Essential Leadership Skills, Part II
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In Part I of this series, the author explained the importance of a clear and compelling vision. Another essential element of leadership is team building.

Build a Team

Although effective leadership starts with defining a clear vision, the next step in working toward that vision is building a team. A vision that defines what could and should be requires change. Facilitating change on a broad scale, whether it be in a community or a nation, a hospital or a health care system, is hard work and is more likely to be accomplished if a team is working together to achieve that vision. Accompanying every good leader is a strong, united team of people who share and believe in the vision. “Good leadership,” according to leadership guru John Maxwell, “helps to put together the right people at the right time for the right purpose so everybody wins.”

Lead With Integrity

Multiple surveys over the past 25 years indicate that the most important factor in the relationship between a leader and his or her team is honesty. For team members to willingly and confidently follow a leader, they have to trust that person. They have to believe in that person’s character and integrity. Take the example of a team of hospital mother/baby nurses. The expectation on the unit is to help mothers whose babies are admitted to the newborn intensive care unit initiate milk expression within 6 to 12 hours of delivery. Let’s say a particular charge nurse never complies with this expectation, with the excuse that she “does not have enough time,” and saves it for the next shift or the lactation consultant. Gradually, the rest of the team begins to exhibit the same behavior, having gotten the message that early milk expression really is not that important. Even worse is to have the lactation consultant walk into the room, educate the mother about the importance of providing milk for her baby, and, knowing that the mother does not yet have a pump in the room, also use the excuse of not enough time, leaving it for the mother/baby nurse. “Example is not the main thing in influencing others, it is the only thing,” said Albert Schweitzer. Leaders must be clear about their beliefs and follow through on them with their actions to build trust.

You Can’t Do It Alone

Leading a team of strong, talented people with individual strengths and opinions is similar to conducting an orchestra. Any single musician may be quite talented on his or her own, but he or she will never be able to perform the entire symphony. The conductor values all the individual musicians and instruments yet guides the orchestra in working together to achieve harmony. Recruiting a team of people who share the same vision gives the group or organization its force for change, yet it does not mean they all agree on how to get there. Leaders help clarify the vision and then guide the team in defining the mission and goals—how they are going to make change happen.

When leaders are afraid to have dissenting opinions on their team, open discussion will be stifled. “I desire what is good. Therefore, everyone who doesn’t agree with me is a traitor,” proclaimed King George III of England. Valuable ideas may be lost if team members are afraid to share opinions that appear to disagree with the leader. As long as everyone shares the vision, then diversity of opinion means all the ideas are being explored. Abraham Lincoln’s election as president of the United States in 1860 was seen as a stunning upset because he defeated 4 very strong, qualified opponents. He then truly surprised the country by asking all 4 to join his cabinet (which they agreed to do). As the country faced the possible outbreak of civil war, Lincoln knew he needed the most talented, experienced people on his team, even if they did not agree with him on everything. They shared his vision of keeping the United States of America intact, and he needed these people on his team to lead the country through the crisis.

Lead the Team

One of the challenges of building a strong team is that team members have to give up some of their
independence to be a part of the team. Bringing strong, talented people together means bringing egos, individual goals, and agendas together, too. And someone has to be the leader. As Lincoln said on leadership, “Some single mind must be master, else there will be no agreement in anything.”

Being part of the team means that team members have to sacrifice some of their own goals or agendas to work together. However, a good leader can at times highlight unique talents of people when it benefits the team. The orchestra conductor can identify exceptionally talented musicians for solo performances during the symphony. The leader of a breastfeeding coalition can identify a team member who is experienced at getting the message across to the media. Although this person will have his or her name in the media spotlight, he or she will be representing the organization and getting publicity for the group and its message.

Leading a team also requires accountability. Team members must trust not only their leader but also themselves. Just as the leader must follow through on commitments, so must the team members. Just as the leader must demonstrate honesty and integrity, so must the team members. For the team to have open communication and explore all ideas, people have to feel that they can freely share information and know that it will be used for the sake of the team, to work toward the vision. As president of the ILCA Board of Directors, I have to create and maintain a climate of trust both between the board and myself and between individual board members. During board meetings, board members have to trust that they can speak openly about a wide variety of subjects, that their opinion will be respected even when they hold a minority viewpoint. In a climate of trust and respect, people can also more easily admit when they have made mistakes, another key element of accountability.

“To get extraordinary things done, you have to promote a sense of mutual dependence—feeling part of a group in which everyone knows they need the others to be successful.”3 As leaders in the field of lactation consulting, we have extraordinary things to do, and we cannot do them alone. We need good leaders and strong teams to achieve our vision of “what could be and should be.”

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References