Ten Characteristics of Association Executive Leadership

By Jack Shand, CAE

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Not-for-profit leaders have common characteristics. Certainly they must have a compelling vision that draws people. They must be effective communicators. Leaders engender confidence. What else are not-for-profit Boards seeking in staff leaders? I have been privileged in my work to study leadership, work with leaders, and evaluate thousands of managers seeking to lead organizations. Boards of Directors have defined their leadership expectations and have asked me to find people who match the criteria. From this experience, I have created a leadership checklist to help individuals hoping to become effective leaders in the not-for-profit sector assess their own leadership skills. These attributes are sought by Boards of Directors because they distinguish leaders from average managers. Leaders have all of these characteristics. They may have more, but they never have less.

Advocate and Champion
Associations and charities share three universal advocacy goals: give us influence; put us on the map; and get us to the table. The focus of the advocacy effort may be government or some other audience. The most effective leaders are inspiring, respected, and credible spokespeople. They have the ability to synthesize and communicate complex issues with clarity. The not-for-profit leader welcomes the opportunity to draw upon the expertise and stature of others - notably members directly involved with an issue - to connect how the issue affects people.

Ego In Check
Association leaders demonstrate exceptional leadership skills but always share leadership with volunteers. Association executives often must exercise leadership quietly and behind-the-scenes. Leaders best achieve results through an inclusive team approach involving members, staff, and all stakeholders, and fostering a collaborative working partnership with the Board of Directors. An ego that signals to members and staff that the CEO is better than others will inevitably lead to a breakdown in the employment relationship. In my work as a consultant and executive recruiter, Boards of Directors tell me that when members feel they no longer have a sense of ownership; when the CEO resists new ideas with an "I know-what's-best attitude"; or when the CEO is perceived as too aloof and disconnected from members, it is only a matter of time before the organization hires a new leader. Leaders must be the role model both within the organization and publicly.
Future Focus
The leader identifies with the organization's vision and mission, and offers personal vision on how to best capitalize on the opportunities before the organization. Leaders are purposeful; they recognize the value of strategic planning and ensure expectations are defined, deliverables are prioritized, and outcomes are measurable. They have the discipline to create time to think about the future needs of the organization and not be constantly immersed in routine work. Leadership guru Warren Bennis cautions executives that "routine work smothers all creative planning and fundamental change."

The association leader is flexible and adaptable and has the capacity to change as the future unfolds. The leader has the insight to foresee trends, understand their implications, and explain to the members, Board, and staff how to move effectively from the organization's present position to the future it has envisioned.

Leaders plan the work and work the plan. They understand that in the absence of purpose, all directions are valid, every effort is useful, and each activity is a success.

Intelligence
Dr. Robert Sternberg of Yale University says that good leadership requires intelligence. He defines intelligence to be "the cognitive ability-to learn from experience, to reason well, to remember important information, and to cope with the demands of daily living." Leaders also bring wisdom and creativity in equal balance to their intelligence.

Every Board of Directors I have encountered has the expectation that their staff leader will be smart and keep abreast of trends, information, and new developments. Governing bodies expect their CEO to develop well-reasoned options, and source the required information to enable the organization to make sound decisions. Fulfilling such a tall order in an age of ever-expanding information requires intelligence.

Leading a not-for-profit organization is demanding. Organizations have growing expectations, difficult politics, and at times conflicting agendas. Many executives finish the workday with a longer to-do list than when they started. Intelligence includes learning to balance the pressure of achieving expectations in all aspects of our lives within the limited number of hours available.

Learning Commitment
Leaders have a personal commitment to continual learning. They are curious people - reading, exploring, studying, and making connections to new people and things.

Leaders also embrace the value of error. As award-winning producer Norman Lear (All In The Family) wrote, "where you trip is where the treasure lies." Leaders learn from failure and move on, averse to making the same mistake twice.

Management Skills
Effectiveness is dependent upon management skills to achieve specific outcomes, such as the ability to plan strategically, and appropriate leadership behaviours, such as acting with integrity, which enable success in the organization's culture.

The management skills required by Boards may best be defined as internal and external. The internal skills include the staff leader's ability to plan; be strategic; manage staff; be a facilitator and consensus-builder; and financial aptitude.

External skills include fostering relationships and alliances with governments; media; and other organizations.

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Boards of Directors expect association CEOs to have abilities across the spectrum of management disciplines. These skills are then applied to achieve two primary outcomes: (1) add value to membership which people can measure, and (2) do the right things with the available resources.

**Politically Intuitive**
The best leaders have incredible intuition. One executive refers to his "B.S. meter"- the ability to identify nonsense instantly. Association leaders are people savvy and politically adept; know who is friend or foe; when to fight and when to fold.

Leaders also are "ahead of the curve" and able to sense changes in direction, at times anticipating them before they occur.

The risk for some association executives is being too far ahead of the membership. I experienced this first-hand with an organization that wanted to develop an export market and international trade capability for its members. The CEO had the right plan but was rebuffed by the Board. A few years later the very same idea was embraced by the Board of Directors. The wise leader knows the right time to introduce change.

**Relationship Management**
Dr. Quinn Mills of the Harvard Business School has an important insight for association leaders about their relationships: "People really don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

There are four key relationships that the association leader must nurture to be successful. The first is with the membership. Members must believe the organization is delivering value. The leader is committed to communicating to constituents what has been done, what is being done, and what will be done. It is clear to members that the organization is improving. Members are engaged; the organization demonstrates that members are the owners because members drive the agenda.

The second key relationship is with the Board. As the elected leaders who represent and speak for the members, the Board is legally responsible for the organization and is officially the leader's employer of record. It is a leadership failure to not recognize the Board's authority. The leader is a non-authoritarian "masterful servant" but concurrently the coach and trainer of volunteers. The best CEOs negotiate an effective partnership with the Board's chief elected officer.

The third group is staff. The leader hires the best staff and then communicates with employees to ensure they understand how their contribution has meaning to the organization. Employees feel valued. A leader cannot achieve results if there is disharmony among employees. There are many cases of association executives who had the support of the governing body, only to lose the confidence of the Board because staff is dissatisfied with the CEO's poor internal leadership skills.

Finally, the fourth group comprises external stakeholders to whom the organization and its leadership rely to help accomplish results. The stakeholders may be government officials, suppliers, or allied organizations. Professor emeritus AI Litvak of York University told a CSAE audience that association leaders build bridges to other organizations.

**Self-Awareness**
Organizations house a spectrum of experience, talent, and personality. Team leaders must
understand their own strengths, as well as the assets needed from others, to deploy their team effectively to accomplish results. For example, one manager may have excellent aptitude to account for finances and another manager may have the ability to generate sales and increase revenues.

Years ago, as an association CEO, the elected chairperson counseled me to be "open to how you are perceived." Personal style and behaviours have two sides to the same coin. For example, some may applaud the manager's initiative while others see it less favourably as aggressiveness. Confidence may be perceived as arrogance. Association leaders are open to understanding how they are perceived - their likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses. Leaders welcome accountability because they learn what they do well, where they must develop to become better, and how they need to rely upon others to get things done.

The leader will learn, over a lifetime, what they do well and where they need to draw on the talent of others to achieve an important outcome. This personal insight usually starts from feedback in the school yard and at home with family, and grows through one's professional career through performance reviews, tests which create profiles of management ability and style, and personal mentors or coaches. The path to self-awareness requires the leader to be honest and realistic with him/her self. Self-awareness also leads to valuing the contributions of others, and recognizing that the richest organizations have - and embrace - a mix of skills and personalities.

Values and Fit

Leaders bring relevant values and value to the organization. Their values may include consensus-based decision-making, achieving results through people, or hard work. Not-for-profit organizations may share certain values (e.g., be member-centered) or have values unique to their constituency and cause (e.g., concern for the disadvantaged in society).

It is important for the leader to ascribe to the values of the organization. The executive who does not have affinity and respect for the organization's purpose cannot lead it effectively. The atheist is not likely to be hired to lead the congregation of believers; nor is the hunter going to be tapped to run an animal welfare agency.

The value the leader brings could include an understanding of the organization's members, an established network in government (where promoting the organization and its key messages to government is necessary), and a record of extraordinary accomplishment which relate to the future needs of the organization (e.g., fundraising).

Action Steps

Leaders, and aspiring leaders, who may be uncertain whether they have all of these characteristics can take a couple of action steps to audit their leadership potential and skills.

1. Performance Reviews

If your employer is not providing regular feedback on performance and opportunities to develop skills, ask for an evaluation. The performance assessment is an excellent resource for employees to learn what they do well, the strengths they exhibit in their role, and the areas requiring attention. Employers need to recognize that there must be a discipline to conduct the process annually, otherwise employee de-motivation is highly likely. This is what all employees expect, and it is especially important for the top employee. Regular performance appraisal of the CEO is the only way to maximize the strategic performance of a not-for-profit organization.
2. Leadership and Management Style Assessment
Industrial psychologists and consultants with a human resources focus will have the tools to help evaluate an individual's leadership skills. Fees can range from as low as $100 to thousands-of-dollars for an assessment. It is a good investment as it will identify areas for development, and enable the individual (and possibly the individual's employer) to focus future education and professional development dollars in those areas which will return the greatest benefit to the employee.

Leaders are made, not born, and there are opportunities to be seized throughout life and career to develop one's leadership potential and hone leadership skills. Creating an inventory of leadership ability and gaps based on the ten characteristics of association executive leadership is an excellent starting point to start one's self-assessment

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