

What's a Leader to Do?

by Margaret J. Marcuson

I keep hearing stories of leaders who leave and later discover that people have undone some or all of the wonderful changes they had instituted. Programs are discontinued. People who left (and should have left) are back. I've experienced this myself as a former leader. It's discouraging. It contributes to my ongoing sense of humility about the ability of leaders to fundamentally change a system. Old patterns, especially those which were laid down at the time of founding, whether that was a decade ago or a century ago, persist. Sometimes they lie low, but at times of high anxiety they re-emerge.

So what's the point of leadership, anyway? While I remain humble about the long-term impact leaders can have to bring fundamental and lasting change, I do believe how the leader functions while present has critical implications. If the leader functions well, chances are others will, too, and the institution as a whole will do better. When people function better, things go better. They make better decisions, which can have a long-term impact on the institution. For example, a thoughtful decision to purchase land to build can have an effect for decades.

In a way this takes the pressure off. Functioning well is not at all easy, but transforming others is impossible. And it allows us to focus on what we can control: managing ourselves.

What does a well-functioning leader look like? Here are some areas to pay attention to:

1. **Be clear about your own purpose**, direction and goals (especially your goals for yourself). This helps others find their own clarity, both now and in the future.
2. **Pay attention to relationships**, especially with key leaders. They may be present long after you leave, and their growth can benefit themselves and everyone else.
3. **Respect the boundary** between yourself and others. If the leader can't respect boundaries, no one else will be able to, either. This can have a long-term impact on everyone.
4. **Manage your reactivity** when others get reactive, and work on your own areas of vulnerability, where you are inclined to get hooked: anxious, defensive, angry or afraid.
5. **Keep a sense of humor** about others, and most importantly, yourself. This includes remaining lighthearted about your ability to change others.

If you pay attention to these areas it can make a big difference in how the institution as a whole and individuals within it function: how they relate to you, to each other, and their own future. This may be the leader's biggest contribution.

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