

Leadership: What Is It and How Can We Practice It?

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The concept of leadership has fascinated me for many years. My interest was formed, in part, by my mother's example of leadership when I was young. She was an active participant in organizations such as the PTA and the Camp Fire Girls, at one time acting as treasurer for the Camp Fire mint sales in our local region. In more recent years my interest in leadership has grown for three reasons. First, mountain climbers have been part of my life for nearly twenty years. In the late 1980s my sister and her partner took me on a number of non-technical climbs. I eventually took courses in non-technical climbing and mountaineering-oriented first aid, so I would be trained in the skills necessary to be safe in the backcountry. In 1994 I met the man who eventually became my husband and, like my sister, he is an avid alpine climber. Through both of them, I have found I enjoy discussing and debating the issues of climbing leadership and group dynamics. Climbing and backcountry accidents frequently figure in these discussions, often providing excellent examples of leadership failure, whether it is personal or group leadership.¹

The second reason for my recent interest in leadership was my promotion to Director of Visual Services at the University of Washington School of Art in August 1995. Prior to this I had been the assistant to the previous director, Jo Nilsson, for four and a half years. Because I had worked with her on budgeting and planning, I thought I knew all I needed in order to take charge of the Art Slide Library and Art Media Center. I quickly learned otherwise. I definitely enjoyed being the director and being able to change things as I saw fit, but that feeling of freedom was almost outweighed by the heavy sense of responsibility that settled on my shoulders at the time. I discovered I did not know everything about running these facilities and that I had taken a lot for granted when someone else was in charge and responsible. Now, after six years in my current position, I feel like I have a realistic grasp of my skills, abilities, and responsibilities.

Many of you already are aware of the third reason for my interest in leadership—my tenure as VRA Vice President from 1997 to 1999. Nothing could have made me understand and appreciate the leadership of a professional organization more than being on the VRA Executive Board and being responsible for planning VRA conferences. It was both an exhausting and exhilarating experience, one I would not trade for anything. I learned a great deal about others and myself in terms of leadership.

Definition

What is leadership? The definition in the online *American Heritage Dictionary* reads:

Leadership (noun): 1. The position or office of a leader. 2. Capacity or ability to lead. 3. A group of leaders. 4. Guidance; direction.²

As with many dictionary definitions, this one points to other words that might provide clarification—in this case, the verb *to lead* and the noun *leader*:

Lead (transitive verb): 1. To show the way to by going in advance. 2. To guide or direct in a course... 3a. To serve as a route for; take... b. To be a channel or conduit for... 4. To guide the behavior or opinion of; induce... 5a. To direct the performance or activities of... b. To inspire the conduct of... 6. To play a principal or guiding role in...³

Leader (noun): 1. One that leads or guides. 2. One who is in charge or in command of others. 3a. One who heads a political party or organization. b. One who has influence or power, especially of a political nature.⁴

These two additional definitions certainly add to an understanding of what the word *leadership* means, but a single synthesized definition would be preferable for the purposes of this essay. Some of the words and phrases that especially appeal to me in the above definitions are *showing the way*, *guiding*, *directing*, *acting as a conduit*, and *inspiring*. But there are two important words still missing. The first is *responsibility*. Ultimately, a leader is someone who is willing to be responsible for something, be it a small task, a big project, or something much larger. Responsibility goes hand in hand with an ability to assess situations, to make appropriate decisions, and to manage any conflict that results from one's decisions. The second term—*facilitation*—encompasses the phrases I pulled from the dictionary definitions. A large part of leadership is facilitation, and part of facilitation is mentoring. A basic definition of leadership would then be "the ability to take responsibility and to facilitate on many levels." However, this definition is still lacking something.

In the summer of 1999 I took a course on library administration skills as part of my work towards an MLIS degree. For my project in that class I chose to interview, via e-mail, women library leaders from around the country about what leadership meant to them. Eight women responded. The one word that appeared in both their general definitions of leadership and in their descriptions of their own leadership styles was *vision*. Leaders normally are people who can see beyond the immediate present and, more importantly, they use communication to inspire and motivate others towards their vision. Two of these women also used the word *flexible* to describe their leadership styles. *Flexibility* goes hand in hand with the word *vision*. Having an ultimate goal in mind, but being flexible about how one gets to it, often can be a key to success. We now have four words to describe leadership: *responsibility*, *facilitation*, *vision*, and *flexibility*. These four concepts encompass the essential elements of leadership.

One question that often is raised about leadership is whether leaders are born or made. This is essentially a subset of the nature/nurture debate, a debate that may never be resolved

with final certainty. However, most people would say leaders can be both born and made. That means everyone can be a leader on some level.

Practicing Leadership

Now that we have a definition of leadership, how do we apply it in our personal lives, at work, and in our profession?

In Our Personal Lives

The most important place to begin practicing leadership is with us and in our personal lives. Taking responsibility for your own actions and their consequences is an important starting point. Many of us know people who blame others for the results of something they have done. Often these people eventually have diminished credibility with their family and friends. The credibility that comes with taking responsibility for yourself is essential to practicing leadership. Vision also can be applied to our personal lives. This does not automatically mean having a personal mission statement and a five-year plan, but it does mean thinking about the purpose of your life and whether you are on the right track.

Flexibility can be very important in pursuing your own goals and plans, and it can be important in interactions with family and friends. It is rare for another person to act exactly as we would desire, so flexibility allows us to respond in a manner appropriate to the moment and the action. Being a facilitator also can be very helpful when dealing with others, even in our personal lives. Facilitation does not mean being a crutch for another person. Instead, it means finding the strengths in people and encouraging them to use those strengths. Remember, from the discussion above, that facilitation includes guiding, inspiring, and mentoring. This is something that can be practiced with children, partners, parents, and friends.

As a whole, practicing leadership in your personal life does not mean you always have to be the one in charge, but it does mean using your strengths and the strengths of those around you to everyone's best advantage. Many of us are active in clubs, service organizations, and churches. We can practice leadership in these activities, which will make us stronger leaders in our work and professional lives as well.

In Our Work Lives

Practicing leadership at work, as in our personal lives, should begin with us. Each of us needs to be a leader in planning and developing our own careers. Once again, this does not necessarily require a five-year plan, but it does mean thinking about what you want to ultimately accomplish in your work life and taking the responsibility to learn the skills necessary to achieve the vision you have for yourself. In addition to having a vision for yourself, it is important to have a larger vision for your collection or organization. This then must be followed up with communication of your vision. Having a vision does no good unless it is shared with other people at work, such as all levels of your staff and your supervisor. This does not mean you have to explain every aspect of your vision to each individual,

but everyone will be more inspired in his or her work if they know how their tasks fit into the larger overall plan.

Related to communicating vision is the need to be a facilitator for your staff, making it possible for them to do their best possible jobs. As noted above, one facet of facilitation is being able to recognize the strengths in others and to use those strengths to everyone's advantage. This can be especially important in office-level supervision. Whenever possible, consider the strengths of each of your employees before assigning tasks. The more you can provide staff with activities that allow them to succeed, the happier everyone will be. However, it also is important to challenge your employees so they can grow, develop skills, and find their limits. Being a facilitator for your staff can mean being a leader and mentor. Mentoring your staff, whether permanent or temporary, can help them to be leaders in their own lives.

In addition to working with your employees, there are a number of other ways to practice leadership on the job. One way is to volunteer for duties that require you to exercise leadership skills beyond your normal environment. This may mean serving on or chairing a committee at a level higher than your collection or organization. For example, it could be a search committee for a staff position in the larger unit of which your collection is a part or an institution-wide committee discussing intellectual property issues. The increased visibility that comes with activities like this may provide future opportunities for you to advocate the needs of your collection and staff to higher administration.

Learning to deal productively with conflict is another way to show responsibility and practice leadership. Conflict at work often results because of reactions to decisions we have made. Taking responsibility for those decisions and acting appropriately when dealing with the reaction (this could mean standing firm or showing flexibility, depending on the situation) is important to being successful as a leader.

Finally, planning and making decisions for the future is an important part of leadership. Vision is essential, but without planning there is no way to achieve your vision. Practice different kinds of planning—involve your staff, consult with your supervisor, or make your own decisions—to learn what works best in different circumstances. Being flexible and willing to try new things can be essential in leadership at work.

In Our Professional Lives

Beyond our daily jobs, there are many opportunities for practicing leadership in our larger profession. The first step is to join a professional organization. For most of us this means the Visual Resources Association and/or the Art Libraries Society of North America. If you also have interests in the larger worlds of librarianship or collections management, or in a focused subject specialty, there are numerous other professional organizations to be explored.⁵ Be sure to become part of the local or regional chapter as well as the national organization for any professional group you join. However, simply joining is not enough if you want to practice leadership. Since most professional organiza-

tions are lead by volunteers, it is important for all members to be involved. You can choose the amount of involvement that fits your comfort level. Examples of some of the opportunities at the chapter level are serving on a committee, being a committee chair, hosting or helping to organize a meeting, and being an officer. Similar possibilities exist at a national level. There also is the opportunity to organize and/or moderate a session or roundtable at the annual conference or to be a speaker at such an event. All of these activities allow for practicing leadership.

When talking with people about becoming more actively involved with the Visual Resources Association, I often am surprised by the false perception many people have about the amount of experience required for such involvement. When I was elected as VRA Vice President, I had been an individual member of VRA for less than two years and had attended only one complete conference. Although I had been involved with local arrangements for the 1993 Seattle conference, my participation in VRA had been intermittent until my promotion in 1995. Despite that minimal participation, someone noticed my organizational skills and nominated me for national office, and I chose to accept the nomination. This is a good example of leadership from both sides—someone took the initiative to be on the lookout for certain skills and make a nomination (showing responsibility, vision, and facilitation), and I was willing to accept the challenge of the election and ultimately the office (showing responsibility, vision, and flexibility). I completely understand that not everyone will want to participate in VRA at the level of a national officer, but it still is important to actively participate at some level. The knowledge you bring from past experience and your current position is more than enough to start practicing leadership in our profession.

How to Become a Better Leader

Some of us may not think we are leaders, while others may feel they already are. Whatever the case, there is always room for practicing and improving leadership skills. Start by becoming aware of the leadership you already show. You may be surprised to discover, after reading the examples above, that you already practice leadership in your personal life, at your office, or in our profession. Next, take your current levels of skills and abilities and expand from there. Learn more about leadership and related administrative and management skills by reading and taking workshops or classes. Many universities and colleges provide training for staff on campus; there are commercial organizations that regularly provide workshops around the country; and, of course, the VRA provides workshops at conferences. Be your own advocate when you present your funding request for this kind of training. As part of your self-advocacy, you could obtain testimonials from other people who have benefited from the same or similar training.

Another way to learn more about leadership is to find a role model or mentor. This could mean choosing a colleague, supervisor, friend, family member, or even someone you do not yet know but whose leadership style you admire. Observe their

practice of leadership and then ask the person if they will help you develop your own leadership skills. This mentoring relationship can be very informal or quite formal; it is largely up to you and your mentor to decide how to proceed. The point is to have someone with whom you can talk about what you have tried, what worked and what did not, and how you can continue to improve your leadership skills.

An excellent opportunity for finding at least a temporary mentor in our profession is at the annual VRA conference. If you are a new member and/or new attendee at the conference, you may request that a mentor be assigned to you for the duration of the meetings. This offers a way to quickly meet people. If you are no longer eligible for this mentor program, do not hesitate to approach one of your colleagues to talk about leadership skills and ways to develop them. Ideally, you will find at least one person in the profession with whom you can share ideas about leadership issues via phone, e-mail, or in person.

Practice leadership in small ways as often as you can. Your confidence as a leader will slowly grow and eventually it will become a natural part of who you are. Even if you have no desire to be a high-level leader, it still is important to practice leadership skills and to know your limits. Keep in mind that the requirements of leadership change from situation to situation but they usually include taking responsibility for your actions and decisions, including managing resulting conflict; facilitating the work of others by guiding, inspiring, providing support, and often mentoring; having vision for yourself and your organization and communicating that vision to others; and showing flexibility when it is needed. This is something we all can practice in the different parts of our lives, whether personal, at the office, or professional.

Resources

These lists of resources are by no means comprehensive, but they do provide a starting point for continuing your exploration of leadership skills and issues. The books are a combination of ones I have read myself and ones that have been highly recommended to me in leadership classes. The websites are all current as of August 2001.

Books

Bridges, William. *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*. New York: Perseus Books Group, 2000 (originally published in 1991 by Addison-Wesley).

Buckingham, Marcus, and Curt Coffman. *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*. New York: Simon & Schuster Trade, 1999 (also available on audiocassette).

Covey, Stephen R. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*. New York: Simon & Schuster Trade, 1990 (also available on audiocassette).

Farson, Richard E. *Management of the Absurd: Paradoxes in Leadership*. New York: Simon & Schuster Trade, 1996 (also available on audiocassette).

Fisher, Roger; William L. Ury; and Bruce Patton. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992 (also available on audiocassette).

Hesselbein, Frances, et al., eds. *The Leader of the Future*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Incorporated Publishers, 2000.

Kouzes, James M., and Barry Z. Posner. *The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Incorporated Publishers, 1995.

Lundin, Stephen C.; Harry Paul; and John Christensen. *Fish!: A Remarkable Way to Boost Morale & Improve Results*. New York: Hyperion, 2000.

Maxwell, John C. *Developing the Leader Within You*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Incorporated, 1993 (also available on audiocassette).

Maxwell, John C. *Developing the Leaders Around You: How to Help Others Reach Their Full Potential*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995 (also available on audiocassette).

Morgan, Gareth. *Imagin-i-zation: New Mindsets for Seeing, Organizing, & Managing*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Incorporated, 1997.

Senge, Peter M. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday, 1994 (also available on audiocassette).

Stone, Douglas; Bruce Patton; and Sheila Heen. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1999 (also available on audiocassette).

Ury, William L. *Getting Past No: Negotiating Your Way from Confrontation to Cooperation*. New York: Bantam Books, 1993 (also available on audiocassette).

Vroom, Victor H., and Arthur G. Jago. *The New Leadership: Managing Participation in Organizations*. Old Tappan, NJ: Prentice Hall PTR, 1998.

Wheatley, Margaret J. *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. 2nd edition, revised. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Incorporated, 1999 (also available on audiocassette).

Websites

Advancing Women in Leadership
URL: <<http://www.advancingwomen.com/awl/awl.html>>

Big Dog's Leadership Page
URL: <<http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader/leader.html>>

Center for Creative Leadership
URL: <<http://www.ccl.org/index.html>>

Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership
URL: <<http://www.greenleaf.org/index.html>>

James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership
URL: <<http://www.academy.umd.edu/home/index.htm>>

Leadership Center
URL: <<http://leadership.monster.com/>>

LeadershipInfo.net
URL: <<http://leadershipinfo.net/>>

National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs
URL: <<http://www.inform.umd.edu/CampusInfo/Departments/OCP/NCLP/index.html>>

SkillPath Seminars
URL: <<http://www.skillpath.com/>>

Wharton Center for Leadership and Change Management
URL: <<http://leadership.wharton.upenn.edu/welcome/index.shtml>> 

Notes

¹To read descriptions and analyses of climbing accidents, see *Accidents in North American Mountaineering*, which is published annually by The American Alpine Club in Golden, Colorado.

²*The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*. 4th ed. 2000. <<http://www.bartleby.com/61/47/L0084700.html>>; (9 July 2001).

³ *Ibid.*, <<http://www.bartleby.com/61/38/L0083800.html>>; (9 July 2001).

⁴ *Ibid.*, <<http://www.bartleby.com/61/46/L0084600.html>>; (9 July 2001).

⁵ Information on other professional organizations may be found at <<http://www.VRAweb.org/affiliate.html>> and at <<http://staff.washington.edu/jcmills/RelOrg.htm>>. The latter is summary information about organizations discussed during Roundtable 1, "An Opportunity to Learn about Related Organizations," at the VRA 2001 Conference in Chicago.

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