

# Three Principles of Wise Action Leadership

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Twenty-three years ago, I dove head first into a fundraising career and discovered my passion as soon as I hit the water. With more than 30 years in the non-profit sector, mission-centered work comes naturally to me, and I am most at home when engaged in conversation with change-makers. My career, which spans two health care systems on the West Coast – Providence and Legacy – and two institutions of higher education – George Fox University and Concordia University-Portland – has afforded opportunities to lead staff and volunteer teams in the most trying and rewarding of endeavors. I am a graduate of Marylhurst University and have held the Certified Fund Raising Executive designation through CFRE International since 1999. I am, however, always in pursuit of wise action. As such, I am both thankful and humbled to return to the Conversation table with Gary Hubbell, colleagues and friends.





## Three Principles of Wise Action Leadership

*Shari Lynn Scales, CFRE*

*“In each century since the beginning of the world wonderful things have been discovered. In the last century more amazing things were found out than in any century before. In this new century hundreds of things still more astounding will be brought to light. At first people refuse to believe that a strange new thing can be done, then they begin to **hope** it can be done, then they **see** it can be done—then it is **done** and all the world wonders why it was not done centuries ago.”<sup>1</sup>*

We live in amazing yet divergent times. Through wisdom and action, we have become beneficiaries of some of the greatest achievements known to humankind – walking on the moon and a cure for polio come to mind. Yet we live in a world that, while on the one hand, offers us the amazing opportunity to have a new heart valve implanted through a vein in our leg, on the other, provides no solution to the problem of feeding hungry children. We *hope* for great success, we *see* the opportunity, but then we allow the economy, political storms, competing interests, an awkwardly matrixed organization, a “lifer” board member, a *fill-in-the-blank*, to keep us from *doing*.

We learn by doing. As a walking testimony of that well coined phrase, I’ve learned a great deal about leadership over the past two decades. Reflecting on my experiences through a wise action lens, some common threads seem woven throughout. To take this to task, I consulted the web on the definitions of *wisdom* and *action*.<sup>2</sup>

**Wis•dom:** knowledge that is gained by having many experiences in life; the natural ability to understand things that most other people cannot understand; Old English *witan*, to know; Greek *idein*, to see.

**Ac•tion:** to do.

Wise action, then, is to simultaneously know, see and do. Standing on the platform of these long-held definitions, I suggest that a leader in wise action relies on three basic yet interwoven principles.

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<sup>1</sup> Burnett, F.A. (1911). *The Secret Garden*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/>. January 15, 2015.

### **Principle #1: The Mirror is Your Best Friend**

The first principle a leader must demonstrate is self-awareness. I've seen leaders check their true identities at the door, not realizing that who they are innately is key to their success – authentic and real. Without self-awareness, which leads to self-trust, one cannot empower others to trust – a basic necessity for group survival and success. Once one becomes aware of and accepts who he or she is in leadership, then comes the ability to adjust and adapt, and think beyond self for the good of the whole.

Trust in oneself means the courage to look in the mirror and lift up that which makes you feel powerful and learn from that which has brought trial or failure. For me, a simple question I've found helpful, that allows me to keep inventory of my skill as a development leader is this: *What's the difference between a good fundraiser and a great one?* In this digital age where we can chronicle thoughts in our cell phones as easily as we can on a sticky-note, I capture these self-realizations as they come to me. One day, I'll write a book. But for now, it's a great exercise that continues to push me to be and to do better. One such realization is that we can't possibly do it all. This leads to the second principle.

### **Principle #2: Embrace Ambiguity and Let Go of Control**

A leader in wise action embraces colorful, interwoven circles, not black-and-white lines. A leader in wise action recognizes that he or she alone does not have all of the answers, and thus, surrounds him or herself with people brighter and smarter. Further, leaders who recruit for ambiguity in order to build fluid teams stand the best chance of creating meaningful and lasting systemic change. What does it mean to recruit for ambiguity? There is a job description, yes. But two questions must be answered: What are the most pressing needs of the organization and community that the candidate can fill the void for now? And, what skill set does the candidate display that will help an organization grow downfield? A wise in action leader recruits for two positions – the needs of today and the opportunities of tomorrow. He or she handpicks teams both to fill current organizational needs and who demonstrate agility and a willingness to step in and tackle new opportunities that may surface down the road. Trusting candidates immediately with future capabilities leads to an empowered team and a stronger organization.

### **Principle #3: The Success of the Whole Feeds Your Soul**

A leader in wise action sets the pace and invites his/her community into the race. The group moves fluidly, with perception, grace and power. Have you ever watched a group meerkats in action? These desert-dwellers gather as one when predators approach, food needs collecting, or the young need to be watched. They don't jump into a lottery of meetings and discussions, figuring out who will do what and with what title. They jump in as one to tackle the task at hand, moving with fluidity, power and grace. The trust a leader identifies and lets flow outward into community (principle 1) lessens boundaries, fosters collaboration and builds instinctual trust. That by far is one of the greatest gifts of

empowerment a leader can endow for generations. Like a social media company CEO once told a would-be hire, “When you’re offered a seat on a rocket ship, you don’t ask, ‘What seat?’ You just get on.”<sup>3</sup>

Think for a moment about what we could accomplish at the leadership table if we move with fluidity through economic, political, financially-rich as well as financially-lean waters. When tough or exciting choices present, a leader who is wise in action sets the pace for collective choosing. He/she will establish precedent for inclusion of the organizational community (internal and external) stakeholders.

Want a hard and fast example? Change the word “meeting” to “conversation.” Rather than a dreaded 60 to 120 minute or more chunk of time on our calendars with top down agenda items to tick off (a.k.a. *meeting*), set the table for conversation and role-playing that will help prepare internal communities to take action in the real world. Recently, I sat in a “meeting” with our development team, several of whom were bantering about the topic of “how to develop a culture of philanthropy” among our organization’s top leaders. “We need to present a philanthropy educational topic at each of their quarterly meetings,” someone suggested. Hardly inspiring. What about engaging these leaders in simple role-playing, allowing them to practice sharing stories and their mission passions at their next opportunities with donors?

Throughout my journey in nonprofit development, I’ve witnessed far too often the “little gift that could” and the “major gift that never happened” because the focus was all wrong and the talk too cheap. I’ve seen teams plan for two, three or more years on the big ask, only to be left in the dust after a competing organization announces big goals and invites partners in early. A leader who is wise in action acts with those he or she has invited to the table – showing the world, and leaving for the organization’s generations to come, the answer *Yes, it can be done*. We owe it to our donors, our missions, and our beneficiaries, not just to be forward thinking but forward acting.

It is a well-known fact that lightning strikes the tallest tree. The solution? Don’t loom large above the rest of the team. When the sum is greater than its parts, lightning will find someplace else to strike. Leadership is a partnership.<sup>4</sup> Equal partnership is in order to achieve success. There are clearly defined roles and expectations of course, but like the meerkats, the partnership that moves as one will reap more rewards.

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<sup>3</sup> Sandburg, S.A. (2014). *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. New York: Random House.

<sup>4</sup> Goldfarb, A. and Jeffrey M. Goldfarb. (2015) “It’s Not Rocket Science: Back to the Basics of Nonprofits’ Sustainability.” *Advancing Philanthropy*. Arlington, VA: Association of Fundraising Professionals

The key to leading with wise action is action. One can wax incessantly and think deep thoughts that are the best of intentions for their organizations. But without enlisting those thoughts and words into active duty, without acting upon that which is churning inside, these best intentions simply idle.

As Lucy Bernholz mused in a recent blog post, “We need to re-imagine *how* civil society will work and what it will look like, not give up on it.”<sup>5</sup> The pilgrims fled top-down autocracy in search of a better life where they could establish the freedom to collaborate and live in community. They would expect we would have taken their arduous task of founding a new world to heart. Let’s keep **doing**.

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<sup>5</sup> Bernholz, L. <http://www.philanthropy.blogspot.com/2014/12/the-failure-and-future-of-civil-society.html>

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