



What Makes a Great Leader: Inspiring Others Without Stepping on Toes

By Dana Kader Robb

So you join a professional organization. Or a church or synagogue. Or your kids go to school. Or you volunteer for a cause. Or you have a job or business.

Anyhow, you're involved in something and you're asked to take a "leadership role". Maybe that means chair a committee, handle a personnel challenge, organize an event, serve on a board, whatever. This could be a way to serve your community, promote yourself or your business and stretch your wings.

But leadership can be scary. What makes a good leader anyhow? How can you be an encouraging, supportive leader who motivates people and gets the job done?

In *On the Nature of Leadership in Leaders' Circles*, Carter McNamara, PhD writes, "Many simply see leaders as those in top positions in the organization... To others, leaders are people at the cutting edge of a movement. Still, to others, leaders are empowered followers. In today's confusing and highly critical world, leaders might simply be those who are sticking their necks out."

Here's a definition I found on the Web: Leadership is an interactive, relational process that creates energy directed towards positive social or organizational change. I like "interactive", "process" and "creates energy" because these are active words – words about movement and dynamic growth.

With that in mind, here are some basics of good leadership:

Let them know your vision

Leaders inspire by sharing their ideas and plans, and aligning the organization's goals in the direction of that vision. In other words, leaders lead. There's a wonderful story about a man during the French Revolution. He's standing in the square, surrounded by throngs of angry villagers. They're all rushing in one direction when he turns to the man next to him and says, "Here are my people. I must find out where they are going so that I can lead them." Seem a little backwards to you?

Be passionate and create energy

McNamara writes, "We need leaders with spirit and vision. We need leaders who can face and embrace change. In particular, we need leaders who can help us ask the hard questions to ourselves – and to others."

Creating energy means sustaining goal-oriented action. After the group has negotiated and defined its common purpose, a leader helps create a focused plan and maintains commitment. As a leader, when you're faced with challenges you don't abandon your passion or position. Great leaders take new information and adjust accordingly, always keeping the stated goal in mind.

Ask for help

If we believe great leaders are just born, we're in trouble. True leaders struggle with doubt and make mistakes (after all, they're human). But leadership doesn't happen in a vacuum. It's interactive and needs the relationships that are created when people work towards common goals. Great leaders are honest about not knowing something. What makes them great is the ability find the people who do know and then take the required action.

McNamara writes, "For leaders to effectively lead their organizations, they must first effectively lead themselves. They must maintain perspective on their lives and their work. Maintaining this perspective requires wholehearted participation – authenticity – whether one is leading a life or an organization."

Develop other leaders

I believe that leadership "trickles down." An enthusiastic leader inspires growth. A nervous, inconsistent leader develops fear and insecurity within the group. Worst of all, a negative leader breeds arguments and an everyone-for-themselves attitude.

Great leaders provide the resources to grow and develop other leaders at every level. Good listening skills are vital. Make sure information is shared, as well as the opportunity to make decisions and the responsibility for those decisions. Leadership is a dynamic, "living" thing, that must feed – and be fed by – others.