



DOING GOOD, WELL: PRACTICAL LEADERSHIP

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A friend of mine who is a councilmember in a mid-sized Texas city asked for my input on hiring a new city manager. He was focusing on proven experience, a good start. I challenged him to go further and deeper: to add more foundational attributes and demonstrated accomplishments to his focus on experience. What were the candidates' judgments in practice? What was the extent of their emotional intelligence? Were they effective in creating relationships with staff, bosses, stakeholders, and peers? How sophisticated is their political savvy? What were the candidates' track record of success in demonstrated performance?

What I was trying to get at was challenging my friend to think in terms of the broad attributes of successful organizational leaders and identifiable results. What is the range of skills, competencies, attributes, and values that the best leaders possess? What were their results?

Why did I take this view? How is it different from traditional hiring practice and why might it be better? To answer these questions, one must understand leadership effectiveness in practice.

For over a year, I have been involved in a focused exploration of what defines effective public and nonprofit leadership. I am writing the book I wished I had when I was a new leader and that I wish my students at the LBJ School of Public Affairs had. This project builds on forty years of personal experience, lots of reading, but most importantly, interviews with quite a few leaders whom I and others identify as successful. Because I am now involved in the training and education of leaders, I wanted to understand successful leadership in practice and how to assist others to achieve that goal. What I found both surprised and gratified me. It also showed a wide gap between the popular perception of effective leaders and the reality.

While I interviewed a lot of very strong leaders and included many of their experiences in my book, I ended up focusing most on four individuals from three public and nonprofit organizations at the state and local levels. Stan Farmer is the city manager of Horseshoe Bay. Bill Kuntz is the former executive director (ED) of the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation, and Brian Francis is his former deputy ED and the current ED. Susan McDowell is the longtime leader of Lifeworks, an organization in Austin that serves the most challenging end of the at-risk youth spectrum. Each organization is at a different place in their evolution. Stan is trying to elevate a well-performing city to an even higher level (the story of his city's journey is in a companion article that follows this). Bill and Brian took over an organization that was struggling to achieve its basic mission and turned it around. Susan was the second ED of a recently constituted organization that was created from four previous organizations and, which today, is regarded as an exemplary entity.

Each of these individuals are smart, with a strong sense of the work of their organizations: they know the business of their businesses. But those attributes are a given and do not make them stand out from many peers. What

sets them apart is their combined focus on mission, results, underlying values, and the inclusive nature of what they do and how they do it. Their ambitions are for the success of the organization's mission and to be better in how they achieve that success. They are passionate for that success, and not for their own self-aggrandizement. They combine passion for mission with a focus on results – and results as reflected in positive impacts on clients, customers, or citizens. They are not satisfied that they have achieved success unless they can demonstrate it, so they focus on *measurable* results. They deeply engage the involvement of their employees by integrating values that drive their passions in service and performance. Each is a highly authentic leader – and it shows. They are innovative and willing to change. They are engaged in these key aspects of their organizations not as accountants monitoring data, but as leaders engaged in understanding information and working with their staffs to insure values, culture, people, performance and the other elements of effectiveness are in place and improving over time.

All three of the organizations these leaders represent have been built around values and a culture that supports those values. The values are surprisingly common among them:

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each features openness/transparency, customer/client service, performance/accountability, continuous improvement, and collaboration/teamwork. The sense of collaboration and teamwork is broad and inclusive. Susan McDowell described her interactions with staff, peers, boards, funders and other stakeholders as engaging with an “ecosystem of support.” Her organization draws on this broad engagement to learn, improve, and achieve its goals. The other organizations do so as well.

The best leaders are effective communicators, both internally and externally. They can explain complex issues and plans of action to their employees, stakeholders, and the media. They are creative about how they communicate, using a variety of tools, approaches and methods. These leaders do this and they do it well.

Each of these leaders and the other excellence leaders I interviewed excel at the two most important underlying factors associated with excellent leadership: emotional intelligence (EQ) and judgment. Their EQ starts with knowing themselves: their strengths, weaknesses, and hot buttons. It extends to their relationships with others and their ecosystem of support. It enables them to take feedback, learn to do better, and create partnerships that further foster success. Their EQ extends to how they embrace others in their mission and create an environment that allows for candor, honest reflection, and improvement.

The leaders make sound judgments in strategy, people, politics, and in crisis management — the key areas of public sector leadership judgment. They know that a judgment is not “made” until it is effectively implemented. They make good people decisions and have surrounded themselves with teams of other leaders that buy into the mission, values, culture, and the processes to achieve them. They know leadership is a team sport. They are demanding of the people they surround themselves with and supportive. These leaders expect a lot but give a lot. They work with others to identify strategy and implement it. They create strong politically important relationships, and deeply understand the politics important to their entities and key stakeholders.

Finally, in what is perhaps the most sophisticated of the competencies they and other good leaders possess, they combine competencies wisely in their plans of organizational improvement. This “meta-competency” is the skillful inclusion of the right elements to achieve a goal. They don’t overwhelm staff who implement the plans with too much complexity. They are able to identify what is essential to

do, not all that is possible to do. There is virtue in simplicity. Another excellent city manager, Brenda Eivens of Cedar Park, agrees that this is an essential approach. Complicated solutions don’t work. Busy workers and busy leaders need understandable approaches that can be readily implemented.

The best leaders work in the present with an eye toward the future. The demands on future organizations will be even greater than on today’s cities and towns: better, faster, and cheaper results. Technology, but also broad societal expectations are changing. Leading change effectively will be in even greater need. Adaptive leadership, which facilitates openness, inquiry, teamwork, and inclusion of multiple perspectives, will be essential. The best leaders do this now. In the future, all organizations will need this capacity.

What the best leaders know is that helping others become better leaders is part of their job. Each of these highlighted leaders focuses on bettering themselves and developing others. All excel in this practice. Bill Kuntz is an award-winning mentor and highly regarded by those with whom he works. He took his mentoring to the agency-wide level and created sophisticated and practical ways to pass on information about needed skills and competencies. One way was through a leadership book club. Stan Farmer conducts a weekly staff meeting with his department heads where they focus on important and long-term issues. I participated in a candid question-and-answer session at one of these meetings about some of my research findings. It was a healthy – and challenging – discussion. I thought it terrific, and we all benefitted.

While these leaders all do a good job developing their leaders, I expect that none would be entirely satisfied with the resources available to their organizations to do so. One of the biggest conclusions I reached after my research effort (and 35 years as a manager and leader in the public and private sector) is that we grossly underfund leadership development. There are exceptions – the United States Army is one I studied – but they are not the rule. If we want better leaders in Texas cities (and really everywhere), we need better leadership models – the “what” and “how” of leadership. Then we need to study the best models, take that understanding and practice it as leaders. Leadership is learned best by thinking and doing, done together.

The practical examples of effective leaders in action working at the local levels can be an important part of that educational effort. ★