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Introduction: Miracle Workers at the Helm

New Ways of Exercising Leadership

Kristen McCormack

Leading a nonprofit organization in today's world requires nothing less than a miracle worker at the helm. That could be the conclusion one might draw from reading the literature on the traits, skills, and characteristics required to lead a nonprofit organization. Today's leaders should be honest, competent, forward-looking, and inspiring as well as intelligent, fair-minded, broad-minded, courageous, straightforward, and imaginative. Leaders should be of high integrity, dedicated, magnanimous, humble, open, and creative while energizing others. Able to cope with change, leaders must establish direction, align people, motivate, and inspire while effectively communicating their story. He or she must be ambitious for the company, demonstrating a compelling modesty, calmly determined, never blaming, willfully creating superb results, demonstrating an unwavering resolve to do what must be done to produce the best long-term results, no matter how difficult. Finally, the leader should be tactically and technically proficient, be self-aware, set an example, build effective teams, ensure tasks are understood, supervised, and accomplished, and make sound and timely decisions.

And while I don't debate the findings of the leadership research, I, and the scores of nonprofit leaders I work with are left wondering: Where does that leave the rest of us?

I have the pleasure of teaching nonprofit management and leadership to bright-eyed M.B.A. students who yearn to someday lead a nonprofit organization as well as

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savvy veteran executive directors who have seen it all. Both groups have something in common: they don't see themselves in the poster composite of "the great leader." The picture is seemingly unattainable and is in stark contrast to their reality leading nonprofit organizations on a daily basis.

And yet thousands of organizations around the world are led, day in and day out, under the most difficult of circumstances with aplomb, dignity, grace, and quiet effectiveness. I have had the opportunity to work with dozens of nonprofit leaders in the United States, Israel, and Brazil over the past ten years, observing their actions and listening to them reflect on their individual roles as leaders. Beginning with the Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange participants in 2005 and more recently listening to community leaders in Brazil, I have observed a sea change in the environment in which leadership is exercised. We live in an increasingly transnational world where individuals claim more than one country as home and where communication is both instantaneous and continuous. Journalism is more democratized and the demand for transparency is a steady drumbeat. Our work and personal lives are increasingly intertwined at a time when we are more reliant on human capital to produce goods and services than ever before. Does this world require different leadership traits and skills, or simply a new way of exercising leadership?

I turned to the reflections of the nonprofit leaders who participated in the Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange as well as those I met in Brazil for answers.

The Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange is represented by leaders of nonprofit organizations from both cities. During the process of documenting the Learning Exchange the topic of leadership was best represented by these descriptors: empowering, nurturing, collaborative, receptive, flexible, understanding, supporting, persevering, and sharing responsibility and credit.

Several leaders stated that they've learned their best leadership skills from their constituents, especially young people with their energy and resiliency and reminders "not to live in boxes." Creating trust, transparency, collective ownership, democratic processes, and space for enjoyment at work were identified as important strategies. Positive ("noncompetitive and cooperative") relationships between NGOs and their leaders was also named as a key tactic for good nonprofit leadership, as "it models for others the ability to celebrate differences." Other suggestions included regular opportunities for individual and collective reflection, "planning more and reacting less," taking risks and being willing to test new initiatives, and "seriously investing in taking care of our relationships."

*—Learning Exchange Research Project,
March 2008 Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange Seminar*

Each year I lead a Brazil Field Seminar for M.B.A. students from Boston University focused on global sustainability and social enterprise. We meet with dozens of

companies, nonprofit organizations, and community leaders. This year we asked each leader to offer advice to the students regarding their future roles as leaders. The response was remarkably uniform including these comments: take risks, never give up, never fight with your own people, cooperate, don't be selfish, learn as much as you can, be fearless, and most of all develop other people as leaders. Perhaps the most inspiring words of advice came from an old Brazilian man, nicknamed Black Bean, who lived in a Brazilian *favela* (slum) of 30,000 on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. After describing his addiction to violence, crime, and drugs as a younger man and his remarkable turnaround, rising to a respected elder in the neighborhood, he offered these words of wisdom in Portuguese, "*Líderes freqüentemente enfrentam enormes obstáculos, mas você sempre encontrará um caminho e você deve persistir.*" Or, "Leaders often face huge obstacles, but you will always find a way and you must persist."

Perhaps not surprisingly, these anecdotes and remarks reinforce many of the same traits and characteristics the leadership research identifies. But they also uncover new ways of exercising leadership. Not only do these executive directors model the traits and characteristics of leaders, they also demonstrate an astonishing ability to embrace ambiguity, differences, and conflict in their daily routine. They build networks of peers, coaching and mentoring each other along the way. Their ability to execute a social change mission is surpassed only by their patience, perseverance, and grand sense of humor. The next time one of them is dismayed by the seemingly unattainable list of leadership qualities to which they aspire I need only suggest they look in the mirror to see a miracle worker. The essays that follow are written by and about these leaders.

