

A LESSON IN LEADERSHIP

As a volunteer who's been involved in association leadership for more than two decades (from committee chairs to presidencies at a state level, and a national board) I've learned some lasting lessons about leadership.

For one, an effective leader needs a delicate blend of both confidence and humility. You need confidence to handle conflict, controversy, or resistance, and humility to listen so you can draw people into your circle. If you're too high on the confidence side, invariably, something will happen to "up" the humility. I know this one firsthand.

My six years on the board of the National Speakers Association taught me about influence, image and leverage. I learned about the virtue of confidentiality and how your ability to protect information told in confidence builds trust and character. I found out through an embarrassing incident that discretion and restraint are two essential characteristics for leaders and that while one's reputation can be tainted in a flash, it's slow to be regained. I also learned that listening, synthesizing conversations, and feeding back what has been exchanged is a great way to provide both a summary and a self-check for all.

In receiving the "Charles Leadership Award" from the National Speakers Association of Michigan in 1996, I realized that we become leaders to change things, but it is usually we who end up changing as a result of our leadership, more than anything or anyone else. Effective leaders learn from every experience, especially the painful ones, for as we all know, they yield the richest, most long lasting lessons of all.

If you want to be a better leader, **evaluate your intent**. Identify your values, goals, and beliefs and how they affect your behavior. **Clarify your agenda** (we all have one) and how you can represent it effectively and fairly while respecting the agendas of others. **Identify your strengths and weaknesses** and review your successes and mistakes. What lessons can your history teach you?

Leadership requires a **vision**. If you can communicate your vision without dampening the spirits or opinions of others, your example will stand out from the rest. True leadership comes from both the head and the heart, and effective leaders communicate in a way that inspires others to get in on the action.

While leaders inspire a sense of cohesion, they are also independent thinkers, willing to challenge the system or seek a better way. They are used to expressing their opinions, and making things happen, and this can sometimes cause problems. But what separates the **effective** leaders from the **ineffective** leaders is their ability to listen to what others have to say. In other words, they know how to relate, communicate, and initiate.

Here's what I mean. The truly effective leaders approach issues "from the side." They don't directly confront or argue with others, or make them wrong. They don't push. They avoid embarrassing or compromising others. They listen before they decide. They don't criticize others. They ask questions rather than make statements. Through this "open handed" approach (as opposed to a closed fist) true leaders sidestep a good deal of resistance by accepting its presence and working around it, rather than merely pushing back. It's sometimes called "pick your battles."

The most effective leaders simply and eloquently explain their position, ask relevant questions, seek clarification, and reframe issues. Does this work? Powerfully. Simply put, effective leaders know the difference between trying to **teach** a lesson and **learning** a lesson.

Effective leaders get the job done because they are there to serve. They are fixed on their mission to make things better. They speak not only to the mind, but the heart. They give their time, attention, and support. They live, breathe, walk, talk, and offer an unwavering model of what they stand for. I've learned that with truly great leaders,

there is little doubt as to their efficacy. They “stand in themselves” for all to see. This is the secret of effective leaders: they **are** their message.

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