

From the issue dated September 28, 2006

How to Stem the Nonprofit-Leadership Deficit

By Pablo Eisenberg

For more than a decade, people in the nonprofit world have been taking steps to stem the growing lack of leadership at charities and foundations. So far, nothing has worked terribly well.

Colleges have been offering more courses on public and nonprofit leadership.

Foundations have financed leadership-development programs for senior and midcareer staff members at charities.

Conferences, seminars, workshops, and other training programs are being offered to strengthen leadership among nonprofit institutions.

Articles and books have been issued cataloging the key attributes of nonprofit leadership, and urging organizations to focus more intently on developing leadership skills.

But still, a vast leadership deficit continues to limit the ability of nonprofit groups to strengthen democratic values and institutions, hold governments and corporations accountable, deliver effective services, and influence both domestic and foreign public policies.

Why is it so difficult for the United States, with all its talent and riches, to nurture leaders who have the intelligence, skills, vision, and courage to make a real difference?

The answers are complex, but it is clear that the very affluence, stability, and educational achievements of American society are, paradoxically, the major causes of the nation's depleted leadership stock.

When times were tougher, when most people had to struggle financially, when women and members of minority groups were battling for their civil rights, and when citizens felt a need to support one another more ardently than they do now, people were more inclined to take risks, to fight against the odds, to demonstrate courage and zeal, and to sacrifice for what they perceived was a common good.

In 2006, Americans are a much more affluent, educated, comfortable, self-satisfied, and stable populace, unwilling to endanger our perceived status and self-interests, sacrifice on behalf of others and our communities, and engage in energetic activism.

As a result, those essential qualities of leadership, such as courage, bravery, risk-taking, and willingness to sacrifice for others, seem no longer to be a significant part of our collective DNA.

No ingredient of leadership is lacking more than courage.

The absence of courage explains why nonprofit executives are deathly afraid of critiquing foundations, other donors, and their own colleagues. It also explains why they refuse to talk in public about most issues, especially controversial ones, and fear taking risks. And it is also why so many foundations refrain from financing public policy, advocacy, watchdog, and other activist activities.

The failures of political leadership, the destructiveness of America's focus on celebrity and stars, the disappearance of the notion of personal responsibility, and the rise of one-issue groups with their narrow visions have all made it hard for nonprofit groups to attract and groom real leaders.

Given all the significant social and economic problems that demand the attention of nonprofit groups, we cannot give up the search for top leaders, and we need to put all our attention into cultivating young people to become strong nonprofit leaders.

It may be time to borrow some of the ideas that worked to develop leaders in the 1960s and 1970s, since that time of great struggle was when so many of the strongest nonprofit leaders got their start.

Many of the activists who founded and took top jobs at the thousands of nonprofit groups created in the Great Society-era began their careers by engaging in neighborhood or community action. Or they participated in campus activism or union organizing, ran campaigns for better health programs or environmental conditions, took on large government or private institutions, or challenged corrupt practices within an established organization.

Federal programs such as the Volunteers in Service to America and Peace Corps exposed thousands of young people to the difficulties of working for changes in society. They came to the nonprofit world motivated by both their successes and the knowledge that more needed to be done, and they already had many of the skills they needed to make a difference.

Today's community-service programs, for the most part, do not give participants much exposure to social-change efforts.

AmeriCorps and several other federal community-service programs are by law prohibited from allowing their participants to engage in advocacy, organizing, or other activist activities, and therefore have been limited to delivering services.

They have not been part of a domestic "combat zone." And the lives of current Peace Corps members tend to be more staid, predictable, and uneventful than those of people who volunteered decades ago.

While still terribly important, those programs cannot be expected to generate the type of leadership they achieved in earlier days unless they offer their participants more opportunities to actively be involved in social and institutional change.

Colleges and universities could also expose young people to the tactics and invigoration of advocacy efforts, but that will not happen unless college presidents and tenured faculty members serve as role models and mentors.

College presidents should be selected and judged in part on their support for student efforts to get involved in civic affairs.

As students lead protests to demand living wages for all college workers, press for endowments to divest from companies in Sudan, and focus attention on myriad other issues, college leaders need to be supporting them — not spending their time raising money from rich donors or retreating to their research laboratories.

Once they get off the campuses, young people must be offered additional opportunities to help them become leaders.

Sadly, few options are available because foundations have poured their money mostly into programs for people who have been on the job for a decade or more.

Foundations should expand their leadership-development efforts to include people in their 20s and 30s. Grant makers could finance:

- Short-term internship programs, three to six months in duration, that provide an opportunity for young people to become engaged in community and national policies and activities, supported by reading assignments and reflection.

The Ronald Reagan Leadership Academy run by the Young America's Foundation is a successful training opportunity for future young conservatives. On the progressive side, the summer internship program of the Center for Community Change is available for potential young leaders who are interested in grass-roots organizations, community organizing, and social change.

Such ventures, whatever their ideological color, enables young people to strengthen their sense of civic engagement and develop some leadership skills. These internships should become a high priority for most foundations.

- Subsidies to nonprofit groups that know how to serve as mentors to young people so they can offer entry-level jobs with decent salaries and benefits for two years.
- One-year fellowships for promising young people at select national or regional organizations, which, in turn, would send the fellows to local organizations engaged in efforts to improve health or education, or to promote causes such as environmental preservation, social change, or voter education. The hosts would serve as mentors to the fellows, as well as oversee his or her local experience.

These front-line experiences, involving community engagement and activism, are the stuff from which leadership will develop.

Many grant makers acknowledge the shortage of outstanding leaders, yet somehow are not willing or able to invest in developing them, citing such reasons as budget silos that exclude cross-cutting issues like leadership development, lack of interest on the part of trustees, or the foundation's mission to support specific causes like arts or education.

One way to break foundations out of this mind-set would be for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, newly flush with money from Warren Buffett, to make this issue a top priority.

The success of future programs at Gates, as well as those of other foundations, will depend on the quality of people who will run them.

Gates has already shown that it recognizes the importance of reaching people when they are young: It recently expanded its \$1-billion program to finance college and graduate education for scientists, public-health specialists, and others.

The magnitude of the leadership crisis calls for strong measures.

Today we have a generation of young people in their 20s who are brighter, more skilled, more civic-minded, and more committed to public service than they have been for many years. They could be the future leaders of the nonprofit world that our society so desperately needs.

We cannot fail to invest in their development and to sustain them with our resources and encouragement.

Pablo Eisenberg, a regular contributor to these pages, is senior fellow at the Georgetown University Public Policy Institute. His e-mail address is pseisenberg@erols.com.