

“What I Meant to Say Was ...”

Geoffrey D. Smith
MA Nonprofit Leadership and Management
University of San Diego
April 2005

Introduction

This is an essay on leadership, approximately 12 pages in length.

How would you like to begin?

...So began each week of the Leadership Theory class, facilitated with great skill and unnerving focus, by Sister Dr. Terry Monroe. To have two blank pages in a graduate position paper on leadership is no less surprising than to be a 1st semester student in a lecture hall at a major university with 90 fellow students, all staring straight ahead, unsure what to do next. As Sr. Monroe sat facing us, expressionless, speechless for 5 or 10 minutes at time, we had plenty of time to ask ourselves: Who will speak first? What should I say? What if I sound foolish? What will the others think? What if I ruin the experiment by my boldness? Will I fail the class if I just sit here? Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. *Nobody told me about this* (Tavistock is one of the nonprofit program's best-kept secrets!) WHAT SHOULD I DO? SOMEONE TELL ME!

But no one speaks. There are no answers, except for what comes from within. We are on our own, with each other, alone. As Life itself.

As our first class in the Nonprofit Leadership and Management sequence, this 'Tavistock' approach to learning did a great job of eliminating any pre-conceived notions of what this Leadership program was all about. The Tavistock, or group relations, model of instruction attempts to see things as they really are in organizational life. (Hayden, p.3) The study of groups, and the relationship of individuals as they relate to groups, provides very profound insight into the true meaning of leadership. This would be a program of learning like nothing we had experienced previously. With this bold start to our learning process, we came away with some important understanding: Listen to yourself. See and hear yourself as others see you. Manage boundaries. Respect and honor those who are different than you. Question your own beliefs and prejudices. Mean what you say. Say what you mean.

And get it right the first time. By the time you get to ‘What I meant to say was ...’, you’ve lost them.

I learned a lot about myself in the Leadership Theory class. I learned that some people fear who am or what I represent as a white male, or an English-speaker, or a Protestant, or a 50 year-old. I learned that I should listen. I learned about respect.

With a newfound sense of humility, I opened my mind to the learning that was to take place.

Essay on Leadership and Management, June 2003

To establish a ‘baseline’ for my views on leadership, I reproduce here the essay that I wrote in application for this USD program, in June 2003:

Essay Question: What changes do you think are needed in the local nonprofit sector, and how will what you learn in this program help you to effectuate that change?

My active involvement in the nonprofit and volunteer sector spans a lifetime. I have worked with thousands of phenomenal people, whose commitment and dedication to volunteerism is awe-inspiring, and without equal in the ‘business world’. There is an old saying, ‘You couldn’t pay people to do what our volunteers do.’ It is so true. Volunteers are driven by a force more powerful than money. It is a determination fueled by the heart, and love for our Earth and fellow human beings knows no boundaries.

There is a tendency in the nonprofit world to take what comes, make the best of it, work like the dickens with free or inexpensive labor, and accept moderate outcomes. The consequence is a program that fails to succeed, a staff or volunteer base that becomes disillusioned, and an organization that suffers needlessly.

In my extensive involvement in the nonprofit sector, I have seen notable successes, and notable failures. By and large, the successful organizations adopt proven business models that incorporate concepts of accountability, responsibility, measurable outcomes, clear organizational vision, and recognition of individual performance. These basic principles, when applied in the business world, produce increased profits, employee retention, and corporate well-being. The same principles, when modified to conform to the needs of the nonprofit sector, can produce remarkable results.

Too many nonprofits are penny-wise and pound-foolish. They fail to invest in key staff positions, ignore organizational development challenges such as leadership and strategic planning, and overlook key infrastructure shortcomings. The result is that programs suffer, donations dry up, and organizational goals are not realized.

Local nonprofits would do well to borrow key concepts from successful business models, and apply proven organizational concepts as appropriate to improve the professional quality of the service product, and the overall success of the program.

The Masters in Leadership Studies – Nonprofit Management Concentration program will provide me with the solid foundation that I need to work effectively with nonprofit organizations to improve the overall success of their programs. Through the academic curriculum I will learn to use the basic tools of management and leadership. Through the real-world practicum's in the community, I will apply these tools to effect change in a very real way. I am very excited about the opportunity to contribute my personal life energy towards the goal of creating a more vital nonprofit community.

Success breeds success. Nonprofits need to focus attention on finding success, and invest carefully in the tools needed to achieve that success.

Clearly, my goal in entering the program was to build my expertise in nonprofit management and governance. While I felt that I had a 'gut' feel for what is 'right' in nonprofit management, I also felt a strong need to validate my understanding of basic

management principles, while expanding my knowledge of tools and concepts. What I was not anticipating – and what I so seriously needed – was a better understanding of the fundamentals of leadership. A wealth of knowledge is useless without the means of transmitting that knowledge in such a way that it is accepted and embraced by the community one serves. That is the true essence of leadership: Influencing learning in a cooperative fashion, while affirming the worth of those who are learning.

Leading is a two-directional proposition. As important as it is for a leader to impart knowledge to those led, so should a leader approach learning with a youthful sense of curiosity. Heifetz and Linsky observe that “authoritative knowledge depends on curiosity to teach you when and where to take corrective action.” (Heifetz, p. 226)

I arrived at the Nonprofit Leadership and Management program following a 2-1/2 year employment at the Sierra Club. Leaving a successful career in high-tech, I had decided to ‘follow my heart’ and work in the environmental nonprofit sector for which I had volunteered for over 20 years. I took the pay cut (\$75,000 to \$30,000), and came to work with my friends on issues that I believed in. What I learned in those 2-1/2 years about leadership – its rewards and inherent risks – were mind-opening at best, and deeply saddening at worst. People who I thought were friends became adversaries. Positive initiatives that I put forward were met with resistance. Extra effort on my part was viewed by some as self-aggrandizement. In short, I had unwittingly stumbled into Leadership 101 – a life course in the dangers of leading.

Leveraging the formal authority vested in me by virtue of my staff position, I sought to lead within the Sierra Club through exciting challenges and initiatives, devoting all of my personal resources to fulfilling the mission of the Sierra Club:

To explore, enjoy, and protect the wild places of the earth; to practice and promote the responsible use of the earth's ecosystems and resources; to educate and enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment; and to use all lawful means to carry out those objectives. (Sierra Club)

I learned several important lessons through my Sierra Club staff experience (lessons that had somehow escaped me through over 20 years of volunteer leadership):

First, while many within the organization followed my lead supportively, there were a few who actively resisted the changes that I introduced. The reasons for their resistance remain unclear, however, at this stage in my learning I have a healthy respect for differences of opinion, and the origins of those differences;

Second, what I think is ‘exciting’ is not necessarily someone else’s idea of ‘exciting’;

Third, the pace of change is very important. Lowering personal expectations and ‘holding steady’ are keys to survival in an environment of change. (Heifetz, p. 141)

The introduction through leadership of change into an organization “-- the kind that surfaces conflict, challenges long-held beliefs, and demands new ways of doing things – causes pain.” (Heifetz, flap) Perhaps because change had become my job, and no longer

merely a volunteer commitment, these lessons were presented to me in very dramatic and direct ways.

A key component to the dynamic of my personal involvement in the Sierra Club was the fact that, in transitioning from a 20-year volunteer participation that involved holding many positions of formal authority including overall organization chair, and numerous committee chairs -- to a *paid staff* position, the inter-personal relationships changed completely! Suddenly the perspective of key stakeholders with respect to my role in the organization changed, along with expectations and apprehensions. This is was an important lesson that I will carry with me as I go forward into new organizational settings in my professional and volunteer career.

Upon being accepted into the USD program, I read with great interest the preface to the text for our Leadership Theory class. From the jacket cover of the book 'Leadership on the Line' I read the following:

Every day, in every facet of our lives, opportunities to lead call out to us. At work and at home, in our local communities and in the global village, the chance to make a difference beckons. Yet often, we hesitate. For its passion and promise, for all its excitement and rewards, leading is risky, dangerous work.

Why? Because real leadership – the kind that surfaces conflict, challenges long-held beliefs, and demands new ways of doing things – causes pain. And when people feel threatened, they take aim at the person pushing for change. As a result, leaders often get hurt both personally and professionally. (Heifetz, jacket flap)

I recall very clearly where I was at the precise moment that I read that text. In the time it took me to read two paragraphs about leadership, I learned that I was not alone in the ‘classroom’ that was the Sierra Club. Far from it – many books have been written on precisely the challenges that I face there. To say that ‘Leadership on the Line’ saved me from profound despair at a very low time in my life would be entirely accurate.

The survival tools outlined in Heifetz are valuable and effective. ‘Getting on the balcony’ (Heifetz, p. 53) and creating a ‘holding environment’ (Heifetz, p. 102) are just two of the many useful strategies offered. What resonates the most with me, however, is the discussion of the sacred heart in each of us that motivates us to serve in the capacity of leadership. Our sacred heart, Heifetz argues, gives us “the courage to maintain [our] innocence and wonder, [our] doubt and curiosity, and [our] compassion and love even through [our] darkest, most difficult moments.” (Heifetz, p. 227) Our sacred heart answers the question, ‘Why do we serve?’ As the students in Sr. Dr. Monroe’s class sat alone in the deafening silence of the Tavistock session, it was from their sacred hearts that they found the courage to persevere, and in some cases, lead.

In and Out of (Psychic) Prison

As leaders, our powers of observation must be continually adjusting and calibrating to the changing conditions we encounter. Through my organizational assessment of the Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve Citizens' Advisory Committee (CAC), I employed a metaphorical approach to better understand the changing dynamics of an organization in the midst of change-induced tension. (I serve the CAC as its chairperson, or designated formal authority.) In adapting to the challenge of a changing community and population demographic, the CAC had embarked on a re-organization plan. My analysis revealed that a sub-group within the user community constituted an 'agent of change' for the institution. My analysis of the organizational dynamics employed key metaphors or 'images of organization', which were instrumental to my understanding of the changing conditions. These metaphors – machine, organism, brain, culture, psychic prison, political system, flux & transformation, and instrument of domination – provided unique perspectives of which I had previously been unaware. (Morgan, p. 6 – 8)

By recognizing the change agent in the mix, and by understanding the psychic prison in many of the members that was resistant to change, I was able to embrace the change and in so doing lead the organization through a process of change that I believe is good for the Preserve. Use of the metaphorical tools permitted me to view the situation objectively, in a way that provided me with important insight into the perspectives of other stakeholders, while putting my own perspectives in proper balance.

In this example, the sacred heart that gave me the curiosity to seek a solution, met with the metaphorical tools that I needed to collect the information. The result was for me a better ability to embrace and manage the changes that were taking place.

Be the Change You Want to See in the World – M. Gandhi

Be the change that you want to see in the world. (Brainy Quote, website). Mohandas Gandhi's important leadership principle is perhaps the most central to my personal philosophy. When push comes to shove, the only things we have control over are our own thoughts and hopefully, our own actions. Leading by example is a simple approach that, in the final analysis, is the truest judge of a person's moral and ethical character.

The human psyche is perceptive. People will ultimately recognize the quality of an individual's character by virtue of their deeds. It is no accident that the slogan of the Boy Scouts of America is 'Do a Good Deed Daily.' An individual who is good in deed and actions will find favor within the society they serve.

As a companion to this view of leadership by example, the reality is that not all leadership initiatives meet with success. Crucial to survival in a position of leadership is the understanding that not all things can be changed. The well-known 'Serenity Prayer' summarizes this view succinctly:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;

Courage to change the things I can; and

Wisdom to know the difference (Open Mind, website)

This is a prayer that I reflect upon frequently as I walk the perilous path of leadership.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as I reflect on the two years of personal growth and learning that I have benefited from at the University, I am profoundly moved by the vision of those who made this Nonprofit Leadership and Management program a reality. Through the leadership of so many committed individuals, I have come to know my community and myself in significantly new and important ways.

As a 'preacher's kid' of the Presbyterian persuasion, to have come to this Roman Catholic University to pursue this course of study has meant much to me, if for no other reason than to be a part of a learning institution whose mission is devoted to compassionate service:

The University of San Diego is a Roman Catholic institution committed to advancing academic excellence, expanding liberal and professional knowledge, creating a diverse and inclusive community, and preparing leaders dedicated to ethical conduct and compassionate service. (University of San Diego, web site)

We are products of our upbringing, and at the core of my being is a deep spirituality that struggles to find light. This program has shown me the path to leadership, which I respectfully now tread.

References

Brainy Quote. Web site. (2005).

<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/mohandasga109075.html>

Hayden, Charla and Molenkamp, Rene. (2002). Tavistock Primer II. Jupiter, FL: The A.K. Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems

Heifetz, Ronald and Linsky, Marty. (2002). Leadership on the Line. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press

Morgan, Gareth. (1997). Images of Organization. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications

Open Mind. Web site. (2005). <http://open-mind.org/Serenity.htm>

Sierra Club. Web site. (2005). <http://www.sierraclub.org/101/3.asp>

University of San Diego. Web site. (2005). <http://www.sandiego.edu/about/mission>