

Leadership: It's In You!

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Abstract

Do you want to make a difference in your world? Do you desire more passion in your work and life? Would you like to feel more capable of initiating change in your work? Many of us have misconceptions about leadership—thinking of leaders only as gregarious extroverts. But leadership takes many forms. In fact, many leaders of our time have made a difference through quiet courage. Each of us can find ways to engage others and enact change. The purpose of this session/paper is to provide strategies to help participants:

- Firm up your vision
- Find your leadership niche
- Decide to take action
- Build alliances

Take the first step...walk through the door and into this session and we will all begin this journey together.



Introduction

Over the past several years, the focus of the work of Project PACE has been on creating systems change on the University of Arkansas at Little Rock campus and identifying approaches to assisting disability resource professionals on other campuses to do the same. During presentations on this topic, participants often voice concerns that while they are aware that change needs to happen, they feel powerless to make it happen on their campus. Dialogues with disability resource providers have led us to the conclusion there are many misconceptions about what a leader is and what effective leadership looks like.

The focus of this session is not knowledge, but heart—not information, but inspiration. We asked ourselves as we conceptualized this session, “What impact do we want to have? When participants walk out the door, what do we want them to take with them?” Here is how we answered these questions. We want participants to walk out the door at the end of the session taking the following things along with them:

- A clearer vision of what they want to accomplish in their work and personal lives
- A better understanding of their own leadership style
- A plan for action
- A new way of thinking about allies

As for impact, we want to awaken the leader within each person, to revitalize, energize and remind participants of the importance of finding ways to love what they do and to bring passion back to their work. In fact, the original title of this presentation was “Finding the Leader Within: Amplify Your Life and Change Your World.” Ultimately, we want to empower participants to make a difference. And now we turn to you, the reader of these proceedings, with the same objectives. We approach this tall task by looking together at the qualities of a leader and emphasizing that the primary ingredients—a clear vision, passion, and courage to take a stand—can be possessed by anyone. We will provide examples of courage and leadership that highlight various leadership styles. We will lead participants through a series of interactive processes aimed at achieving our goals.

What is Leadership?

The premise of this paper and session is that anyone can be a leader. Ultimately, being a leader is about deciding you want to change the world. Initially, that sounds like a hard task, but in Steve Farber’s book, *The Radical Leap*, he encourages us to define “our world” in whatever way we choose. Your “world” might be creating a captioning policy on your campus, or changing the philosophy or culture of your office. Your “world” can be anything that is within your circle of influence. Steve Farber (2004) defines leadership in this way:

Real leaders take us to places we've never been, turn nothing into something, transform good into great, help us grow as human beings and change the pieces of the world that they touch for the better.

This is the definition that we ask you to keep in mind as you move forward. We suggest that true leaders have a clear vision of what they want the future to look like, the passion to communicate that vision to others, and the courage to see it through to the end. Vision, passion, and courage are attainable to all of us.

Vision

When we think about getting a clear “vision,” the driving question we want to ask ourselves is: “When I achieve my vision, what will be different? What will that look like?” Too often, we think about what we want to achieve only in words, but we do not take the time get a clear picture of what it will look like when we reach those goals.

You may wonder why this step of the process is so important. Getting a clear picture of what we want to achieve is important for several reasons. First, when we define our goals only in words, our work is mostly a mental task. But when we take the time to create a vision of what we want to accomplish, we ignite passion. And when we are passionate about a task, we are more likely to stick to it even when we face barriers. That passion gives us the courage to keep going when the going gets tough.

Second, having a clear picture of what we want to achieve is a way to engage our full mind in the task. This is a tool used by hypnotists everyday. One way to conceptualize the subconscious mind is that it operates differently than the conscious mind. We theorize that the subconscious mind understands images much better than words. How much more powerful would it be for a baseball player to visualize the ball going over the fence and the crowd applauding wildly than simply saying the words “I want to hit the ball over the fence and to get a standing ovation?” The ballplayer who takes the time to engage her senses – to get a feel of the bat hitting the ball, to visualize the ball going over the fence, to see the crowd coming to their feet – is more likely to hit that homerun. The image of that event sinks down on a much deeper level than the description of

the same event. The subconscious mind takes hold of that image and becomes an ally to that ballplayer when she steps up to the plate to hit the ball.

If you are uncertain about the power of the subconscious mind, think about what happens when you drive to work. Have you ever gotten in the car and suddenly arrived at work having no memory of how you arrived? Maybe on a conscious level you were considering how you would discuss an issue with your boss, or singing with songs on the radio. But you didn't get lost or have an accident. You didn't have any problems arriving safely at work because another part of your mind was engaged in the task. The next time you get dressed, will you have to think about each detail of that process? No. You will probably be thinking about something else as you go through the all-too-familiar motions of that task.

You may be thinking, "Yes, but driving to work and getting dressed and playing baseball are all very different from changing a policy or practice on our campus." All of these tasks are different, yet the same principles operate. In the work that we do, we often are required to make split-second decisions. When our vision is clear, it is like having a strong rudder in place. Our subconscious acts as an ally – helping us to make decisions that take us closer to that vision. Stop for a moment and take some time to answer these questions:

- 1) What are your top three values related to your work?
- 2) What are your passions, the things you really love to do, or the kind of results you love to see?
- 3) If you could make one change in your world, what would that be? What legacy would you like to leave at your place of employment?
- 4) What will be different when you achieve that change? What will that look like?

If you are having difficulty developing a vision, refer to this example. This is taken from a session in which participants were developing a vision of the campus where the social model of disability and universal design are fully embraced.

- There will be no difference between how students with disabilities are perceived and how other students are perceived.
- The campus will be barrier-free.
- Students will feel like they are a part of the process, more connected to the whole college experience, and campus community.
- Faculty/staff will reflect the diversity that exists among our students.
- Disability will be seen as an aspect of diversity.
- People will see what Interpreters do **not** as a service to deaf students but as a service to the campus.
- Students will get the message "we want you here" throughout the campus.
- Disability services will change. The role will change to one that is more of an 'environmental consultant' office and might have IT experts, curriculum development experts who assist the campus community in creating more inclusive, usable learning environments.
- The whole campus community will feel a responsibility for access.

Another way to think about the creation of your vision is to use a technique that counselors and life coaches call "treasure mapping." Again, this calls for getting a very clear and specific idea of what

you want to accomplish. Some even suggest creating a collage of images that represent the different parts of the goal.

Finding Your Leadership Niche

Once you have established a clear vision, the next step is to find your leadership niche. The word niche is chosen here very intentionally. In ecology, a niche is the way in which an organism relates to its environment and the other organisms within that environment. You might think of finding a niche as a way to thrive in the situation you are in and to relate to that environment and your colleagues in a way that maximizes the productivity of your efforts. Your leadership niche does relate to your style, but it is more than just a style. We suggest that there is no one correct leadership style. When you “google” leadership styles, most of the hits that come up refer to Kurt Lewin’s three styles of leadership: authoritarian or autocratic, participative or democratic, delegative or laissez-faire. We propose that those are actually management styles, rather than leadership styles. Managers and leaders are vastly different. If people do what someone says because that person is their boss, that is management. If people do what you say because they are inspired to do so, that is leadership. Some managers are leaders. Others are simply managers.

A leader, simply put, is one who influences others. Leadership has many faces. It doesn’t require you to be the most outgoing and gregarious, or to be in a position of power or authority. Consider your own strengths and how those strengths fit in to the environment where you work or any environment where you want to effect change. Find your niche. For inspiration we can look to many leaders throughout history who took a stand and changed the world for the better. Sometimes being a leader just requires us to sit still. Who knew that a simple act of Rosa Parks not giving up a seat on a bus would have such a far-reaching impact? What we do, how we respond to the world around us, is indeed important.

Take a minute to consider the following questions and jot down your ideas.

- 1) What are your top three strengths?
- 2) What are some tools you have to influence those in your environment?

As you work to find your niche, you may want to consider other leaders in history who have made a difference. Lao Tzu describes a leadership style that differs greatly from the traditional western views of leadership: “A leader is best when people barely know he exists. When his work is done, they will say: We did it ourselves.” Perhaps you can see your own style reflected in this quotation.

Taking Action

As we have considered vision and niche, we have focused on contemplation and planning. When we move into action, then the requirement for courage comes into play. You have already begun to take action. If you attended this session in Columbus, you took action by walking through this door. If you are reading this manuscript, you are taking action as well. What are the other doors that you need to walk through to achieve your vision? We can expect that there will be challenges, but no one said changing the world was easy work.

Taking action does not require that we are fearless. It does require us to face our fears. The title of Susan Jeffers (2006) book offers sage advice: *Feel the Fear ...and Do It Anyway!* If you talk to people about what keeps them from taking action, some of the fears they will voice are: letting others down, losing face, getting fired, being found out as a fraud, or failure. As you look at those fears more closely, they all can translate to a fear of failure. Yet, if we do not take action, we will definitely fail.

Now take a minute to think about your vision and consider ways that you can take action to make that vision a reality:

- 1) What do I want to do more of?
- 2) What do I want to do less of?
- 3) What can I do right away?

Some doors are harder to walk through than others. Fifty years ago, nine young people walked through the doors of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, and the world was never the same. Maybe you can think of other examples in history of people who had courage to walk through doors and changed the world with those few steps.

Redefining Your Allies

Books and articles written on systemic change recommend, without fail, that we seek out allies for our cause. This is an important step in the process of creating your leadership niche and in creating lasting change. We propose a bit of a twist here and suggest that in addition to those people on your campus or in your circle of influence that you see as allies, there are other less visible allies that you can call upon in those times when you are called upon to walk through those doors.

Your fear as an ally. Fear can stop us from walking through a door, but if we push past it, it can be a source of energy. It creates adrenaline and that adrenaline can be channeled and can heighten our experiences. Sometimes fear is a good indicator that we are exactly where we need to be, pushing the limits that need to be pushed.

Your subconscious as an ally. As we saw before, our subconscious mind also acts as an ally. As you firm up your vision, you will find that your subconscious becomes a compass for you, guiding your decision-making and moving you ever closer to that vision of the future.

The group in your pocket. Carol Gill, in an interview with *New Mobility* (Byzek, 2004), gives us a powerful image. She says that when she is in a situation where something she says is devalued because of disability prejudice, it might initially deflate her, but she says "Then I think about the group in my pocket, and that fortifies me." She is referring to other disabled people who share her experience and who are advocating for change in their corner of the world. When we are working to create more inclusive equitable environments, to create a more socially just world, we are not alone in that work. We have allies throughout the world. The network of friends and colleagues that are connected through PEPNet can be considered the "group in [our] pocket[s]."

Conclusion

This paper is just the beginning of the process of finding the leader within. The authors challenge you to think about leadership in new ways, to find passion in your work, to amplify your life and to change your world for the better. We offer ourselves as your allies as well and invite you to contact us with questions, to discuss your challenges, and to share your success stories. We challenge you to become, in the words of Steve Farber (2004), "bold and audacious," to be "extreme leaders," and to turn your vision into your reality.

References

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