

Article for Third Sector – Changing appreciation of leadership over last 20 years

Twenty years ago, when I began providing consultancy to voluntary organisations, there were only a handful of people who appreciated the power of effective leadership. In the mid 1980's the senior employee was often called the General Secretary, people who reported to him – and they were nearly all male – were called Heads of particular functions, the governing body was often called the Management Committee and the real power usually lay with the quaintly named Finance and General Purposes Committee. The distinction between governance and management hardly existed and in some organisations the word 'management' could not be used because it was too closely associated with the 'bad' world of business.

Today, the chief executive usually reports to the Board which has committees such as Audit, Performance and Nominations to oversee the governance of the organisation. The distinctive functions of governance and management are well articulated and Chief Executives of larger organisations have a team of Directors to 'direct' the organisation. Managers are expected to provide leadership of their functions and the crucial leadership role of the Chief Executive is understood and appreciated.

Management guru Peter Drucker was one of the first people to address the special issues of leading nonprofit organisations when he said, in 1990, 'in the nonprofit agency mediocrity in leadership shows up almost immediately'. More recently, Dobbs and Nanus have described how to lead these organisations in their excellent book *Leaders who make a difference*.

Today there are many ways for leaders to sharpen their skills including tools to diagnose leadership styles, 360° feedback systems, training courses, coaches and action learning sets to name just a few. Much of the voluminous literature on leading business and public service organisations transfers, with cultural adjustments, to the third sector and there are many books and articles exclusively on the leadership of nonprofit organisations (see www.thirdsectorleadership.org.uk).

So what is needed to help leaders develop their skills? First boards and managers need to allow people time to invest in leadership development. Despite the pressures on time, leaders need to reflect on their experiences, document what works for them and develop plans for addressing skill deficits. They should be encouraged to choose a combination of training and support that will bring them, and their organisation, the greatest benefits.

Second, most leaders are also led, either by a board or by a manager. People who are being led need to recognise that providing quality leadership is a subtle and demanding role. The leader's team can make leadership much easier by 'managing their boss', giving honest feedback when requested and being supportive rather than critical.

Finally, there is a pressing need for low cost training, coaching and action learning opportunities to fit the budgets of organisations that can not afford market prices for these services. The sooner these become more available the greater will be the impact on the leadership of voluntary organisations.

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