

# The Gifts of Leadership



**M**uch has been written on the requirements of expert leadership. We know about the quantitative competencies: being able to read the balance sheet, make sound financial decisions and interpret a variety of data. Extensive literature has been written on numerous leadership styles. Daniel Goleman's work on emotional intelligence puts forth the range of styles required to manage workplaces and workplace relations.<sup>1</sup> He identifies four fundamental capabilities: self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; social skill. These capabilities are not only the fundamentals of emotional intelligence, but they also contribute to a leader's ability to give their own very unique, very personal gifts to the association.

What, exactly, do people want from their leaders? What are their expectations from the people who occupy those coveted chairs in the executive conference room? Certainly they want more than business acumen, polish and sophistication. And, they have to want more than the ability to execute brilliant strategy and deliver convincing public relations. There has to be more than the ability to build coalitions and garner support for the latest and greatest innovation.

Staff and managers alike want gifts, as do members and elected leadership. Yes, they want their leaders to be a sort of year 'round Santa. And, the gifts they want are not the gifts that you hope to receive on Christmas, but rather the very special gifts that you, as

a leader, ought to give to the association on a regular basis. The gifts a leader tenders are offered because of a genuine commitment to the good of the association, to its whole health and long-term well-being. These gifts become the legacy that transcends all of the tactics and strategy that seemingly place some associations in preeminent positions.

## THE FIVE GIFTS

There are five gifts worthy of exploration. Three are borne of my own insights and two are from the work of Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal, authors of *Leading With Soul: An Uncommon Journey of Spirit*. Beginning with Bolman and Deal's work, the first gift is *Authorship*. Authorship provides space for creation within established boundaries. Authorship allows employees to develop their projects in ways that both add value to the association and enhance their own professional growth. Staff and managers craft their jobs in ways that maximize impact, which benefits both them and the organization. Association leaders who provide the "what," or the objective, and then trust employees to determine the "how," or the methods, are providing a vote of confidence in their staff's abilities.

The second of the gifts is *Significance*. This gift is rooted in a shared history, shared organizational traditions and lore. Narratives that link "people, events, triumphs and tragedies" and are passed throughout the organization enhance a sense of significance

and purpose.<sup>2</sup> It is evident in organizations that purposefully stop to celebrate their accomplishments (large and small), successes and survival. The gift of Significance allows people to find the true meaning in their work, their association, and the larger industry. It provides a compelling context to answer “Why am I investing my life’s energy doing *this* work in *this* association?”

The third gift, borne of my insights after more than ten years consulting with leaders who frequently struggle with effective organizational stewardship, is the gift of *Balance*. This refers to the balance between work and play, the balance between a career and other interests, the balance between technology and the human element. When the association leans too far in either direction, the leader and the entire association are off kilter, lacking healthy equilibrium. Balance is evident when people are encouraged to leave at reasonable hours, to tend to sick children or aging parents, to volunteer in their communities and to be maximally effective in their positions in the association.

While there is evidence of many leaders ‘faking it until they make it,’ one of the greatest gifts a leader can provide is the gift of *Competence*, substantive knowledge of the industry, issues and trends. Maintaining a high level of professional competence calls upon leaders to devote considerable attention to their own development through on-going training, education, other forms of peer-to-peer learning and voracious reading. This means a re-allocation of time and energy so that executive-level learning is a priority. Leaders who neglect this gift eventually breed stagnant associations lacking the infusion of fresh knowledge, current information and creativity.

The fifth and final gift is *Respect*. This term is overused and often under-practiced. It applies to both the posture a leader assumes in the association, respecting its resources and reputation enough to conduct oneself in a manner that is beyond reproach. This includes not getting sloppy drunk at the Annual Meeting cocktail party, choosing economical means of transportation, selecting language carefully, and building partnerships that maximize the organization’s limited resources.

Respect manifests itself in courageous listening, listening with the intent of understanding and appreciating other perspectives. It is also evident when leaders use cross-functional, cross-level approaches to problem-solving. This collaborative approach validates the multiple levels of expertise in the association. Respectful leaders acknowledge the fact that they are not the font of all knowledge, rather one of many repositories of information and expertise in the association.

## PRESENTING THE GIFTS

Presenting these gifts is not as simple as wrapping them and placing them under a tree. In fact, it requires thought and planning. Consider these steps when beginning to use the gifts to augment your leadership style:

**1. Select one gift to emphasize at a time.** Do not overwhelm yourself or your association by infusing too much too quickly. Instead, work on one area and model that behavior consistently. Integrate it thoroughly into your modus operandi and then move to the next.

**2. Give the right gift to the right people at the right time.** An immediate, pressing, high visibility crisis is probably not the right time to launch an effort to begin giving Authorship. Use wise judgment when determining which gifts work best, in which settings and with which employees.

**3. Don’t be surprised if people reject your gifts.** Authorship requires responsibility on the part of the recipient, as does Significance. Both ask everyone to take ownership for the association, their role and work in it. If there are competing norms in the association or if people have competing interests, they will naturally reject efforts to create ownership, individual responsibility and accountability.

## SUMMARY

Beyond traditional leadership competencies, beyond managing resources and enforcing arcane rules, is the very human act of giving of oneself to the association. The five gifts provide a framework for leaving a legacy of genuine concern and commitment to the human element.

## References:

1. “Leadership that Gets Results,” by Daniel Goleman, *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 2000.
2. *Leading With Soul: An Uncommon Journey of Spirit*, by Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, p.113.

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