

Learning the art of leadership

Geoff Aigner explains that to do good in the world, leaders need both a higher motivation and a well developed skill set.

Leadership is rightly a noble and ambitious venture. Yet it is surprising – and concerning – how often it's referred to where it's lacking or in a negative context: 'What we need is some leadership here,' or 'We need real leadership here!'

We hear this complaint (or wish – for it is a wish) in every organisation and community we work in at Social Leadership Australia: whether we are talking to people in the government, corporate or community sectors; young or old; country or city; black or white; men or women.

Defining true leadership

There is a general agreement that something needs to shift in how the roles of political leaders, bosses or community and government leaders are taken up. But when we ask, 'shift from what and to what?' there is either no cohesive answer or just a perplexed silence.

When it comes to leadership we seem to know what we don't want and don't like, but we find it harder to articulate – let alone agree on – what we do want.

I suspect that our complaint belies an unspoken dream that leadership in Australia should be inspiring, sustainable and purposeful. This is something that we rarely talk about in the context of leadership. How we as a society, from the prime minister to the small business owner, government bureaucrat or grass roots activist relate to and enact leadership is fundamental to our long term progress.

This then means that true leadership embodies a high dream and purpose. It means working out the kind of life we want to live and the world we want to live in. It also means that leadership is not a lot of things. It is not management, entrepreneurialism or dictatorship. It is the responsible use of power to make progress. And this progress means helping systems of people understand and solve their own problems.

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Working with power and ideals

This kind of leadership is not confined to any sector, profession or level. Its result is leaving things better than we found them – more resilient communities, sustainable organisations and people who are willing to step up and take over when we are gone.

We often meet and work with people who have significant power and there are two striking things we notice. Firstly, how ordinary these people with significant power are. We find we all suffer from the same foibles, doubts and difficulties. Secondly, and more relevant to the practice of leadership, is how little opportunity we have to gain awareness of our role and to learn to do something different. This is the challenge for all of us who have some power and want to use it responsibly.

The idea that leadership can embody this ideal can be revolutionary in its



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own right, given how often the word leadership is misused and the practice of it disappointing. But if we agree with ideal and want to use our power well, what does that mean we need to do differently?

Lessons in true leadership

In our work with the adaptive leadership model there are three things we emphasise for people who want to exercise more purposeful leadership. All of these are based on the premise that leadership is something we do and not something we have.

1. Clarity of purpose: in the rough and tumble of making change it can be easy to lose sight of purpose and get caught up in our personal needs or those of others. It is surprising to see how many leaders with even the best intentions can lose sight of their purpose. In exercising leadership it is important that we are able to draw on our purpose when we are in

situations that are unclear, and use it to create direction or to guide our actions. It also enables us to orientate others to purpose in any given moment, which is an important function of the role of authority.

2. Understanding role: in exercising leadership it is important to understand the difference between who we are as a person and the role we are taking up in a system. If we are better able to separate self from role and be more aware of limitations and opportunities in role, then we can be more neutral. This allows us to focus on what will make progress for the whole system and not just a particular interest or faction. This is an incredibly powerful practice and one that is particularly important in the Australian context, where there is a default to relating to others by relationship rather than role.
3. Working with power and rank: these tend to

be provocative words because we can feel uncomfortable about admitting to the power we have, particularly if we haven't earned it (e.g. through gender, culture or class). Yet owning our power and putting it to good use is where all good leadership starts. We find that what we fear about power is the reverse of what we expect. Those who do not understand their power and are unwilling to admit it tend to be bullies or overbearing. Those who can own their rank can put it to good use and be of service to their system. They bring grace and generosity to their role.

The world needs this kind of leadership: leadership that can transcend our egos, bring love, freedom and compassion to those we work with and for. 



Geoff Aigner

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