internal and external collaboration are more important than ego driven confrontation in building teams, partnerships, coalitions, and successful outcomes.

LESSONS LEARNED

The above are the ten fundamental anchors for advocacy leadership in the current age and projected into the future. And yet, I would like to share some other lessons learned while doing research, consulting, coaching, and leading in the nonprofit, volunteer, advocacy arena:
- Small is not beautiful; focused is beautiful.
- Relationship-building competencies are essential for success.
- Branding and differentiation are critical dimensions of organizational leadership style.
- Style can never be an excuse for lack of substance.
- If you want to analyze an advocacy organization, read its financial statements; if you want to pluck its soul, talk to its leader(s).
- We must be opportunity-driven rather than crisis-reactive in fashioning our respective organizational futures.
- Periods of transition require both organizational change and personal change.
- We must create, mentor, develop, and train the next generation of leaders for the

advocacy challenges ahead.
- Leaders must enjoy operational business processes (execution) as much as they enjoy philosophical and rhetorical expositions (vision).
- We must become more market sensitive in relation to finances and human capital and learn how to position our organizations according to market realities and business efficiencies in order to avoid the swings of feast and famine.
- We must recognize that sustainability means mutability.
- Advocacy leaders, like all leaders, must be risk takers.
- Great leaders continually invest time and energy in nurturing trust—both internally and externally.

CONCLUSION

Surely, if one masters the interdependent leadership axioms cited in this article, as well as uses some of the lessons learned (based on my personal experiences in the nonprofit sector), the ultimate outcome to the external world will be an advocacy organization that is second to none. Furthermore, internally it will galvanize full time co-workers and committed volunteers to be proactively and symbolically engaged in a collaborative, interactive, leadership journey that will culminate in a meaningful endeavor that everyone in the organization is proud to support, own, and celebrate.

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