



Releasing the Leader Within

Shari Lynn Scales

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Releasing the Leader Within

Shari Lynn Scales

Vice President of Advancement of George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon

If ever there were a time to consider the enormity of impactful leadership, Election Day 2008 was proof positive. This historical event, coupled with my own professional transition between a health care foundation executive role (a field in which I carry decades of experience) and a vice presidential seat in higher education (a field in which I possess no experience at all), caused me to reflect on the topic of leadership in the world of development: how each of us has the ability to lead, and how each can use this innate skill to release the leadership potential in others, whether they be staff, board members, donors, or prospects. This essay is not an attempt to solve a leadership problem and may not even generate “a-ha’s” for most readers. Rather, the words below offer a compilation of personal reflections meant to spark additional conversation or release further thought.

While U.S. society, politicians, pundits and leaders from around the world will be talking about Barack Obama’s unprecedented accomplishment for years, even centuries, to come, leaders in the nonprofit sector have many a lesson to learn from this historical campaign. For starters, we learned from the Obama campaign that it is possible, within a relatively short period of time, to generate a groundswell of community support through simple, grassroots efforts. How else are we to solidly flank our pyramids with new donors and relationships? How else are we to determine who our next Phil Knight may be or where our unimaginable \$100 million gift may come from?

Notice the language of we. An excellent leader instills a sense of ownership in the cause—and the solutions. Conversations with our staff and our donors are no different. From the time his campaign started to his impassioned acceptance speech, Obama never said it was all about him. “We have a lot of work to do to create change in America,” he said. *We*.

The beauty of work in nonprofit development is that we get to listen more than we get to talk. At least that’s what is supposed to happen. Many times, whether during the high of achieving an incredible gift or during a discomfoting lull in the campaign to build Providence Newberg Medical Center—a project that seemed to be without an ending—I found donors leading me toward their passions, their hopes, and their commitment to changing our community for the better. Simply providing that opportunity for a donor to support something bigger than both of us sparked deeper discussions about the meaning behind the bricks and mortar, and unleashed desires to lead, by example, a community toward positive change.

I found donors leading me toward their passions, their hopes, and their commitment to changing our community for the better.

Leadership speaks to the freedom to express thought, emotion, passion, and persistence—and to help define and even release in others those same powers that each may carry within.

Just ask Ken and Joan Austin. One wouldn’t know upon meeting them that the two founded and still run today the world’s largest dental equipment manufacturing company, A-dec, in Newberg, Oregon. You see, they never forgot what it took to grow their company from a small start-up shop in a World War II-era Quonset hut with two employees, to today’s state-of-the-art corporate and manufacturing campus boasting nearly one thousand employees. Leadership. It’s not about them. Yes, they are the leaders, but their passion first and foremost for their employees drives what they do, within their company and for their community. Leadership the A-dec way trickles down through the company’s management, supervisors, and frontline staff who, in turn, spark strong families, teach Sunday school, coach their kids’ sports teams, and so it goes.

Leadership is not stoicism. I’ve seen great leaders unafraid to bare their emotions in public by shedding



a tear or two, and with a quivering voice, deliver the best or worst of news to the flocks who follow them. Leadership speaks to the freedom to express thought, emotion, passion, and persistence—and to help define and even release in others those same powers that each may carry within.

So what does this have to do with raising money in what is, today, one of the worst economic storms our country has ever weathered? Back to the Obama campaign. At a time and during a campaign when it seemed most odds were against a gangly African-American freshman senator, election night proved many wrong as the political ticker showed more than a seven-million-vote lead over his opponent, and as 240,000 people filled Grant Park to congratulate his achievement—their achievement. He had the power to instill ownership among his supporters in this campaign. When leadership is shared, excellence is released.

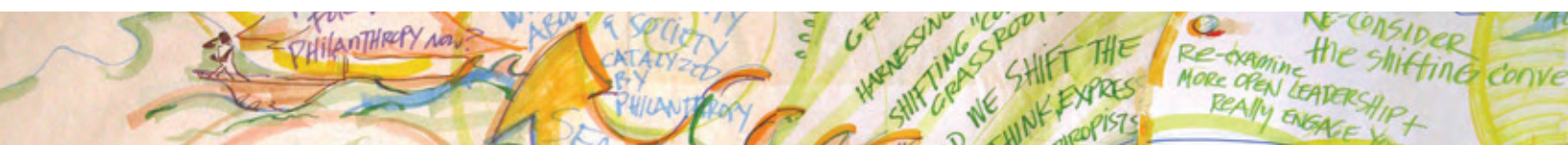
Thus it is critical for nonprofit leaders first to get their organizational houses in order. Not the files, not the database systems, but the people. Whether a 2-person shop or an advancement team of 15, defining how each staff member embraces the organizational mission and understands implicitly the critical role he or she plays in the fund development process is imperative. One-on-one discussions foster opportunities to identify strengths and areas of growth, and to create game plans for movement forward, or onto another team altogether. Creating an environment that instills trust and accountability among the internal staff can only strengthen this idea of unity for a common cause. Leadership is not always about championing popular ideas, rather we need to demonstrate to our development staffs the willingness to be open, take risks, push the envelope, and ask the hard questions—all for the sake of our institutions' and our communities' success.

What about the board? We're taught as fundraising leaders to go out and recruit the best and the brightest community leaders out there. But once they're "in"—then what? I've seen a roomful of financial leaders, successful business owners, retired educational leaders, and real estate moguls reduced to head-nodding robots in board meetings, assumingly, for fear they are out of their comfort zones of expertise. Leadership knows no language. With our boards, we have incredible opportunities to speak in commonplace terms about everyday issues. Does my child or grandchild have a good school to go to? Will our local hospital be able to keep its doors open? Will the university add a much-needed program? What are we to do about the homeless, drug abuse, and domestic violence permeating our cities? Who do we know that can join us in understanding this cause, embracing our mission, and solving these problems? Without necessarily tactical measures and a detailed master plan for solving these crises, one can at least foster the idea of stepping up to dialogue and get our arms around owning the problems, which can then spark leadership in beginning to create the solutions. That's what Barack Obama has taught me anyway.

Leaders can express fear and courage at the same time, serving up doses of honesty along with stick-to-it-tiveness, in the face of incredible odds.

Leaders can express fear and courage at the same time, serving up doses of honesty along with stick-to-it-tiveness in the face of incredible odds. An old friend whom I met in the grocery store the other day talked excitedly about Phil and Penny Knight's unprecedented \$100 million donation to Oregon Health Science University. You see, she has an incurable form of lymphoma that she has been battling nearly five years now. When I mentioned that she looked great, Penny said, "The chemo is working. I'm in 90 percent remission now." But her eyes only lit up when talking about the possibilities the Knight's gift would bring to her oncologist and the team of specialists working with her and other cancer patients, and how their gift will benefit the legislation she is championing at the state level in support of cancer research—all this while juggling a family of her own and teaching business classes at Portland State University. Wow! She inspired me to do more right there on the spot. She made me feel that if she could have that much drive despite not feeling like dancing a jig some mornings when she struggles out of bed, how much more could I do and be? More than I am now, I am confident of that.

So how can we have these same conversations with our major donors? Easy. Get them to share their stories and their passions, and then talk about our organizations and the challenges and opportunities we face collectively. Surely there's a major donor on your list right now who has an idea, but is not sure where to take it; who has a passion, but doesn't have the right forum in which to share it; who has drive to learn



more, but doesn't know what questions to ask. Begin asking *yourself* how you can be a catalyst for that donor. Think, then, of the possibilities that may grow from there. What if we exchanged our MBAs and our CFREs and all our worldly applied skills for *love*, as Obama's poet laureate from Yale suggests? Not love in the sense of flowery romance, but the instinctual passion that drove us to our positions of nonprofit leadership in the first place.

I am blessed to have created a new leadership group at Providence Newberg Health Foundation called the Women's Health & Philanthropy Council. This "experiment" with a female-dominated group started with our hospital's plans to build a new women's health center. Thinking outside the box a bit, I didn't want simply to create another "campaign cabinet" of sorts whose work would be intense and time-limited, and whose anticipated success after an uphill climb would come to a screeching halt once the doors of the new women's center were opened. Rather, I thought, could this be an opportunity to finally grow our foundation's outreach into the community, and truly make a difference in philanthropy going forward. Could this be a chance for Newberg to have its own "women's giving circle" or "investment club"—except they would be investing in their collective communities rather than their personal portfolios. So, after a few phone calls and one-on-ones with some women hand-picked from my best relationship lists, our group launched. Being the organizer I am, I armed them with neatly laid-out three-ring binders containing lists, notes, and articles on women's health and women's philanthropy.

The chemistry was just right.

It took no later than the second meeting for the group to launch into its own self-facilitated discussion about—what else?—their kids. And the conversation wasn't focused only on the question of how the new women's health center could be a resource for their daughters and granddaughters. The question was, *How can we teach our younger generations about the importance of giving back?* A fundraiser's dream—at least mine! Because, if ever there was a question among the top five on any fundraising executive's list, if ever there was a question whose answer would have direct impact on the success or struggle of our nation and its future, it is this one. So, having created this group of women leaders, they will take their leadership out into the streets and begin to energize, recharge, and instill. They will foster, empower, and grow. Their actions—next year on the women's health center, in 5 years on community health, and in 20 years on a force of visionary change for the entire community—will make their indelible mark on the hearts and minds of old and young alike, teaching us all that, in the words of our first black president, "Yes we can" create positive change for the future with our collective thinking and gifts. "Yes we can" bring the work of hospitals, universities, social service networks, churches, schools, and environmental agencies to a new level that defines them, collectively, as the backbone of renewed nation. "Yes we can"—a phrase that will forever ring in the hearts and minds of many Americans after that historical election night, and should serve as the monolith for our work as nonprofit leaders going forward.

So, what possesses a team that boasts centuries of Washington DC experience and, comparatively, a team with decades of higher education fundraising knowledge to reach out to its most junior ranks? Hunger. Desperation. Can't someone, anyone, take our institutions by the reins and bring some truth and fair assessment, and make the hard decisions that will drive us to the success we have worked so long and hard to achieve? Can we be the coach that the team longs to have rally around them, assure and inspire them, and in turn, assure and inspire donors or prospects—to create powerful, impactful change in what we've already staked a claim in?



We're human bridges, really. That safe place between what is and what is yet to be. The beginning to an end of a yearning for something better, different, more.

And what does it mean to be president–elect? Or vice president of advancement–elect? We're human bridges, really. That safe place between what is and what is yet to be. The beginning to an end of a yearning for something better, different, more. You saw it in the eyes of the audiences who, month after month leading up to November 4, 2008, filled stadiums and parks, wide-eyed with enthusiasm toward a would-be president whose leadership brought hope when he hadn't even held the title of "president" yet. So, too, a somewhat successful, but could-do-more development team at an up-and-coming Christian university looks to their next advancement VP for direction *now*. A sense of calmness permeates as they wait and rest, for this new person now carries the burden of the future, although not officially yet. It's almost more burdensome to carry the "elect" term than to officially be tagged "it." There are expectations to meet in the interim, two or more hats to wear for a while, confidences to gain that are yours for the losing if you don't act before you're really supposed to. You're the bridge.

So too, we look to our donors to be that bridge—carrying our institutions from one project to the next. Sometimes, merely a footbridge with two ropes tied tightly at either end; at other times, the Golden Gate of a capital campaign goal exceeded. Sometimes we need only skip easily upon a six-lane concrete structure. Other times, we're grasping the unsteady railings, white-knuckled, as our toes curl and grip with every awkward step across the deepest ravines and raging rivers we sometimes find our institutions hovering over. Leadership is about building the bridge and crossing it simultaneously—with your teams and your donors—showing those around you that, yes, anything is possible once passion, and excellence, are released.

The futures of two institutions—a cutting-edge, Christian-heritage-rich liberal arts university on the brink of new success and a 225-year-young country long hoped to be the world leader that would bring all peoples and all nations to common worldly good, no matter their spiritual or ethnic core—depend on us.



About this extract

In Spring 2009, Gary Hubbell Consulting convened a think tank of North American nonprofit organization and development leaders. Four topics were selected for discussion, each of which became the focus of an insightful essay by each of the hand-picked attendees. The four topics are: New Perspectives on Leadership, Reimagining the Future of Philanthropy, Development in a Systems Context, and Demonstrating and Communicating Philanthropy's Impact. The resulting e-book, *In Search of New Meaning: Philanthropy, Community and Society*, is available for free download at www.OnTheCuspPublishing.com. This essay is an extract from that publication.

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