

LEADERSHIP

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When we look at leadership in communities, we see leaders all around us.

Leadership—what is it? Many definitions have been offered, cultural stereotypes abound, numerous programs focus on “leadership development,” but the question remains. In fact, leadership is many different things to different people in different circumstances.

When we think of leadership, we often think first of famous individuals. We may think of great political leaders: Washington, Churchill, Roosevelt. We may think of the leaders of social movements: Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez. We may think of spiritual leaders: Jesus, Mohammed, Mother Theresa. Do we also include in our definition some of the infamous leaders such as Hitler, Stalin, or a David Koresh? Obviously, leadership is not always or automatically “good” in and of itself. We are quickly reminded of the notion that power corrupts and that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

An exploration of leadership also quickly takes us beyond the lists of the famous when we consider the examples of leadership in our own lives: family members, friends, teachers, ministers, and others who by their lives and examples have influenced and led us in various ways. When we look at leadership in communities we see many leaders who may never become famous, but whose leadership is essential to the life of the community. We begin to see leaders all around us.

It is important to make a distinction between “individual-oriented” leadership and “civic-oriented” leadership. Traditional ideas of individual leadership often center on attributes such as charisma, influence and position. Strong individual leaders wield power, maintain control and motivate followers to accomplish their purpose. Such purpose may or may not serve the common good.

Civic leadership requires strong and competent individuals as well, but the overall intent is to em-

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power others and increase participation in the life of the community and the full range of democratic processes. The

proper exercise of civic leadership will at times challenge excesses of individual-oriented leadership if position is abused, power is not shared, and the common good is not served.

In the civic context, leadership may be seen as a collection of skills and actions that encourage broad-based participation, facilitate consensus building, distribute shared responsibility and enable groups to work effectively to achieve their shared goals.

Thus, leadership development consists of strengthening skills in individuals and providing groups with techniques and opportunities for working together.

This approach implies that leaders are made, not born, and that whatever natural talents one may have, these can be enhanced and additional skills can be learned. Further, the individual does not have to possess the full range of leadership skills in order to play a leadership role on a team. The problem solver need not be a gifted public speaker if someone

else can fulfill that role. The visionary doesn't have to excel at detailed follow through and the meticulous record-

keeper need not be a visionary, if they can work together. Each is a leader by virtue of the skills they bring to the team effort.

Leadership for the common good demands that values, as well as skills, be taken into account. What is the difference between Gandhi and Hitler, or Mother Theresa and David Koresh? All might be considered "effective" leaders in some sense.

Leadership for the common good requires leaders who are not merely capable, but who are also accountable to the constituencies they serve; ethical in their practices; grounded in their communities (however broadly community may be defined); open to other points of view; respectful of racial, cultural, gender, economic or other kinds of diversity; committed to developing others as leaders; willing to share power, responsibility and authority; and dedicated to serving the best interests of all concerned rather than working for personal gain. ❖