

Leaders as Champions

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A few years ago, while attending a religious service, I witnessed a lesson in leadership that has stayed with me. During the finale of one of the most majestic songs of the season, there was a momentary break in the chorus, at which time a small but clear voice range out, “E-I-E-I-O.” The parents’ horror notwithstanding, the child spoke volumes about where we are in the leadership field. We sing the song we know. However, I believe that we are at a point in the development of our communities and the leadership needed for the future that we need not only some extra verses but also a whole different tune. This morning I want to suggest to you that that tune is more about community champions and less about our traditional notion of leaders. It is about what we do together as community winning teams. As Helen Keller reminded us, “One can never consent to creep when one feels the impulse to soar.” It is time to sing and soar in our communities.

Our country is obsessed with champions—from the Super Bowl to the Final Four to the Little Leaguers at Williamsport—we are glued to find out who is the best for 12 months at least. In addition to winning trophies,

however, champions almost always stand for something. It can be hard work, talent, teamwork, or a talented coach, but we almost always point to one thing that makes the difference. As we think about how to fan the fire on our leadership work, I believe it is time to revisit this notion of champions for our communities. People who have it as their job to set agendas that improve things, that convene and encourage others to do their best, and never give up until the job is done. As I look around at communities, I have begun to look first for champions and then for leaders. Now why would I make the distinction—sounds a lot like the same thing—not really.

We have researched and argued the term “leadership” for decades. The Community Leadership Association is the preeminent one in preparing “leaders.” But I think we have come to a watershed time in your organization and in our communities that needs to be heeded. We have all been at this business a long time; in the case of CLA, for better than three decades. Much has been done and many lives have been touched. What hasn’t happened in my view are the kinds of changes we need in our communities to make them better for everyone; we are still nibbling around the outfield fence when we need to be smack in the middle of the game. We

have to ask ourselves if we are preparing our participants to be champions or just players.

One of the wonderful things about the aging process (in fact one of the only wonderful things about the aging process) is memory and perspective. As Mark Twain said, “It’s what you learn after you know it all that counts.” So let me step back for a moment and talk about why this is so critical to consider. Let’s put it in the context of this organization just for comparison purposes. This organization was founded in 1979 with about 40-50 programs; today of course there are many multiples of that. The organization and its ultimate member programs were created for three purposes according to Carl Moore in *A Colorful Quilt*: 1) people believed that communities could be better; 2) communities must change in some fundamental way; and 3) communities need to replenish and diversity leadership. All of this has happened to some degree but I want to argue this morning—not nearly enough. Now how can I be so sure? Let’s just take a look at what has happened since CLA was founded.

Twenty-five years ago our communities looked different:

- Surfing was done outside
- Cell space was about the body not the air
- People actually made telephone calls from home

- Discs were thrown not played
- Blackberries were picked
- M & M was a candy not a rapper
- Bill Gates was a teenager and had an allowance

In this same quarter century we have seen real changes in science and technology. People carry computers and their music collection in their pockets. Yesterday 66 million Americans were online. We have microchips and accelerated processors. We have laser surgery and MRI machines. We have space labs and palm pilots. And probably more dangerous to our health—we have 180 million wireless phone subscribers who also drive! In other words, what read like science fiction when the Supremes were at the top of the charts is commonplace or outdated today.

While a lot has changed, unfortunately the last 25 years have seen too much unchanged. Roughly 40 million people still live in poverty; 44 million of us cannot read well enough to complete a job application; there are a half million daily crack users – none in 1979; and 500,000 young people dropped out of school last year. And we are divided as Americans and human beings at a time when we need each other most. Amidst rising home prices and real estate values the scarcest real estate we have is “common ground.”

I believe as John Gardner did however that “What we have before us are some breathtaking opportunities disguised as insoluble problems.” Perhaps this organization and the programs you direct are in the best position to turn the tide—to change the odds for the future. But it will take fanning the flame of what we all know to be true to make the turn. For those of us in the field, its time to focus on the outcomes we want in our community.

This morning I want to share a few stories about champions and what they do from my book *Smart Communities*. As I reflected on the book, I realized that people are first and foremost the elements that make communities “smart.” Embedded in the leverage points that all smart communities do: investing right the first, working together, building on strengths, practicing democracy, preserving the past, growing leaders, inventing the future—are champions that made them a reality. These are not academic ideas but grounded in everyday work. While these folks have done extraordinary things—they, in fact, would speak of themselves as just regular people trying to do just what folks in your programs want to do: make the community better, create a change in the community through leadership development, and finally, to replenish and diversify leadership.

Let's look at three very different communities: Harlem, New York; Tupelo, Mississippi; and Asheville, North Carolina.

Champions Make the Community Better

Harlem is a city within a city. While home to rich artistic and cultural traditions, Harlem has for the last few decades seen a steady decline in its infrastructure and social system. One of the constants of the community however is the Abyssinian Baptist Church. Founded in 1808 by free blacks, the church has always had a strong outreach in its community. Never was the need greater than in the mid-eighties when the neighborhood surrounding the church was disintegrating before their eyes. Years of disinvestments had left Harlem in disrepair and in despair. As one person so aptly put it, "the community looked like hell." It could have stayed just that way were it not for some champions that believed that things could and should be different. The late Reverend Samuel Proctor, then pastor of Abyssinian, and a group of parishioners vowed that something had to be done to stop the bleeding in the neighborhood—literally and figuratively.

With this goal and a \$50,000 seed grant from the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, the church made the decision to establish the Abyssinian Development Corporation (ADC) and hired one of its own,

Karen Phillips, to run it. I want to tell you a little about Karen because she is the epitome of a community champion. Born in Ocilla, Georgia, she made her first trip to Harlem as a young child. It looked a lot different from Ocilla—African American women had a variety of jobs, Jackie Robinson was the spokesperson for Chock-Full-of-Nuts, and the community was thriving. Those memories stayed with her through her education at Harvard in urban design. However when she moved to Harlem after graduation those memories quickly clouded. She and the others in her congregation knew that something needed to be done and they might be the only ones willing to take the risk.

The ADC story is told in many circles because it is a great success story—that \$50,000 initial investment has risen to \$200 million. Why? I believe it was because of the presence and commitment of the church certainly but also because the initiatives were built on the structural and human assets of Harlem that too many had thrown away or given up on, and because champions took up the cause. Were they leaders—surely? But they had qualities that sometimes we lack in our leaders—they saw a problem and tried to fix it; they involved the people who were most affected; they worked together, and in the words of Winston Churchill they never, never gave up. Today because of those champions thousands of children have had

the benefit of a Head Start program, residents can shop in a local supermarket that has reasonable prices and fresh food, and young people have opportunities for leadership and academic excellence never afforded them before. There have been leaders in Harlem for decades—Abyssinian provided some champions.

Champion's Look for the Right Change

One of the crown jewels of the Blue Ridge Mountains is Asheville, North Carolina. It is home today to a creative economy, according to Richard Florida that has created a renaissance in the city. Unfortunately it has not always been so good. In the late 1920's, Asheville was bursting at the seams with real estate speculation, borrowing, and physical expansion. When the Depression hit, Asheville was one of its worst victims. With debt exceeding that of Raleigh, Durham, Winston-Salem, and Greensboro combined, the city could not meet its obligations. Through a restructuring plan, the city did not go bankrupt but future indebtedness was limited by severely constrained municipal spending. It took Asheville 46 years to pay its debts. When it emerged in 1976, not surprising, people were really ready to do something. That something it turned out to be was the leveling of 11.5 acres of downtown buildings to make way for an indoor shopping mall to

compete with suburban retail. While this seems like a reasonable idea on its face, in the case of Asheville it was of particular concern: its downtown has the second largest most Art Deco buildings following only Miami Beach. This plan would have been a *fait accompli* had it not been for a group of citizens led by a local merchant named Wayne Caldwell. Wayne's group, the "Committee of 1000," was a loose coalition of downtown merchants, preservationists, and "this is just a bad idea advocates." On the other side of the argument for the demolition were the city's key business leaders, the mayor, etc. Clearly the line in the sand was drawn. What is important to know this morning is that we must have people who are willing to challenge the status quo, ask questions, and get involved. We need ways for people in your communities to actually think through and deliberate on the best kind of change. The rest is history as they say—the citizens won the argument and saved the city from a fate fraught with problems. Wayne Caldwell would not call himself a champion but he certainly is. If you ever get a chance to visit Asheville, sit in one of the many outdoor cafes and think about where you might be if Wayne Caldwell had decided to go on vacation.

Champions Build and Use Bench Strength

Since this is baseball season, let me suggest a metaphor for our third championship story that really gets at the heart of the matter—bench strength. This is a concept that coaches from Little League to the majors understand; even if the most gifted players start the game, you must have a bench of players ready to join and perform at a moment's notice. Building bench strength is the most critical challenge facing our communities today—getting more people in the game to play and play hard. One of the best examples of a champion for this idea would have to be George McLean, the owner and publisher of the Tupelo, Mississippi newspaper. Birthplace to Elvis and in one of the poorest states and the poorest counties in the United States, Tupelo has an uphill climb. In April 1936, McLean wrote a prophetic editorial just two days before a deadly tornado hit the area entitled, “It Can Be Done!” This kind of optimism coupled with an untiring desire to include people and to try new things made George McLean a champion *par excellence*. He knew that three things would change Tupelo—working together, education, and involvement—and he dedicated his time, his money, and his editorials to these causes. He and others in the community set the bar high on all three. There was a norm established that people and organizations would come together around the things they held in common;

there was a commitment to quality education for all; and there was an expectation that people would get involved. The program on rural development that he spearheaded was called the best anywhere in the country. What kind of difference did this champion make? Today Tupelo is home to 40 Fortune 500 or internationally recognized companies; is the largest producer of upholstered furniture in the world; has the largest non-metro healthcare center in the United States, and finally, is recognized for its Blue Ribbon schools. There is not a person in Tupelo who would tell you all this would have happened without George McLean. He had vision, he had enthusiasm, but most of all he was willing to go against the conventional wisdom and set a tone and path for the city and region that was positive, inclusive, and honest. He talked about the could not the can't.

These three examples illustrate vividly why in my mind it is time to think about identifying and preparing champions for the community.

So How Do Leadership Programs Build Champions?

- 1) We structure our curriculum and our experiences for the outcome we want.
- 2) We use our program to connect people from throughout the community on the issues to be addressed. We need people in our

civic ranks who can make and support decisions needed for the long haul not the immediate.

- 3) We develop a clear expectation and path for civic involvement.

Serendipity is not enough—wishing it were so is not enough. We must show the possibilities of how real involvement leads to change.

As Dr. King once said, “we must teach people to believe in themselves.” To believe they can make a difference.

- 4) We have got to communicate that solutions will come when the table gets bigger.

Our research in our nationally recognized LeadershipPlenty® Program shows clearly that there is a change in what people believe they can do if they have the tools, if they learn to work together, and if they have clear vehicles to get involved. But none of this is possible without leadership programs forging the way. As Jean Monnet once said, “Nothing is possible without individuals; nothing is lasting without institutions.” As institutional sponsors of leadership, we must be keenly aware of three realities as we move into the future. We want champions in our communities who can respond to crises surely; but what we need more are people who can anticipate problems and opportunities and put systems in place that will prevent issues from becoming problems. Your graduates have to understand

this and make sense of it. As you think about the future of your program ask yourselves three questions about the relationship of your leadership program to the community: Who do we have? Who do we need? And what do they need to know? My guess is that these answers will affect how you think about recruiting and how you structure your program. We need leaders who have vision and persistence—who can see it and see it through for the community.

I want to close with thoughts from John Gardner that he wrote in *Self-Renewal*. If he were addressing us this morning I suspect this might be his message:

There's something I know about you that you may not know about yourself. You have within you more resources of energy than have ever been tapped; more talent than has ever been exploited; more strength than has ever been tested; and more to give than you have ever given.

It is time to sing a new song in leadership and that song is “We Are The Champions.”