

Reflections on Third Sector Leadership



11/13/2017 - 11:06



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A lot is written about what constitutes 'good leadership'. What skills and qualities do you need to achieve it? Across different sectors there is little agreement. The answers are often situational - the right style for each context. This is particularly true in the third sector.

Some of this need to be flexible is about the nature of our sector, whose key strengths lie in the passion and ~~Horizontal photo~~ commitment of our workforce. Without the financial incentives available in the other sectors, our job is more to inspire hearts and minds.

For this, a more collaborative style is desirable, meaning power needs to be worn lightly. Leaders do well to remember there is a difference between being a boss (where formal power is given) and being a leader (which is a status largely earned).

Taking these factors as our context then, what can third sector leaders do to cultivate effective leadership styles?

Understand that leadership can be shared

Collaborative styles are useful in a sector that is always being asked to do more with less, so sharing leadership can be a useful way to bring out the strengths and expertise of others. In practical terms, our lack of job security means it's always a good idea to invest leadership energy in your 'bench strength' (staff who might be ready to step up into leadership roles when others move on).

Of course you cannot delegate everything, and knowing your 'red lines' are essential. Whilst you might be able to delegate certain responsibilities in creativity or specialist knowledge, issues of governance and ethical decision-making are areas where senior, formal leadership is still required.

Above all, sharing leadership is about understanding that you don't always need to be the smartest person in the room. A good leader knows how to exercise good judgment to create an effective decision-making process that your team can trust.

Leadership by example

There will be plenty of formal opportunities to exercise your leadership credentials. But don't forget the informal ones. How you interact with you team and what you share with them can be crucial to fostering leadership in others.

Leaders need to be accountable. You gain accountability through what you share, so take opportunities to describe what you're working on and how you're doing it. If you're not sure where to start, think about your organisation's values and how you can role model them in your own behaviour.

Become comfortable with uncertainty

A leader often needs to be thinking several years ahead of their staff team. We cannot know the future, so it helps to become comfortable with the unknown. The Dutch social entrepreneur Tim Smit (creator of Cornwall's Eden Project) has a personal rule that he accepts every third invitation he is offered, regardless of the sender or subject. He knows that opportunity often comes from unusual places.

Persistence

I said at the beginning that there is very little agreement on the common qualities of all good leaders, but there is one: persistence. The challenges we face are many and the leader's job is to find creative ways through these situations. This is where persistence connects to entrepreneurial behaviour. You will need persistence above all other qualities. Nobody follows a quitter.

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