

As I See It

Building Your Leadership Power

By Marlene Wilson



Nationally known volunteer leader, management consultant and author, Marlene Wilson gave the following speech at VOLUNTEER's 1985 National Conference on Citizen Involvement in Los Angeles.

Not long ago, I accompanied three of my workshop participants to a waterfall in Thunder Bay, Ontario. We stood on the observation deck, appropriately dazzled by the sight. Three of us exclaimed, "Amazing!" "Majestic!" "Incredible!" The fourth member of our group, who was from Thunder Bay, remarked, "I guess it is incredible—as long as you haven't seen how it can be."

She then explained that she had visited the waterfall the week before when the flood gates above the dam were fully open. Instead of the three separate, narrow falls we were seeing, she saw one gigantic cascade of water, stretching almost as far as you could see. She finished the description by saying, "Now that was incredible!"

This scene came to mind as I was preparing this speech because I think there are lessons to be learned in everything (or as Arlene Schindler so often says, "Everything is relevant!"). The relevance as I see it is this: It is appropriate that we come together at conferences, so we can remind ourselves that what has been accomplished in our field in recent years is "amazing," "fantastic," "incredible." For example,

- Fifty-five percent of all adult Americans (92 million) volunteer (1983 Gallup poll).
- If these volunteers were paid, their worth would be at least \$63 billion.

- Charitable giving reached a record \$47 billion in 1984 (an increase of 10 percent over 1983).

All of this is true and cause for celebration. But what would happen if we knew how to open the flood gates and let volunteerism really flow to its full capabilities—where we tap into that 50 percent that is not involved, —where charitable giving doubles, —where volunteers and staff, boards and executives see themselves as truly synergistic teams?

My hunch is, "We ain't see nothin' yet!"

So it is with both gratitude for what our field has accomplished and hope for what is still to be done that I come to you today.

My topic is "Building Your Leadership Power," and it is my belief that we have both some problems and some challenges in this field with leadership and with power. Let's start with the problems:

1. Attitudes

First is our attitude about ourselves and how we view the importance and significance of what we do in the voluntary sector. It started with the "I'm only a volunteer" syndrome and moved on to become "I'm only the volunteer director" feeling. It is an attitude of feeling powerless and it is dangerous, for it affects one's feelings of self worth as well as the ability to influence others when appropriate. This has gotten much better over the past decade, with the advent of sound training, professional associations and greater recognition of volunteer administration as a legitimate field. But we still have a long way to go. We cannot be powerful if we feel powerless—it's not possible!

Another attitude we combat is that we take care of everyone but ourselves. I'm talking about burnout, which is still rampant in the helping professions. There's an old saying that illustrates this problem so poignantly: "You can't anymore give what you ain't got, than you can come back from where you ain't been!"

Concerning attitudes toward power, I have conducted workshops on the subject and have participants perform a fascinating exercise. I ask them to give me their immediate responses to three words: powerful, powerless and empowering. The results have been amazingly consistent.

The word powerful drew a mix of negative and positive comments, i.e., strong, effective, manipulative, able to get things done, pushy, aggressive, money, mover and shaker, intimidation. The word powerless elicited consistently negative comments, i.e., weak, ineffective, poor, pushed around, victim, frustrated. The word empowering brought forth consistently positive comments, i.e., makes things happen, enables, shares power, opens doors, works on behalf of others, mentor.

I then point out how it is impossible to empower others if we are (or feel) powerless. Yet, we use the terms empowering and enabling in the helping professions all the time. We have to have power before we can share it! To learn how to get and use power well, we have to shape up our own attitudes about it. Power, which comes from the Latin word meaning "to be able," is simply:

- The ability to cause or prevent change.
- The ability to influence outcome and people.

As you can see, power is neither good nor bad—it's what we do with it that is. When we have it, do we use it to

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manipulate and intimate others—or do we enable and empower others? Those are the choices.

Therefore, we must become more comfortable with the concepts of power and influence.

One other outcome of our reluctance to deal with power issues is a sort of complacent and comfortable “we/they” attitude. We can gripe and feel frustrated by what THEY decide, without having to take any responsibility for changing things. But the older I get, the more I am continually shocked and challenged by the incredible truth—there is no THEY. In a democracy, WE are they!

2. Lack of Skill in Influencing

Influencing is a skill that must be learned and practiced. Yet, it is rarely included in any curriculum for human service professionals or volunteer leaders. How can we change that?

In Chip Bell’s book, *Influencing*, he states, “Many have gone about the act of influencing like the stereotypical PR promoter—with flair and color, sound and fury. Often we have bagged more flak than game.... As professionals in organizations, we are sellers of fitting ideas and we should have two concerns:

1. Is my idea of sufficient worth or value?
2. Can I convince others of its value?”

3. Our Leadership Style

Another area of concern is the style of leadership all too frequently utilized in this field (and other human service professions). We are DOING rather than ENABLING. This leads to overload, running from morning until night, burnout, and frustration.

After personally writing and speaking about this problem for ten years, I am appalled at our lack of progress. It is not that people don’t have access to our workshops and dozens of books that deal with the philosophy and skills of truly participative management (*In Search of Excellence, Passion for Excellence, Masters of Change, The Entrepreneurial Leader, Servant Leadership*).

It’s not the knowing about it that’s the problem—or the believing in it. It’s the doing of it. How and when will we get serious about doing what we know about?

4. Misuse of Power

This is what has given power a bad name and, as Roseabeth Moss Kanter says, has made it the last dirty word in America.

There’s not a person in this room who has not at some time had to deal with what David McClelland calls “personal power persons”—ones who are into power for their own personal aggrandizement, who sees your win as their loss, and therefore is threatened by the success of their subordinates (paid or volunteer). Their primary strategies are manipulation and intimidation. They are the antithesis of empowerment, and they have killed more creativity, motivation and excitement in organizations than we can ever imagine.

Having experienced such a boss myself, I know what it feels like. (It was after that experience that I wrote *Survival Skills for Managers*.)

The only antidote to this kind of power person is for more

and more of us to become what McClelland calls “social power people”: influencing systems on behalf of others; enabling and empowering all who work with us to be their best and not be threatened by it; rewarding it; building the self esteem and capabilities of our people (paid and volunteer); helping dreams and visions happen; and confronting the personal-power individuals who are killing our people’s spirit. There is no more important an agenda for us! But we won’t have time or energy for it as long as we continue to be DOERS!

5. The Organization

In *Survival Skills for Managers*, I point out that there is nothing that frees up our natural spontaneity and creativity more than someone giving us permission to be the best that we can be in the work that we do. The reality is that very few organizations or agencies even attempt to grant that permission in today’s complex, technocratic society. In fact, it is never even an issue with most of them. (Could that be why someone recently cracked, “If you don’t believe in life after death, just stand outside our agency at 5:00!”)

In the book, *The Organization Trap*, Samuel Culbert relates

We live in a remarkable time, when we have access to some of the most creative people in the world to help us: volunteers, out of every discipline, bringing incredible skills and unhampered by the tunnel vision we sometimes get by working too close to the problems. We need to RECRUIT, ENABLE and EMPOWER them to help us!

this touching story about an outgoing deputy director of a public agency:

As he stepped forward to speak, tears began streaming down his face. To the audience’s surprise, he did not try to cover up. There were no platitudes about his sorrow in leaving. Instead, he frankly admitted his tears were of pain and disappointment for allowing himself to be chewed up by the system. In the speech, he stated he had compromised himself, accomplished little, gone along with outmoded methods, stopped taking stands on what needed to be changed, and generally had become a mediocre, ineffective leader. Needless to say, the cost to him as a person was tremendous—but he realized it too late.

Anyone who has worked in a hierarchy can identify with his pain, frustration and tendency to go along, rather than rock the boat. We don’t like to be trouble-makers!

But how do we keep organizations from devouring people? Robert Townsend, in his book, *Further Up the Organization*, has a fascinating formula:

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One good plan is for the chief executive to insist that he must personally use every form in the company before it's installed. Like: requisition forms (for pencils, pads, or air tickets), long-distance-telephone-call forms, or personnel department forms. And his secretary can't fill in the form for him.

If some psychiatrist in the personnel department invents a new application form with a whole lot of questions like "How did you feel about your mother?" before it gets used, the chief executive has to fill it out...completely. This will kill a lot of bad ideas early.

Related to this is a function that you might describe as vice-president in charge of anti-bureaucratization (otherwise known as a VP in Charge of Killing Things). He (she) must have a loud voice, no fear, and a passionate hatred for institutions and their practices. In addition to his regular duties, it's his job to wander around the company looking for new forms, new staff departments, and new reports. Whenever he finds one that smells like institutionalization, he screams "Horse feathers!" (or something more graphic) at the top of his lungs. And keeps shouting until the new whatever-it-is is killed. Every chief executive should find someone to perform this function and then make sure he can be fired only for being too polite.

A new and awesome challenge to all organizations is just beginning to be felt. It is what Peter Drucker calls "a growing mismatch of jobs and job seekers." The most significant group affected is the enormous "baby boom" generation (56 million between ages 25 and 39).

It is a challenge for the world of volunteerism—to tap into the skills, talents and energy of this group and help it do its best—so its members can get satisfaction and fulfillment possibly denied them at work. But, we must know how to work well with them!

How, then, do we keep from being overwhelmed by all of these problems:

- Our own attitudes toward ourselves and power
- Our lack of skill in influencing
- Our Doer vs. Enabler style of management
- The misuse of power
- Stifling or disabling organizations

All I can do is recall the words of the most creative person I know, a quadriplegic who has moved nothing but her head for six years. Marge says, "Never stumble on anything behind you!"

We move on, having faith that we can, in fact, view problems as opportunities, which can help us discover new and creative solutions.

What are some of these challenges?

Challenges

1. We must have vision, seeing clearly what we want to have happen. Let me illustrate with another analogy.

Last summer, Harvey and I visited the Greek Islands. One of the most memorable things we did was go parasailing. This is something we'd both wanted to do for many years, but whenever we had the opportunity, we lacked the courage. But this time we did it!

What an experience—to be sailing far above land and sea, seeing everything from a brand new and exciting perspective. I was barely aware of the motor boat pulling me—or the rope connecting me to the source of power. I was free to soar amid the clouds. It was a truly exhilarating feeling.

I would suggest that in this time of enormous societal change, we need to enable and empower some people in our organizations to soar above the day-to-day activities and problems and to dream about what's next for human services and volunteerism—to do what Camus suggested: "Create dangerously" with vision and courage and dreams!

We live in a remarkable time, when we have access to some of the most creative people in the world to help us: volunteers, out of every discipline, bringing incredible skills and unhampered by tunnel vision we sometimes get by working too close to the problems. We need to RECRUIT, ENABLE and EMPOWER them to help us! We also have access to technology to help us in ways we never imagined five years ago. Now let's get on with it!

2. Understanding power and becoming more caring and effective influencers of the outcomes we care about is another very large challenge.

In learning how to influence well, there are really only three skills we need to sharpen:

Influencing is not for the faint hearted. One of the things that helps keep us on track when things get rough is knowing we are not alone. Others care about us and about the outcome we care about. Use these people—they are advocates and we need them!

- Identifying the problem to solve or the goal to achieve.
 - Learn how to turn gripes and frustrations into goals to achieve.
 - Be sure you're solving the real problem and not a symptom. Try to really find a cure for the problem rather than bandaiding minor irritations!
- Strategizing how you are going to influence—how to influence whoever can say "yes" or "no" to your idea.
- Negotiating—becoming more adept in this art so we may ask for what we need to secure win/win solutions.

It is so easy to believe that one person really can't make much of a difference in the larger scheme of things, so why try.

Robert Greenleaf, who has written so much in the last decade about servant leadership, says "I believe that the transforming movement that raises the quality of any institution, large or small, begins with the initiative of one individual person—no matter how large the institution or how substantial the movement."

History is filled with examples of men and women who set out to make a difference and did it! The one common denominator, no matter what their strategy, undoubtedly was persistence.

Influencing is not for the faint hearted. As someone once

said, "You can tell when you're on the right track—it's usually uphill."

One of the things that helps keep us on track when things get rough is knowing we are not alone. Others care about us and about the outcome we care about. Use these people—they are advocates and we need them! As author Peter De Vries said, "We're not primarily put on this earth to see through one another, but to see one another through."

There is a groundswell of literature flooding our bookstores that points to one clear fact: There is a revolution brewing in the workplace and it has to do with how people feel about the way they have been led. People are sick of being treated like children and pawns in corporate and agency games.

We are dealing with the most skilled and educated workforce we've ever had in the country and, yet, how sadly it has been demotivated and underutilized in the past decade. It has to do with style of leadership! In industry, it was autocrats who told everyone what to do. In human services, more often it was doers who did everything themselves. As Warren Bennis, a respected management expert says, "American organizations have been overmanaged and underled!"

The great pain I see in people's lives as I travel across the country is the realization on the part of both paid staff and volunteers that almost no one has seemed to want their best. What a waste! What a national tragedy!

But this new literature brings fresh hope, for these books share story after story of how truly participative management helps everyone win: the organization, the people who work there, and the customer or client. Read *In Search of Excellence*, *Passion for Excellence*, *Megatrends*, *The Change Masters*, *The Entrepreneurial Leader* (and I might add, *The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs* and *Survival Skills for Managers*).

Of course, we had a visionary leader in our field who was writing about this way back in 1967. I'm speaking of my dear friend and mentor, Hat Naylor. In her book *Volunteers Today* (the first in our field, I believe), she said:

A new style of leadership is demanded—a dynamic, eclectic approach with courage to experiment, to weed out the useless, and yet hold fast to ideals, standards and essential values. Such leaders are not developed by being told what to do. Rather, they respond to our faith in them and in their capacity to learn and to do.

Why has it taken us so long to hear that?

What a picture of energy and excitement that brings. Can you even imagine what would happen in your organization if you and those you work with were treated this way? What would happen in our local, state and federal government agencies if people were treated this way?

What would happen, I suspect, is that seemingly impossible problems would be solved, health problems would be greatly reduced, ideas would frolic in the workplace, and community needs would be addressed in new, exciting and caring ways we haven't even dreamed of yet.

The key to building your leadership power is simple: You get power by giving it away! The more you help your people—paid and volunteer—realize their own potential, feel more able and powerful—the more influential you become. It's strange but true!

If we learned our lesson about influencing—one person at a time, one act at a time, conceptualizing a dream others can get excited about—then the job starts right here, in this room with each and every one of us. Remember—we are they!