

May 2013 Joyaux newsletter: focusing on leadership

Leadership: art and meaning

Leader. Leadership. Leading.

I'll bet you use those words a lot...leader, leadership, leading. But do you ever wonder - when you use them - do you ever wonder if the people listening share your interpretation and meaning?

The art of. The science of. Opinions about.

I think leadership means the willingness and ability to lead and influence others.

Leadership is about learning and change - so leaders are change agents.

The best organizations are rich in leaders. This network of individuals creates a web to support your organization - and to support the community. Leadership acts as the glue that helps hold your organization together - and your community, too.

When I think of the supporting web and the glue, I think of Marian Anderson's quote: "Leadership should be born out of the understanding of the needs of those who would be affected by it."

I think leadership exists to help accomplish group purpose. And that means that leaders are accountable to the group. And the group includes board members and staff, donors and volunteers, and clients, too.

Recently I read some wonderful thoughts about leadership from a CEO who received an award for her leadership. I very much admire her remarks - made in 2007 - years before I had the opportunity to work with her.

Here's what she said...

Leaders don't lead alone.

"I don't accept this award alone. Many, many people played a role in me learning how to believe in myself and learning how to lead...."

"I...wouldn't be here today were it not for many, many people along the way who believed in me, pushed me along, lifted me up, entrusted me with projects that were a stretch for me, and who saw and developed leadership in me long before I ever saw it in myself."

"The reason I am here today accepting this award is because of what those people around me did to develop leadership in me. And perhaps now more than ever, when so much in our country is at risk-for women, for choice, and for justice-we, as leaders must not only focus on the immediate work that fuels our passion. We must also focus on developing our next wave of leaders."

The most important job of leaders is to develop leaders.

"Our days must be urgently occupied in lifting up the new leaders, pushing them along, entrusting them with projects that are a stretch. Our mission hinges on developing a deep and courageous and highly skilled bench.

"This will not happen by chance. This is our most important job as leaders-we must create opportunities for leaders of the future and get out of their way."

Leaders don't always start out to lead.

Sometimes stuff just happens.

You get a job. Maybe you take initiative. Maybe you're just around at the right time.

Sometimes, someone else sees something in you. Someone else - a leader - is committed to developing new leaders. And you're the one chosen today.

That's what Judy said, the leader who won the award. In her 2007 acceptance remarks, Judy talked about her colleagues seeing something in her. "And they let me loose.... That's when I started getting itchy. I saw opportunities to do more. I started asking 'why' and then I asked the more irksome question, 'why not?'"

Here's what I think, me, Simone: I think leaders ask why and why not. I think leaders ask questions all the time. I think leaders ask the most strategic questions and the really cage-rattling ones. It's the cage rattling questions and the why and why not questions that challenge the status quo - that make the most meaningful changes.

Encourage the questions and the questioners.

Judy reminds us that we must encourage the questions and the questioners.

She says: "As I reflect back on my own life in this work and on the lives of those who inspired me to be more enterprising I realize that we must seek out and lift up those among us who ask questions like 'why' and who follow quickly with 'why not?'"

"Find these people. You know them. They are the ones who irritate you. They are also quite likely to be the ones with the courage and grit our mission in these times requires. Our next leaders not only ask questions, they make bold statements."

And Judy reminds us that energy and enthusiasm can blind us to any caution. That can be pretty glorious.

Leaders develop other leaders.

Judy goes on to say, "[Other] leaders...in my life inspired me to lead more boldly. We must begin to recognize those among us who say 'we must not.' You know them. They are the ones who exhaust you.

"They are also the ones who tackle barriers and remove them, who don't take no for an answer, and who bring resilience to a cause that will wither without it.

"Our next generation of leaders also holds the bar of commitment very high. They know the consequences of timid action. They say 'if not' and know the price of inaction."

Leadership is courage.

Imagine "not being satisfied to limit one's outrage to complaining." I very much appreciate that statement.

Not just complaining. Instead, speaking out and speaking up. Being so outraged that you act. Then, imagine being so outraged that you're willing to go to jail.

That's Judy's leadership environment. She's the CEO of Planned Parenthood of Southern New England (PPSNE). She was attracted to the CEO position in Connecticut (which then merged with Rhode Island) - because of the "if not" thinking of its founders.

Here's how Judy tells the story: "After 40 years of trying to change the Connecticut law that declared it illegal for married women to use birth control, Estelle Griswold, supported by a courageous board, decided to press the matter. She decided the only way to get her way was to get arrested. Her action resulted in the landmark Griswold vs. Connecticut case at the Supreme Court which laid the foundation for Roe v. Wade.

'If not us' and 'if not now' were the questions Estelle not only asked but answered."

Can you imagine going to jail for your beliefs? Like Martin Luther King, Jr. or Alice Paul or Estelle Griswold?

Developing leaders

Judy says it so well: "We must promote leaders with this level of courage and will." And, "[we] need to lead with a radical edge."

"We must be on the lookout for those among us whose drive comes from a deep sense of 'if not us, who and if not now, when.' You know them. They are the ones who scare you. Going to jail will seem a reasonable choice to them.

"They will be the ones you might be tempted to put a lid on. Instead we must lift them up and give them a job to do. They don't last long on the sidelines or on the junior varsity....

"Our leadership job is to find these people. Our leadership job is to ask of them, as Mary Oliver asks in her wonderful poem, 'Summer': 'Tell me, what do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life.'"

Thank you, Judy Tabar, for sharing these remarks from your acceptance speech as the Outstanding CEO in the Planned Parenthood movement, March 29, 2007.

And now... How about me? And how about you?

So I ask myself - and I ask you...and I hope you ask others: Who are the leaders in your organization and in your community? Who are the leaders developing your next generation of leaders? Where do you stand in all this important work? How do you lead?