

Do You Have Enough Support for Your Leadership?

by **Margaret J. Marcuson**

How do you keep yourself going as a leader? Sometimes our role seems to require more stamina than we've got. But we can cultivate the kind of support that will sustain us longer than we thought possible. Soprano Renee Fleming writes: "It's the support that allows a singer to manage a 'cultivated scream' for three hours without causing herself pain and harm. When a singer uses her body and breath properly to support the voice, it takes the strain completely off the throat. My ear, nose and throat doctor, David Slavit, marvels at the fact that we can sing for hours—a feat that ought to leave blood on the floor—yet come in the next day with baby-fresh vocal cords, showing no signs of redness, swelling or strain." (*The Inner Voice*, p. 40)

While others can help support us in our leadership role, there really is no substitute for internal support, for developing the muscles that will sustain us through times that could leave us bleeding, at least emotionally. When we develop those muscles, we can come through with less strain, and with more energy and hope.

What are the muscles we need to develop? First, our own clarity of thinking. What do we think and believe about life, and about our current leadership context? What are our own fundamental principles and values? What are our goals for our own work as leaders? What is the legacy we would like to leave? As we reflect on these questions regularly, we develop strength that will provide support when times get difficult.

Secondly, spiritual practice. Even faith leaders all too frequently neglect this discipline. While spiritual resources are available to us when crisis comes, we will find it easier to draw on them if we have an ongoing practice. Prayer, meditation, regular spiritual reading, connecting with nature in some way—all of these can help us as leaders.

Thirdly, emotional self-regulation. In a leadership crisis we can find it easy to be emotionally hooked: the adrenaline floods our body, we see no way out. But when we are more aware of what is going on internally every day, when we can observe ourselves and others more neutrally, we will be better prepared for the difficult moments. And we can practice managing ourselves. Can I be a little less reactive to that annoying person? Can I breathe deeply when someone criticizes me instead of getting defensive?

Renee Fleming says that a voice like hers benefits from regular daily training, with flexibility being the key goal. Like singers, our own daily training in cultivating inner support will help us develop greater stamina and flexibility as leaders. We can survive the ongoing challenges and the occasional crises of leadership with grace and strength.

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