

## Vibrant Communities Leadership Challenge

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I'm delighted to be here this afternoon at this second great gathering of Vibrant Communities. This is such a great initiative, and we're so pleased to be a part of it through Tamarack.

Paul has asked me to talk about leadership, what he has termed the leadership challenge.

Before I do that, I thought it might be useful to give you a little context of where I come from on this matter. I split my working life between the business world and this so-called third sector. I run a private investment holding company called Avana Capital Corporation, and we invest in a variety of companies. Some are well-established companies, and some are newer companies which we hope will become successful. I am also chairman of The Maytree Foundation, and lead a number of other community related activities, including Ideas That Matter and The Zephyr Press. And I'm also chairman of The Caledon Institute of Social Policy, and of The Tamarack Institute of Community Engagement.

At both Avana and Maytree, we place an enormous emphasis on leadership. We have seen over time that the most successful organizations are ones with good leaders. I call them "leader led" organizations. I don't simply mean the person at the top, for good leaders can be found at various places inside organizations.

To make life simpler when we switch our Maytree and Avana hats, we have devised one approach at both places. We think the philanthropy model borrows from business, and the business model borrows from philanthropy. The common paradigm is **investment**. In both cases you are investing capital, either for financial return or for social return.

Many of you are familiar with business investing. You ask yourself several key questions.

1. Is this a good business **idea**? That is, is there a significant customer base for the products or services to be produced? Can they be sold at a good enough price so we can make profits? Can we achieve some competitive advantage?
2. Is there a good **strategy** to achieve business success? From the strategy, is there a credible business **plan**?
3. Are the **people** in the business the ones who can make this successful?

A good business idea, the right strategy, and the people to make it work: these are the critical success factors.

What is the application of this to the non-profit world? Can these questions be restated in a way that makes sense? Well, let's try.

1. Is this an **idea** that represents a product or service that is really needed in the community? Would it result in a significant improvement in the life of enough people? Can it be provided at a cost that makes sense? Does this approach to solving the problem offer some competitive advantage over other ways of doing it?
2. Is there a good **strategy** in place to achieve success? Has a good business **plan** been developed to implement that strategy?
3. Are the **people** running the organization capable of making this successful?

As you can see, these questions are virtually identical. In each case we require that there is a powerful idea at the start which will represent the production and provision of something of value. We don't underestimate the importance of the idea.

Then we look for some coherent connection between the idea and the market, either the commercial market of business or the social market. That is captured by a strategy of getting the idea to market, and a plan the sets out just how it will be done.

And finally, and critically importantly, there must be the people who can achieve success.

If I was to be asked what is the most critical among all the ingredients, I would answer that it all matters, that we would never invest in the absence of idea, plan or people. The critical leavening agent, though, is leadership. It is leadership that can produce idea, plan and people at a high and effective level. It is leadership that can give the investor the confidence that success is achievable.

So, what is leadership? How do we behave in a way that will lead to success?

You can look around and see many kinds of leadership. Leadership by example, by exhortation, by charisma, by passion. It can be loud or quiet, sharp or subtle, episodic or enduring, obvious or barely seen. The style of leadership that will work depends on the situation at hand. And on the other people involved.

A lot of leaders can work in different modes. That is, they know when to step forward and when to lay back. They know when to be firm or soft. They can tell when a pat on the back will be better than a kick in the butt. And, at the same time, other leaders are more comfortable operating in a narrower range.

What is important is to explore your own range, and to find your own voice.

One of my favourite historical figures was Dag Hammarskjöld, the second secretary-general of the United Nations. He died in a plane crash in Africa, on an aid mission. He wrote his wish for himself as a leader this way: “If only I may grow firmer, simpler, quieter, warmer....” That was the voice he sought, consciously, at the end of a long process of exercising leadership. He was, to his death, refining his leadership.

Now, some of you might be ambivalent about exercising leadership. I have seen it in community groups before, particularly ones like the Vibrant Community groups where you have people coming together from various parts of the community, often for the first time. There are a number of obstacles which can prevent you from taking leadership, or can provide you with an excuse not to.

- There may be some confusion as to who in the group should step forward.

- Leadership can be lonely. At the top of an organization, there are certain decisions to be taken which are yours alone, and which don't lend themselves to a collegial process. You have to make those decisions, and wear them, and sometimes you wish you could share the responsibility.
- Sometimes the best choice for you to make is uncomfortable and involves a lot of heavy lifting. It would be easier to do something else.
- Sometimes the best choice puts you in conflict with vocal and tough opposition.
- Sometimes the problems are so difficult as to be intimidating.
- Sometimes other people might think you are being self-important to step forward to lead on an issue.
- And there will always be lots of other things to do that demand your attention. Being busy is a great avoidance strategy.

Let me plead with you to be brave enough not to let these concerns stop you. You need to step forward and challenge yourself. Don't let timidity, or busy-ness be your excuse.

The worst thing is you might **all** be thinking these things at the same time, with the result that **nobody** steps up. And that would be a tragedy, because these valuable endeavours might founder on tepid leadership.

So I encourage you to be prepared to lead. Each one of those concerns is legitimate, but each one can be dealt with. You can discuss with the group the appropriateness of your stepping forward. You can assess the amount of work to be done, and find ways to fit it to what you are prepared to do. You can discuss with the group your relative understanding of the job, and get guidance on how to top up what you know, if necessary. And you can search for ways to strengthen your commitment, if that is possible.

But I can assure you, and I know Paul agrees with me, that these various community initiatives will fail if nobody steps up to say, “I will lead”.

And you know that I am talking about a skillful type of leadership, one that is sensitive to people, problems and issues. One that listens, encourages, and empathizes. One that builds other leaders in the team, and makes everyone better.

Plan for leadership. Think consciously about it. Articulate the steps you need to take to achieve your goals, in a systematic way. See yourself as a leader, and recognize that it is not untoward to step forward and put a burden on your shoulders. Have the courage to try.

Paul asked me to be particular in recommending some things that I think are components of good leadership.

So here are some things I think you should be thinking about.

- Think about *idea, plan and people*. That is, make sure you have **an effective analytical tool** to help you in your work. For us, it is *idea, plan and people*, and for you it might be something different, but you must have a systematic way to understand the work in front of you, and a way to make decisions that is consistent and powerful.
- Think about **empowering** people and **delegating** tasks. Some leaders take everything on their own shoulders, sometimes to be heroic and sometimes because they can't trust others. Those leaders burn out. Bring good people on to work with you, and be generous in sharing the load.
- **Share credit** for successes, but be prepared to **shoulder the blame** for failure. That doesn't mean that you coddle people who don't perform, but no real leader points the finger at others when things go wrong.
- Have a **client orientation**. Look at your work through **the lens of the community's need**, not through the needs of staff, or funders, or board members. Your mission is to serve the needs of the community, so it is best to look through that lens. When

you are thinking about something which needs to be done, even if it has been done many times before, make sure it is in the best interests of the people you are trying to serve. In business we call it customer orientation.

- **Communicate** all the time. Make sure your colleagues know what is going on, your clients know, and other stakeholders know. Tell your story. At the least it is a way of keeping everyone on the same page, and at the best it can inspire people to want to do more and to help out.
- Be friendly. By that I mean **be a collaborator**. Work with others who are engaged in the same struggle. Share information, tools, and techniques. And, if someone does a job better than you, consider getting them to help you run your program, or even merging your program with theirs, letting them operate it.
- **Think long term**. It never pays to make enemies, although sometimes it can't be avoided. You will have to disagree with some people, but if you can do it in a civil manner, then a year, or five years, or ten years ahead you will not have them trying to block something you are trying to achieve for spite.
- **Be brave**. Have the courage to take on the tough tasks, and not to settle for partial solutions. But at the same time don't be stupid. Some things are so hard to do that they will absorb energy, time and money well beyond the value of what additional might be achieved. When in doubt about when to be brave or not, go back to your analytical tool of idea, plan and people. And another point about bravery: when you take on the tough tasks, you will be criticized by people who have interests you are about to step on, or people who are jealous of your courage, or for many other reasons. Don't let it deter you. Listen to legitimate criticism, and learn from it, but don't be cowed just because there is some opposition.
- And, finally, **be ethical**. There is a negative type of leadership around these days that specializes in dividing communities, and capitalizes on stimulating resentment against certain people or

groups. It is, unfortunately, effective. It works in elections. But it is an illusory kind of leadership, for it leaves you with an resentful and unhappy body politic, and it makes it much harder to get people to support you later, when you may need them. Don't stoop to the negative, for there lie ruined communities. It is far better to take the high road of inspiring people to your vision and ideas, because then you can lead them to the promised land.

You know, we are all engaged together in a wonderful struggle to build a great country. Much has been done in Canada. We enjoy, taken all together, enviable achievements in wealth, health, education, safety, security, and quality of place. But we can do better, and we all need to devote ourselves to that task. In whatever we do, we should be striving together to do it well in the service of others. Whether we are from a family that has been here for many generations or we've just arrived, we stand shoulder to shoulder. Whether we live in one of our big cities, or a small community, we stand together. Whether we work in business or social service, academia or government, we work together. Some of us have been at it for years and some are just starting, but we are equals in this great task.

Finally, let me speak directly to the Vibrant Community participants. I know how busy you are, balancing your demanding work with your families and personal lives. I know what a great commitment it is to be part of this great effort, and I admire your determination to expand your skills and deepen your knowledge. Vibrant Communities will make you more effective, and will produce lasting benefits to your home community, and to the whole country.

You will find colleagues here who will not only be your allies now, but for many years to come. You will make many friends here.

I wish you all the very best success. And I encourage you to embrace and exercise your gifts of leadership in this great cause.

