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Teaching to Lead: Preparing Tomorrow's Nonprofit CEOs

Who's up for a lifelong love of dangerous work?

By Joe Schuler Jr.

Can you teach leadership?

No, say the prominent thinkers assembled here - Frances Hesselbein, Marty Linsky, Ron B. Meier, Larry Moses, Debra Roshfeld, and Roy Sparrow.

To prepare executives to leap beyond managing organizations and begin to change the world, tomorrow's leaders must live and adapt using experience. They must not only study management fundamentals, but also refine the raw know-how to push their limits, probe their flaws, and begin a lifetime of learning that will transform organizations.

"There is so little leadership and such a yearning for it because it's difficult and dangerous work," says Linsky, author of *Leadership on the Line*. "People don't do it very much. People think about it as a bunch of skills. That's a mistake, it's about taking reasonable risks in the service of some purpose that justifies taking the risk."

"Leadership is fundamentally about organizing change," says Moses, whose organization, the Wexner Foundation, has developed pioneering leadership programming with Harvard University. "We need leaders who are not only competent managers and know how to navigate complex systems but also who are invested in keeping these systems relevant in the face of new challenges."

While more than 250 universities offer nonprofit management programs and many more organizations offer executive leadership programs, few present current thinking on organic leadership development. If they do, few convey, as these experts observe, that it's a lifelong aspiration, requiring constant nurturing and guidance. It's an ambition not just for senior executives, but for entire organizations. Top-ranked nonprofit, social enterprise, public leadership and business schools are just beginning to equip those eager to absorb these new leadership concepts

There's growing understanding of Daniel P. Goleman's "emotional intelligence," Jim Collins' "legislative leadership," and Linsky's "adaptive leadership." There's recognition that leadership isn't individual but systemic, and entirely inclusive, as Hesselbein has demonstrated [see profile, adjacent].

Sparrow, who retired as a professor late last year, incorporated into the Wagner School curriculum more social and organizational psychology, and discussion of brain functions relative to managerial tasks. He relied on the work of Primal Leadership authors Goleman, Richard E. Boyatzis, and Annie McKee. "The capacity of people in leadership positions to emotionally arouse people around them is something that can be understood and proven," Sparrow says. The negative impact leaders can have is devastating. This relatively new work is being injected into curriculum around the country, Sparrow says.

By beginning to understand and embrace leadership as a way of being versus doing [see "Leading NOW: Creating Leadership," adjacent], organizations that help employees experience leadership allow these young execs to gain the courage needed to take risks. Thought leaders say that this is critical to subsequent organizational and societal change. Raw power is old school. New school leadership is inclusive, inspiring and continually transformative.

Who, What, Where & How

In Jim Collins' *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, the author suggests "legislative leadership" as the model for nonprofits. He writes that no individual leader has enough structural power to make important decisions alone. Persuasion, political currency, and shared interests create the conditions where effective decisions can happen.

Collins believes that the personal humility and professional will of the social sector leader, combined with legislative leadership skills, will provide a model not just for nonprofits but businesses. "Perhaps tomorrow's great business leaders will come from the social sector, not the other way around," Collins writes.

The evolution of leadership education prompts eight key questions for organizations seeking to woo and develop talent:

- 1. Who?** Who's drawn to social sector leadership?
- 2. What?** What will they need to know?
- 3. Where?** Where will they come from?
- 4. How?** How will organizations identify and train them?
- 5. What works?** Training in classrooms or within organizations?
- 6. What lasts?** What's needed for success over time? How do executive education, coaching, mentoring take them past their own derailers?
- 7. What moves?** How will they influence the nonprofit sector, and when?
- 8. What's to lose?** What are the risks if no investment is made?

The social service sector has become increasingly attractive to the next generation, both Hesselbein and Moses say.

The funding side, in private and family philanthropy, will be a mammoth, attractive pull for young professionals, says Moses, because of an entrepreneurial element matched with almost unlimited resources.

On the other hand, social service, religious and educational agencies may struggle to attract talented leadership because they are perceived as having less status or can offer less compensation, he says.

But some believe those aren't the driving factors for this generation. According to Hesselbein, young leaders are motivated by powerful, fundamental beliefs and a motto: "to serve is to live."

In the last decade, says Sparrow, extraordinarily high caliber students entered the Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, people who easily could have entered law school or business schools.

Young people are better able to tap into their inner motives, he says. "They don't want to use their talents to advance commercial goals. They want to have an impact on society, on people, on communities."

Sparrow says he doesn't know if the change is a result of 9/11 or the proliferation of schools offering social sector management and leadership curriculum.

But while universities and organizations should understand this new era of belief-driven career choice - this "us generation" - Linsky suggests organizations shouldn't be critical of what emerging leaders bring to the table. "I don't think there's any skill that you need that you can't learn," he says. "Although for some it will be harder to learn these skills because their defaults go the other way."

If future leaders are open to exploring their blind spots, he believes they can adapt and exercise leadership.

Managing vs. Leading

Emerging leaders will first need to understand the difference between leadership and management. "Leadership has become an overused and almost unintelligible buzzword," Moses says. Like Linsky and others, he believes people confuse authority and leadership. Once they understand the distinction, they'll know what to study, and more importantly, how to learn from their own experience.

"A lot of leadership is the function of experience that one can reflect on, experience that might occur under the tutelage or watchful eye of a mentor," Moses says. "Experience that challenges our emotional and personal side is as important as the professional or analytical side."

Sparrow says faculty of schools of business and nonprofit management must understand the broad disciplinary basis required for good management and leadership. He says there are at least 10 key disciplines - among them psychology, sociology, and anthropology. "I don't think you have a school that's going to have all of those disciplines," he says, "but each person who teaches in such a school needs to recognize the life's work of the people they're graduating."

Potential leaders need to be aware, too, that in academia, there's been a re-labeling of management curriculum because the L-word has become so sexy, Linsky says. Managerial competence is necessary for organizations to thrive, but management capability and authority have nothing to do with leadership, says the consultant.

"I have a hard time getting through this issue of whether we're training people to be really successful in moving up the food chain and getting a big job, or training people to change the world," he says. "It's important not to denigrate helping people learn how to be successful in organizational life but it's different than helping people effectuate their dreams to change the world."

He adamantly insists that the most important quality necessary for someone to exercise leadership in a senior nonprofit authority role is the capacity for adaptation, and the capacity to lead organizational adaptation.

"Adaptive change is so hard, because it challenges people's way of *being*," he says. "Adaptive challenges don't live in people's heads. They live in their hearts and stomachs."

New leaders must know that leadership is systemic and not individual, Linsky believes. Change results when people see humans as systems, and problems as something to be assessed outside personal experience.

Leaders annoy people, he says. They only know they're leading when they meet resistance, and are able to adapt by using what bubbles up. Through courageous conversations, Linsky says, people change how they look at themselves and others.

An Army of One

Tomorrow's leaders will come from within "legislative leadership" organizations or from sectors social service agencies might not think to tap - such as the military, suggests Hesselbein. She works with the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army. One Leader to Leader Institute initiative, called *Generals in Transition*, briefs these gifted leaders in fund development and then places them in the private sector. They offer immediate answers to the social sector's cry for battle-proven CEOs.

Hesselbein says that when an organization like the military shares its values and principles and lives them, "it is amazing what happens to the workforce. With leaders at every level, dispersed leadership is a very powerful concept." By marrying their fundamental beliefs with their definition of leadership, people become powerful influencers of others.

Hesselbein says that such leadership occurs at every rank, and recalls a conversation with a young colonel experiencing legislative leadership in Afghanistan, his five sergeants dispersed throughout enemy territory, astride Afghan ponies and wearing peasant clothing, even as the world's most advanced technology was in their hands.

"This is not the old hierarchical army," she says. "They all depended upon one another. But warfare is different. The team approach, the 'army of one, everyone a leader,' is real."

Tomorrow's leaders won't need pinpointing; they'll let organizations know exactly who they are. They won't be defined by specific, apparent skills. "In the end, it's the quality and character of a leader that determines the performance, the results," says Hesselbein.

Organizations who want to attract the best will realize the powerful attraction of "Chief Learning Officers," who demonstrate to candidates how serious they are about fostering leadership. Agencies might pinpoint these passionate people by their after-work activity: serving on volunteer boards, perhaps the very boards governing the organization.

What Works, What Lasts

At this critical intersection of classroom knowledge, self-assessment, and experience, leadership becomes organic and growth takes place.

Thought leaders like Linsky are convincing others that there's a different way to look at the top spot: from the middle. Students who talk through and learn from difficult situations and who can rely on coaches and mentors to align their objectives will be the leaders of the future, these teachers say. A systemic approach will allow leaders not simply to rise to the top, but to change organizations from the outside in.

"I wish the L-word didn't exist," Linsky laments about leadership. "If people are rewarded with the L-word on their foreheads for being really good do-be's, then everybody is happy and the system works. But you can

be really successful in organizational life and be a really competent person in organizational life without ever exercising leadership."

In the Wexner Foundation leadership programs, participants "go on a leadership journey," Moses says. "They go with each other and there's an intimacy to the process, with self-revelation and confidentiality. When people talk about leading, they're talking about what they want to do in the world. They're really talking about what's most precious to them and that creates a certain intensity."

Good leaders find they're boundary crossers, and in the environment Moses describes, this reflex becomes honed. Peer counseling and group dynamics have worked well at United Jewish Communities' Mandel Center for Leadership Excellence [see story, adjacent] in dealing with the challenges to personal and professional growth that everyone faces, says Meier, Center director.

But knowledge and experience stretch over the leader's entire journey, on a career potholed with personal and emotional setbacks. A coach or mentor makes sense, someone who elicits lifelong reflection on behaviors and decisions.

Moses says leadership involves loneliness. Quoting Linsky and co-author Dr. Ron Heifetz in *Leadership on the Line*, he says leaders need allies and confidants, a sanctuary, places to heal and reflect. Because of the risks, leaders sometimes falter or fail, but through consultation with confidants, they can correct blind spots.

Leadership has suffered recently because of lapses in integrity. This era's new leaders understand that their moral compass will demand greater transparency and communication.

Leaders not only need to be mentored, they need to mentor. "Mentoring is circular," says Hesselbein, still mentored, and mentoring three young female organizational leaders. "You learn as much from the person you're mentoring as they could ever learn from you. That's a very important part of a leader's life."

Influence & Impact

How will these new leaders have an impact, and what do organizations risk losing if they don't invest in the future?

If they don't invest in cultivating future leaders, they will pay the price later, says Sparrow.

Some organizations will start with people who already know how to move others. "The real danger would be in not giving the people who need more support a chance," Sparrow says.

He gives an example of a brilliant leader, a former student, who was helped to overcome her doubts and who built self confidence through mentors, and is now very successful. "I think many women and minorities haven't made it, not because they couldn't make it, but because nobody was there to boost their confidence in their own ability," says the retired professor.

Another risk organizations take is to fail to create the context for successful leadership by not letting people flex their leadership muscles within the system.

If you send someone to an executive training program but there's no opportunity at home to make use of the learning, what are you left with? "A person who now has great critical capabilities and perhaps sees the organization differently, but the organization is not using that person strategically," Sparrow says. "They're not saying, 'We invested in you and we're going to give you opportunities when you get back to use your knowledge. We're going to have you as part of a development program within the organization.'"

And that is the crux of leadership development: How social-sector agencies think about it and how they decide to let their humble and fiercely determined emerging leaders live it when they return from school or executive seminars.

From these agencies' own definitions - and actions - will come solutions, ways to form leaders in the truest sense of the word: People who don't simply exercise authority but who lead bedrock organizations through massive change, and revitalize their communities...and the world.

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