
KEY IDEAS ABOUT LEADERSHIP*

by John Bell

Basic Assumptions for Effective Human Leadership

- *Leadership is necessary.* Things get done because at least one person sees to it. Because most of us have experienced oppressive leadership, many people shy away from leadership, not wanting to be like the bad leaders they have seen, or wanting to have no leaders; let's just have a committee. In practice, leadership by committee rarely works because takes a highly rational and cooperative group. Usually it helps when at least one person is thinking about the whole group and how things are going. This person can be the designated leader or the leader from the side that makes sure things go right.
- *Leadership is natural to human beings.* Almost everyone, at times, is or has been a leader. Almost everyone has decided to organize others to get something done. Everyone can learn to become a good leader. Almost every person is or can be a leader. Part of our human nature is to take charge, to have responsibility, to be a model for others to follow. Some people are able to do this now, others can grow into leadership with practice and encouragement. But to view everyone as a potential leader helps us look at people differently, with more confidence and respect.
- *Each of us has a deep longing to see things right in the world.* All human beings have seen injustice, cruelty, and humans hurting other humans. When we were small children, we were usually powerless to stop it, though we knew inside it was wrong. Some humans have been hurt so severely that they grow up to repeat what was done to them, passing on the mistreatment. But scratch the surface of the hardened person, or the powerless person and you will find inside a human being who cares, and would like the world to be a better place.
- *A good leader takes responsibility to see to it that things go right.* To go right for oneself, one's family, the program, and the community and world around. Taking this kind of responsibility brings a good leader power and influence, but these are not ends in themselves.
- *There is an infinite need for good leaders.* In order to effectively tackle all the challenges facing humanity, large and small, probably the single most important task is to develop strong, ethical, good leadership at all levels of society at the fastest possible rate. The old saying that too many cooks spoil the broth, applied to a group, usually means that the group's goals are too narrow and need to be expanded to allow the members to contribute at higher level.
- *Good leaders root their actions in love.* They care about people and issues. They lead with a clear head and an open heart. They are not angry, vindictive, opportunistic, or self-centered in their leadership.

- *Leadership is transformative at its best.* In order to bring about a transformation in the world we need more than piecemeal reforms, which can be wiped away by the next government. What is needed is to develop leaders who help bring about a permanent change in people's attitudes in which they come to care for each other and the earth more than about their own personal power, profit, prestige, or pleasure. And to develop these kinds of leaders at the fastest possible rate.

What An Effective Leader Does

- *Elicits the best thinking of the group, synthesizes ideas, and helps find the key issue.* By listening well, encouraging participation, welcoming ideas, stopping attacks, appreciating people, setting a positive tone.
- *Is absolutely reliable.* A good leader does what she says she will do.
- *Builds unity.* A good leader builds cohesion among the group members and between the group and other parts of the program, agency, or community.
- *Guides the development of good policy.* A good leader helps the members develop policy which benefits the greatest good, and opposes interest group politics.
- *Offers proposals but never complains.* A good leader thinks about what needs to happen next to keep things moving forward and decides not to get stuck in criticizing or complaining. A good leader offers positive, human solutions to the challenges facing us.
- *Counters negative attitudes.* A good leader counteracts widespread despair, fear, and feelings of powerlessness with an attitude of optimism, confidence, and determination.
- *Guides group functioning.* A good leader keeps an eye on how the group functions together, eases tensions, sees to it that people are respecting each other and even getting close to one another, sets a positive, appreciate tone.
- *Thinks about each member of the group.* A leader has three responsibilities towards the individuals in the group. One is to always keep the person's humanness in view, to never forget how essentially caring and competent she or he is, how they are doing the very best they can, given everything, and deserves complete support and approval as a person. The second is to be clear about where their distress interferes with their functioning and to give them some deft assistance wherever possible. The ways each of us has been hurt in life has left its scars on our behavior, attitudes, and thinking. The third is to be a model of the kind of leader you want them to be. Whether you like it or not, people are watching you and learning from your modeling. Make sure it is what you want them to learn.
- *Thinks about the group's goals.* You keep your "eyes on the prize", keep the purpose clearly in view, steer the group away from appealing sidetracks, set policies which move things ahead, etc.

- *Uses good group process.*: Uses democratic, consensus decision-making; defines clear and realistic goals; maximizes participation; resolves conflicts among group members; helps create group cohesion and mutual support.
- *Develops other leaders.* A good leader thinks about the leadership development of others in the group, finds ways of increasing the responsibility that others take, and essentially prepares others to do the job he or she is doing. Part of this is knowing when not to be the leader.
- *Opposes corruption.* A good leader doesn't lie, use the position for immoral or illegal purposes, and keeps high ethical standards for the group.
- *Remains accountable to the group.* A good leader remembers to communicate openly and regularly with the members of the group and the larger community, does not get isolated, is open to criticism and correction.
- *Furnishes confidence.* A good leader communicates confidence that "we can succeed", counters cynicism and discouragement with a positive attitude, finds the silver lining in the darkest clouds.
- *Acts as a good role model.* Inspires respect and confidence, shows sound moral judgment, treats people the way he or she wants to be treated.

Some Key Things a Good Leader Needs to Learn

- *How to overcome the internal obstacles to more effective leadership.* Most leaders have had hurtful experiences which interfere with being able to function fully as a good leader. We have picked up bad habits, wrong information, and distorted ideas about ourselves and others which get in our way. The biggest obstacles are feelings of powerless, insecurity, lack of confidence, fear of all sorts, inappropriate anger, feelings of not being good enough (or smart enough or strong enough or loved enough, etc.), and scars from internalized oppression because of racism or sexism or classism or adultism or any other kind of systematic ism. Ideally, a good leader will learn how to heal from the effects of such past hurts in order to become more effective.
- *How to use good group process skills.* To get a group to do almost anything, they will have to have meetings. By using good group process, a leader can greatly facilitate group unity, goals, and success, along with the development of the individual members. These process skills include: how to plan an agenda, lead a meeting, maximize participation, elicit best thinking, appreciate members, get good results, guide decision-making, resolve differences, and develop new leadership.
- *How to understand the reality of people of different backgrounds.* Most groups have in it people of different backgrounds, whether it is male and female, different racial or cultural groups, or different ages. The habits, perspectives, and hurts from these different backgrounds will often show up in a group. To build group cohesion, it helps a good leader (and the group) to understand how oppression in general works, and to set up situations

where people from the different backgrounds can tell each other what their experience has been: what they like about being from their group, what has been hard about it, how they have been mistreated, misunderstood, or disrespected for being from that group, and how they would like others to treat them and their people.

- *How this group or program or project fits into the larger society.* Even the smallest of goals exists in a bigger context. It is helpful for a good leader to have an ever-enlarging picture of the world. For example, who are community people most likely to help and hinder the project; what are the government and agency structures that might affect the project; where are the sources of funding and other support, how do alliances get built, what are the economic and political trends to be aware of, etc.
- *How to deal with attacks on leadership.* Most visible leaders are vulnerable to being attacked or criticized by people inside or outside the group. It can be key for a leader to understand the nature of different attacks and how to deal with them.
- *How to nurture oneself and the group members.* A good leader needs to learn how build support for herself or himself in the leadership role. He or she needs to learn how not to isolate himself or herself, how to communicate well with both the group members and those key people outside the group, how to not overwork to the point of burn-out, how to rest deeply, share responsibility, and be close with people.

Habits Incompatible With Good Leadership

Old attitudes and habits which *do not* help us be effective leaders include:

- martyrdom--sacrificing ourselves for the cause, or the good of the group;
- overworking--thinking there is virtue in being exhausted or burnt-out;
- doing it alone--not expecting or asking for support;
- having long, joyless meetings--because that's "just the way it is";
- communicating that "leadership is hard"--we need to communicate the joys of leading.

Rewards Of Leadership

The rewards of being a leader are many. You get the satisfaction of deciding things, of making things go right. Taking on the challenges of leading helps one's own development. You get to associate with other leaders. It is easier to lead than to follow an ineffective leader. You get to be a spokesperson. You get to tackle situations that force you to grow. You get to help others become leaders. You get the respect of the group members. You get to have influence over events. You get the chance to care about people and the community in a larger way.

*These ideas are distilled from many sources impossible to separate out, but notable among them are Harvey Jackins, founder of Re-evaluation Counseling, Dorothy Stoneman, founder of YouthBuild USA, and decades of my experience working on youth leadership development in two national youth organizations, Children of War and YouthBuild.