

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Being a Leader

by Connie Gilman

I have long been interested in leadership. In fact, my senior high school thesis was titled "Why Men and Women Seek and Accept the Responsibilities of Leadership." That interest has been with me ever since and has grown over the years. "Yes," you might say, "That's obvious! You're President of the Virginia Library Association, and you've been a member of the Virginia Library Leadership Academy since its inception."

There are various theories about leadership. Some imply that you are born to lead, others state that everyone is a leader, and then there are those who assert that leadership skills can be developed through classes, training, and mentoring. I believe most of us have some innate leadership skills but many of us choose not to use them (being content to let others take on the responsibilities). And, truth be told, additional responsibilities, more problems, and increased time commitments are to be expected when accepting a leadership role. Throughout my years as a student, wife, mother, librarian, church member, scout leader, club participant, board member, and committee member, I have tackled a variety of leadership roles and responsibilities. Having said this, I have a good friend who is also a joiner, but instead of desiring to lead she prefers to be a member. "How can that be?" I ask myself, "Why doesn't she want to take on new challenges? Why isn't she using more of her talents to lead?"

For some reason, she has no desire to lead groups of people. Over the years, however, I have come to realize that following is just as important as leading. And where the leader directs, the committed follower completes assignments and supports both project and group.

I have come to realize over the years that the value of a leader is his or her ability to be the catalyst

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for new ideas and to promote the potential in younger leaders and motivate creative followers. In all those roles there are opportunities to change another person's understanding of the world. A leader is able to influence others in ways that may not be immediately apparent. And committed followers often lead by example through their ideas and their work. Often in the leader-follower dynamic, the leader is an extrovert and the follower is more of an introvert. Yet many leaders manifest leadership in quieter ways. There are a number of library directors and managers (including me!) who willingly admit they are introverts, but become an "extrovert" when they put on their leadership hat.

True leadership is not about wielding power. It's about understanding and respecting people. Good leaders learn the skills needed to influence and motivate peers by mastering group dynamics, empowering team members, setting goals, and supporting the success of the team. Leadership is about establishing a vision and inspiring others to work toward it.

Leadership is messy! Choices are not always black and white, but rather all sorts of grays. Compromise is frequently needed and the ability to admit mistakes is a must. And one needs always to remember that it is impossible to please even some of the people all of the time. So a leader needs to willingly bear the burden of decisions that will be unpopular for some and lauded by others. Such decisions can be a gamble, but as long as you listened ... really listened ... it becomes the best decision that you can make. And it is essential that a leader be humble enough to admit when they are wrong!

As a leader you need to know what responsibilities you have and you need to understand your own information seeking behavior. Followers must also hold up their end of the bargain. Each contributes to the success of the organization as long as they continue to recognize the value of each other.

Communication is more than being a good listener. Not only do you have to disseminate information, but you also need to provide clear expectations of outcomes and

let others help chart the course. Remember that just because you know what's inside your head doesn't mean others do.

Gratitude for those you work with is profoundly important for exceptional leadership. Remember, you couldn't lead without them! Attempt to catch those you work with doing a good job and let them know how much you appreciate their efforts. It takes a simple "thanks" when you notice someone replacing the copier paper and a bigger THANK YOU! when they have completed coordinating the Snapshot Virginia Day! Never say "I" accomplished a major activity or event either in public, private or in a performance review. The leader only uses "we."

Keep in mind that management is not only down but up as well. It is an important strategy to know your leadership style as well as the style of your own supervisor. Once you know their style you can learn how to use it to complement yours. This can sometimes be frustrating but your responsibility is to move the organization forward and that can only be done as a team. While I was writing this column, a publication from my high school arrived. On the cover was a flock of birds, flying in a formation that outlines one huge bird. Included was the title of the lead article, "The Time of the Singular Leader is Past: We are the ones we have been waiting for." So with those words, I close and challenge each member of the Virginia Library Association to be the "one" ...leaders and followers together. **VL**

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