

Small “L” Leadership

Creating Initiative, Responsibility and Innovation At Every Level Of The Organization

By

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This is the eleventh article of a 12 part series entitled “Building Effective Organizations” in which we will discuss some of the challenges facing your organization today and explore strategies and approaches that may be useful in dealing with those issues. Throughout these articles we will explore some of the key management tasks that comprise the implementation of an organizational vision and which help create a responsive, community-oriented agency. In this installment we will explore how to build leadership capabilities at all levels of your organization. Today’s organizations require all employees to be leaders and take initiative and responsibility for meeting organizational goals.

There is no doubt that a great many non-profit, social service organizations are finding themselves in difficult times because as demands for their services increase they are, at the same time, under tremendous pressure to make do with a stagnant, or shrinking resource base. Currently, there appears to be little political, economic or social will to more completely fund our social safety net and so it is likely these trends will continue to impact our organizations for some time. These demands will call for us to respond in imaginative and unique ways and to realize above all else, our greatest creativity and therefore our best chance of success, comes from our people.

Innovation is the application of creativity and the “capital” necessary for innovation is most likely to be found in our organization in human form. Innovation comes from people who are not afraid to see problems as a personal challenge, take ownership for finding solutions and are willing to run the risk of failure. These behaviours are ones that we usually associate with good leaders but the truth is that we now need these attitudes and actions from a greater number of our people in order for us to survive. Today’s challenges forces us to examine our traditional concepts of leadership and realize that we are, to a large part, still operating with a traditional, out-dated concepts of leadership.

When thinking about the role of leadership in your organization, you might pose the following questions to yourself:

1. Does our organization have a plan for leadership growth that keeps pace with the demand for our services? Who is being developed and groomed?
2. Do we have a plan in place to fill the gaps and do we have a plan that will allow current employees to step up to the plate to fill those positions?
3. Do we have an objective plan in place to develop our future leadership?

4. Is our leadership meeting our strategic needs?
5. Do we have enough bench strength that allows us to be innovative?

Old leadership was a top down activity, and because it was formal and often came with impressive titles, it can be called “Big L” leadership. It was the domain of a select few at the top of the organization who made all the decisions and handed down instructions ‘from on high’. But, being quick enough and creative enough to meet tomorrow’s challenges will require that we expand upon our current leadership capabilities and demand leadership from those who traditionally were not expected to undertake such roles. We need to expand our vision of organizational leadership and realize that today leadership needs to be a requisite part of everybody’s skill set. We need to actively and purposefully develop the leadership capabilities of every employee in ways that deepen and strength our organization’s capacity for creativity and innovation.

“Small L” leadership is a kind of leadership that found throughout the organization and resides at all levels of the organization. It is demonstrated in common everyday tasks and unlike other forms of leadership has the potential to give us sustained effectiveness. People do not need a formal title or specific role to practice “small L” leadership, it is found through in concrete behaviours of employees at every level of the organization and it percolates up from the grass roots. “Small L” leaders are characterized by a/an:

1. Strong concept of who they are
2. Clear understanding of the importance of their job and how they “fit” into the organization
3. Commitment to clear and productive communication with co-workers and others with whom they interact
4. Willingness to go beyond their job descriptions
5. Realization that they are a big part of the organizational team and directly contribute to the success of everyone
6. Open acceptance of workplace diversity
7. Competence in both the technical and interpersonal skills required in their jobs
8. Commitment to better relations with co-workers
9. Strength to withstand inappropriate peer pressure and group-think
10. Understanding that personal growth leads to organizational growth
11. Willingness to listen to constructive feedback and an overall positive regard for others
12. Dedication to continually raising the bar for themselves and the team
13. Willing to push themselves out of their comfort zones

14. Genuine interest in both people and things
15. Willing to undertake the hard work to develop good relationship with all types of people
16. Desire to balance both their work and personal lives so that both flourish

It is in such everyday actions that real leadership takes root and allows responsibility and learning to spread like wildfire throughout the organization. Such characteristics populate our organizations with proactive, capable people who are unafraid to take the initiative for getting things done.

Organizational leaders must realize that each and every one of these characteristics is learned and can be taught by the organization to committed employees. However, the organization needs to, through its managers, pay attention to the concerns of development needs of its people. In addition, managers need to help their people see the problems facing the team differently by providing the current contextual realities for workers and then arose, excite and inspire them to put out extra effort to attain ever-changing goals. But, “small L” leadership is not about trying to get your people to work harder, chances are most of them are already working as hard as they can, but it’s a matter of ensuring they are doing what the organization needs them to do and accepting responsibility for getting it done.

But, such behaviours will only grow in an environment fertile to their development and senior organizational leaders need to build an environment that provides employees with the incentive to become “small L” leaders. Senior managers need to:

- Set clear expectations for every employee
- Help build a better understanding of both individual and team roles
- Provide opportunities for involvement and making decisions
- Give continuous support, encouragement and direction
- Offer regular feedback
- Award suitable recognition and reward
- Develop a work environment that facilitates growth and responsibility

By serving people’s fundamental needs for recognition and praise, relentlessly pushing people to improve, valuing and supporting them while they do it organizations can create an organizational environment that can create deep bench strength in your team’s leadership capabilities. But realize, that maintaining such an environment is a never-ending process.

“Small L” leadership is about realizing that senior management’s ideas and knowledge are not enough to competently guide the organization today and that the organization needs to focus more purposefully on developing new style leaders that are unafraid of challenges, risk or responsibility. “Small L” leaders get it done today because they don’t waste a lot of valuable time awaiting instructions or afraid to show initiative. They feel confident in stepping up to the plate because they know what the team needs and what they are capable of. Such people also make it easy to manage promotions and organizational restructuring when they become necessary because there are plenty of people ready, willing and able to formally lead when the time comes. With “small L” leaders your capabilities expand like those of an iceberg that has much of its mass hidden underwater. Your organization has a huge reserve of leadership capabilities just under the service that you can bring to bear on problems, challenges and solutions as they arise.

In the next article we will examine the nature of organizational change and how senior leaders can better structure major change initiative by understanding the nature of change and the accompanying dynamics of transition.

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