

2001

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### Recommended Citation

Nunes, Christopher and Baker, Robert E. (2001) "Leadership in the Leisure Service Organization: Techniques for Individual and Organizational Improvement," *Visions in Leisure and Business*: Vol. 20 : No. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions/vol20/iss2/2>

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**LEADERSHIP IN THE LEISURE SERVICE ORGANIZATION: TECHNIQUES FOR  
INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL IMPROVEMENT**

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**ABSTRACT**

In the past 20 years, leadership has been a topic of much debate and inquiry due to social and economic conditions that have faced the provision of leisure services. Leisure service organizations have seen their workforce reduced, have had to do "more with less", and have had an increased role in non-mission related activities (23). In order to be effective and build organization and individual improvement the leader must focus on self-improvement, modeling successful behaviors on an internal and external basis, building successful personal relationships with followers, developing positive communication methods, maintaining effective conflict resolution techniques, building collaborative agreements, maintaining a pursuit of excellence and identifying successful motivation techniques. This article presents techniques of leadership that can be applied to leaders at all levels of a leisure service organization.

In the past 20 years, leadership has been a topic of much debate and inquiry due to social and economic conditions that have faced the provision of leisure services. Leisure service organizations have seen their

workforce reduced, have had to do "more with less", and have had seen an increased role in non-mission related activities (23). In response to this situation an abundance of information has been disseminated through professional and popular literature, conference presentations, and in-service seminars about the concept of leadership. Although, there is a wealth of information on the topic, the concept is still often misunderstood by leaders of the leisure service delivery system. The general difficulty with the terminology and concepts behind leadership is not new to the profession. Rodney and Toalson (46, p. 86.) wrote that leadership "is a popular word that is surrounded by myths and misconceptions". The purpose of this article is to provide the leader techniques with which they can improve individual and organizational leadership. "Redesigning leadership structures, processes and capabilities is not easy, but can result in significant benefits through greater organizational alignment and focus on key strategic goals" (47, p. 19).

The information presented is significant because there is a general shortage of leaders, and it is forecasted that when those individuals who are currently being trained and

developed are called upon, they will not be prepared to lead (57). By utilizing techniques that are supported through research and practice, current and future leaders will be more prepared to affect personal and organizational improvement.

The leisure service delivery system include recreation and related organizations that share the broad responsibility for the provision of recreation, park, leisure, and sport programs, services and facilities for the public at large (33). Within this system there are three classifications: public/governmental operated, non-profit, and commercial (60). Recreation and leisure services are delivered through ten sponsoring organizations: governmental (federal, state, municipal, tribal), non profit community organizations, commercial recreation businesses, employee service and recreation programs, armed forces moral welfare and recreation, private membership organizations, campus recreation programs, therapeutic recreation services, sports management organizations, tourism and the hospitality industry (33). Within the leisure delivery system, leaders have a variety of key responsibilities. The responsibilities include: maintaining positive relations with other recreation and leisure service providers, establishing a consistent set of rules for the staff and community, serving as a spokesperson for recreation and leisure, demonstrating a high level of commitment to the profession, facilitating communication about management philosophy, training staff, developing performance objectives, and responding to changing social conditions (34). Although these responsibilities are essential in carrying out the vital mission and goals of the leisure organizations, individual and organizational improvement is not highlighted as a key responsibility. Therefore, it is necessary that leadership, and how it relates to

overall improvement in the leisure service organization, be examined.

## **SELF-IMPROVEMENT**

Individuals who choose to develop through a variety of self-improvement exercises and activities can be called a leader. Those who do not strive or realize the importance of self-improvement have not taken the first step towards individual and organization effectiveness, nor leadership. A leader who does not consistently update their knowledge and skills will realize the depreciation of their technical, conceptual and human relation skills (28, 32). Self improvement cannot be viewed as a once a year occurrence; it must be committed to on a daily basis. The real test of a leader is to maintain a high level of performance when and individual is bored or frustrated by the work situation and environment (1). Even during these times it is critical that the leader focus on self-improvement. Wellins and Byham (57), report that support for successful organizational practices, such as self-improvement, must come from the top. Leaders need to "champion leadership development" (57). Regardless of the type of organization, the leader is a role model for the behavior of those in their charge (10).

The leisure service leader must continually develop themselves and not rest on past achievements. When past successes are relied on as a method of leadership, the individual may fall into disrespect with their staff, organization, and patrons. Effective leaders love to learn and are driven to make a difference (24). When the leader is focused on continual development of their skills and abilities, the seed for personal and organizational improvement is planted.

Self-improvement cannot be a one-time investment, but is a continuous act (25). One method in which a leader can make a commitment to self-improvement and development is to construct an individual professional development plan. An individual professional development plan is a system that allows employees to set development goals in conjunction with an organization's needs.

Included in the development plan are educational and training needs required to meet goals that are set up in the plan (30). These educational and training needs may be partially met by attending annual state, regional and national conferences, conducting presentations, reading professional literature, and/or staying on top of current trends (5).

One of the more recent movements that has spread across many Fortune 500 companies is to improve leadership abilities through personal coaching. Personal coaching involves building a one on one relationship with a coach or psychotherapist. The coach allows the leader to identify elements in the organizational environment that are being neglected. Due to the hectic nature of business, often times this coaching can be facilitated over the internet through electronic mail (8). One final self-improvement method is called self-quieting. Self-quieting involves spending 15 to 20 minutes relaxing and directing energies inward. This allows the leader to cut away from the stressful work realm and focus on relaxation (58). If the leader relaxes, new energy is created which will allow the leader to more effectively guide the organization towards its goals and objectives. Through the use of these techniques the leader demonstrates a commitment to self-improvement.

## **MODELING AND BENCHMARKING**

As part of the reflective nature of self-improvement, a leader can look to the con-

cepts of modeling and benchmarking as methods of improving their individual and organizational leadership. Benchmarking is defined by Kraus and Curtis (34, p. 44) as "the continuous process of measuring products, services, and practices, against an organizations' strongest competitor and those recognized as industry leaders". Benchmarking can also be accomplished through replicating practices that have been already successful within the company (7). By either definition, the emphasis is to analyze the best practices in business and industry and to incorporate them into daily practice. When the best practices are incorporated, the leisure service organization will benefit from improved programs and services.

When conducting a benchmark assessment for a leisure service organization there are several areas in which to research. "A quality evaluation of a service should begin by identifying the targets of quality evaluations- breaking down the service into smaller discrete and distinct elements and assessing the targets in terms of consumer and human service components" (13, p. 1). Some common programmatic and administrative elements that span across the leisure service delivery system can include: marketing techniques, facility operation, aquatic program management, recruitment and retention practices of clients, employees or volunteers, and quality assurance methods. Once the processes have been identified and improved through the use of benchmarking, the leader has given the organization a new operational paradigm. The leader must expect that this paradigm be adhered to, and give the tools necessary to carry out the new operational structure (47).

When looking internally to benchmark the leader should first examine their human relation skills. These skills can include understanding group dynamics, facilitating coop-

eration, trust building, communication practices, motivation techniques, and conflict resolution (28). These skills are important to benchmark due to the fact that they are critical in establishing relationships between the leader and follower. Other skills to benchmark are the leaders technical skills (programming and management techniques) and conceptual skills (critical thinking and problem solving) (28). In order to incorporate the attributes that have made others successful, the leader should examine top performers in their segment of the leisure service delivery system, as well as those across the system and in non-related fields. For example, public parks and recreation leaders should not only examine fellow public recreation professionals, but also examine models of success in the fields of armed forces, tourism, sports management and commercial recreation. Although benchmarking is a very popular method of improvement for both the leader and organization, the fast pace of the current marketplace makes copying an example a high-risk strategy (39). What is being currently being done at one organization is a result of months and years of research. By the time the benchmarking organization implements the adapted system, the marketplace will most likely have changed. It is therefore imperative that benchmarking be used as one component of individual and organizational improvement

### **PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND POWER**

Power is defined as the "latent ability to influence others actions, thoughts or emotions. It is the potential to get people to do things they way you want them done" (40, p. 379). Leaders in leisure service organizations need to recognize that there are many different types of leader power that are used in leader-

follower relationships. French and Raven (22) were among the first to identify the types and constructs of power and their relationship to organizational behavior. They identified five bases of power that include: reward, coercive, legitimate, referent and expert. There are other types of power that include: ideas, rational disclosure, leader reputation, prestige, personality, purpose, status, content of message, interpersonal and group skills, gender, race, religion among others (17, p. 13).

In order to maximize leadership, interpersonal power must be comprehended. A hallmark of a good leader is that they ascertain a relationship with all members of the organization. To develop a relationship with members, a leader needs to know information that goes beyond an individuals personnel file. This information can include knowing an individual's hobbies, personal and professional goals and any special interests. "People do not care how much you know, until they know how much you care" (39, p. 103).

There are many methods in which a leader of a leisure service organization can accomplish developing relationships. A leader can develop relationship with followers through having an open door policy, managing by walking around, and empathetic listening. "A recreation leader who allows for individual consideration makes each person genuinely feel special" (28, p. 56). When a leader knows the individual on both a personal and professional basis, they will be more inclined to go beyond expectations for the leader.

While connecting to organizational members, a leader needs to effectively balance personal and professional relationships. An unprofessional relationship, "can detract from the authority of superiors or result in,

or reasonably create the appearance of favoritism, misuse of office or position, or the abandonment of organizational goals for personal interests" (29, p. 1). Activities that can be deemed too personal can include dating, frequent socializing, borrowing money, and sharing living accommodations.

One person may not see any wrong doing with the relationship, while others see it to be unprofessional (29). When a relationship goes beyond professional, the leader may not be able to effectively evaluate the individual. By blending the roles of friend and leader, serious ethical questions concerning professional judgement exists (21).

## COMMUNICATION

It is estimated that leaders spend roughly three-quarters of their time communicating (35). With that considerable amount of time being spent on communication, the leader must have a detailed understanding of the concept and practices of effective communication. Although the leader may know how to effectively communicate, they often revert to their background experiences of how they were communicated to (35). Johnson (27) urges leaders to reflect deeply and deliberately on the content and their style of their communication. Only through an explicit analysis of a leader's communication practice can these practices leadership be improved. After all, communication only happens when the message's point is delivered (21).

To establish an effective communication style and practice the components of communication must be identified. Anshel (2) identified several components of an effective communication process that included transmitting clear and appropriate messages, reducing extraneous distractions, responding to feedback, selecting the correct channel,

and actively listening. This process is perpetual, and an individual can be communicating even when the leader is not cognizant about the message being delivered. It is estimated that between 60% and 75% of what is communicated is through non-verbal channels (10). This can take place through your personal appearance, actions, body language, pitch, tone, rate, inflection, emotion, volume, silences and pauses (28). The final component of the communication process is the people, environment and circumstances. The most effective messages are those that "...are simple and direct and can serve as a battle cry of sorts for people across all organizational levels" (11, p. 89).

In order for a leader to change their approach to communication, the first step is to set up clear and defined objectives for the message (29). Once goals and objectives for the message are set, Laud, (35) suggests changing a leader's style of communication involves four phases. These phases include developing an awareness of the role of communication, discovering how unconscious communication interfered, reflectively formulating new approaches to communication, and honing and entrenching these new approaches until they become reflective and natural. Leaders of leisure service organizations must continually reflect on the approach to ensure that they are becoming effective communicator's (27). When leaders are committed to continually developing their communication processes, they are making communication a habit (44). By making the evaluation of a leader's communication process a habit, it is hoped that a reduction of problems related to communication, such as the misunderstanding of roles and responsibilities, uncertainty of goals, and unknown expectations, will be realized.

## CHANGE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Leisure service organizations are not unlike other organizations from across disciplines when operational change is warranted. When change is deemed necessary, the leader often faces the human tendency to want to conserve the existing culture, which is referred to as "cultural persistence" or inertia (53, p.66). The change in normal *modus operandi* for an individual is difficult to forgo due to personal and professional investment. "The greatest difficulty in the world is not for people to accept new ideas, but to make them forget about old ideas" (43, p. 78). Culture has an addictive quality, perhaps because cultural members are aware that cultural components cannot be altered without affecting other cherished values and institutions. This culture is a way of describing an organization's internal world, a way in which organizations are differentiated (53).

The current attitude towards the change of culture is a direct consequence the social changes taking place in society. Leisure services are being affected by change from multiple sources such as increased legislation and policies, advocacy by the consumer and the reduction of resources by governmental agencies (26). Other changes include the increasing role of women in the workplace, followers having multiple roles (mother, head of household, volunteer), and the consumer as vigilante (45).

When organization change is warranted there is often resentment to the change by the organization's members. Many times this resentment turns into cynicism against the organization and those in charge. Wanous, Reichers, and Austin (56, p. 135) define cynicism "as a construct that has two elements: a pessimistic outlook for success-

ful change, and blame placed on 'those responsible' for lacking the motivation and or the ability to effect successful change". In order to address cynicism and organization change, the leader should focus on the components of pessimism and dispositional attributions (53). To address pessimism, all operational change that is deemed necessary should be communicated. In regards to dispositional attributions, the members of the organization need to be more involved with the change process, so that the change is not viewed as unexpected (53).

A leisure service organization will ultimately have to face change whether it is from social changes or faulty internal organizational elements. This change can result in conflict between the leader and organization. The leader must show some consideration to those affected by the change, yet clarify for the need for the change (47). The need for the change could be a result of inconsistencies in communication, leadership, motivation, decision-making, group dynamics, task interdependence, scarce resources, goal incompatibility, and poorly designed reward system (48).

The most effective leaders can use the perceived negative circumstances of conflict to produce positive outcomes. When a minimal amount of operational and organizational change is warranted, opening up the lines of communication can be an effective manner to see that both the leader's and follower's needs are being met. When the conflict reaches an intensified level more structured techniques such as mediation or conflict management can be utilized. This conflict may appear to be detrimental but it can allow the leisure service organization to examine self-concepts, produce evidence to support varying positions, enhance morale and cohesion, stimulate creativity and innovation, and devise resolutions that promote

group identity and harmony (28, 48). Successfully identifying strategies for conflict resolution, is an important step in meeting organizational goals (37). Dealing with conflict in a "mature, respectful and open manner" can improve communication within the organization (55), and improve rather than reduce group effectiveness (36).

## COLLABORATION

As a result of the many social changes that have effected leisure service organizations, collaboration has become a more important tactic for leaders to embrace. Although individuals are an essential component to the success of a leisure agency, they cannot achieve the same results as a collaborative effort. Collaboration is defined as the process in which individuals or organizations work together to meet goals (28). Another definition includes pooling resources by two individuals to solve a problem that neither can solve individually (54). No matter the definition, collaboration relies on two organizations working together to find a solution.

Within leisure service organizations collaboration is needed due to the increasingly tighter budgets, downsized organizations, and increased competition for the leisure dollar (41). Over the past two to three decades "... there has been a continuous increase in partnerships between organizations to better meet the needs of the participants" (15, p. 4). Collaborations allow both individuals and organizations to draw on each other's creative energy and financial resources to benefit one another (54). The benefits of collaboration for a leisure service organization include streamlining of services, increasing quality, flexibility, increasing credibility and visibility of all involved, and developing networking opportunities,

which far outweigh the time and energy that is consumed in organizing the partnership (41, 59).

Although the benefits of collaboration are known, it is a very delicate process to gain the full impact of collaboration for both individuals and organizations. The leisure service organization must realize that an increased effort in the area of collaboration will result in the leader and organization receiving new and innovative ideas from partnering organizations in the areas of programming, administration and service delivery. To obtain the benefits, members of the collaborative mix must not identify themselves as individuals but as team members. These team members must have individual skills (technical expertise, problem solving and interpersonal skills) and operate within the context of a single mission (36). When members of the team act as individuals the singular mission is then jeopardized.

Many times the literature refers to collaboration on an external organizational basis, (15, 36, 41, 54) but neglects to focus on the positive benefits of collaboration made by individuals on an internal organizational basis. To form collaborative agreements internally, the leisure service leader must work within the organization, and other departments within the overall leisure organization, to encourage team building, foster open and honest communication, and clarify roles and responsibilities. When collaborative efforts require working with external agencies the organization can organize cooperative programs, partnerships, coalitions, and alliances with organizations that have complementary missions such as community and non-profit recreation agencies, commercial recreation enterprises and tourism providers, and armed forces recreation services and other federal government providers of recreation.

## PERFECTION VERSUS EXCELLENCE

Perfection in the leisure service organization is often viewed as the ultimate goal for an individual or organization. Babbio (4) identified perfection as one of the six keys for success to operate in the new global marketplace. In the manufacturing community, the concept of Six Sigma has been bantered around for the past two decades. Six Sigma is an organizational paradigm that focuses on perfection in the product and process (42). In leisure service organizations, the leader often demands perfection in facility management, resource allocation, strategic planning, and other areas on leisure service administration and programming. By exerting the highly aloof goal of perfection, leaders have a tendency to stifle creativity. Creativity is stifled because the focus is on perfection. "When we try to be perfect, we over focus on one thing and do not allow room into our minds for new thoughts or concepts" (52, p. 8). There is a monumental difference between the manufacturing and business community and leisure service organizations. While the manufacturing and business community produces goods that are then consumed, the leisure service is produced and consumed at the same time. To focus on perfection in leisure service organizations would divorce the human element in leisure and recreation.

While perfection can be achieved from time to time, the leader of a leisure service organization should strive to focus on the pursuit of excellence. In order for the pursuit of excellence to become an organizational norm, the leader must live this ethic (14). This ethic can be manifested through six leadership behaviors: continuous improvement, commitment to creativity, customer focus, commitment to continuous learning,

empowerment, and a focus on the facts (16). Crulmey, (14) added that if excellence is to become the new paradigm, then excellence begins with the way people are treated. When people are developed through additional training and education, their skills and self-confidence are developed. This quest for personal excellence will result in excellence being delivered to the organization.

A leader, who demands excellence from their employees or followers, normally receives this high level of performance. To strive for perfection is potentially caustic, but all employees or followers can achieve the process of excellence. If the operational norm is perfection, the knowledge, skill and ability level of the followers is not expanded. Those individuals who are motivated by perfection operate in an environment of control, where lack of it can cause low levels of productivity, and the individual has the tendency to have tunnel vision (20, 51). The modern day leader cannot work in an environment of control and tunnel vision. Today's leader must focus on a team attitude, long and short term planning, and conceptual thought processes.

For the leader and their followers to reach a consistent level of excellence, a mutual agreement of reaching beyond expectations and venturing beyond the safety nets and traditions should be realized. "Our most beloved products were developed by hunch guesswork and fanaticism by creators who were eccentric or even stark raving mad" (43, p. 358). If the operational norm is perfection, the leisure service leader does not allow any time for speculation. Without speculation programs and services offered by leisure organizations would become stagnant, outdated, and lifeless.

## MOTIVATION

The final technique for individual and organizational improvement is a thorough study of motivation and how it relates to leadership. Zahra and Calvasina (61) cite motivation as the "singular important determinant of individual performance as is a major ingredient of job satisfaction" (p. 23).

Untold dollars are lost annually due to unmotivated employees and followers. To combat this loss, business and industry spend resources hiring individuals to motivate their employees through presentations and workshops. This is a short-term solution as the presentations are often filled with buzzwords, quick fixes and the speaker often does not do more than entertain (62). To effectively motivate followers, a leader must examine each individual's needs and how they related to the overall organization.

A first step in this process is to identify each individual's needs. There have been many different studies and papers on which needs are the most important for the leader to focus their energy. Followers may have needs in areas such as achievement, power, affiliation, autonomy, esteem, safety and security, and equity can serve as motivation for individuals (9). Antonioni (3) suggests that followers have needs in the areas of trust, respect, and participation in decision-making, fairness, and feedback. Throughout the research and literature three of the most effective motivators are trust, respect and caring (3).

In order to focus on trust, respect and caring, the leader should develop a quality relationship, which includes understanding the variety of needs each individual has, with those on staff. All leaders in the organization should commit to relationship building, due to the fact that within a hierarchical system an employee can receive leadership influences

from a number of different sources (31). If all individuals in the upper echelons of the chain of command exude trust, respect and caring, these motivators will transfer to the front lines of the organization.

Trust, respect and caring are needs that are generally demanded by all members of an organization. The leader must develop a plan to meet individual needs that is congruent with the organization and operational goals. The leisure service leader can help the individual establish long and short-term goals and clarify the individual's roles within the organization.

On a larger organizational scale, motivation can be improved through a number of methods. The Personal Motivation Index was developed to determine if work satisfies personal needs. The index has 17 statements in which the follower or employee indicates the level of agreement for each need being met through work. If an individual scores higher than 100, their needs are being met by the work and work environment (6). A second method to improve organizational motivation is to create workplace commandments. By creating a list of workplace commandments, the responsibility of motivation is placed on all individuals and not just the leader. The commandments can include statements on self-respect, respect, fairness, value ideas, integrity, feedback, and service (19). Although these commandments might seem to be buzzwords, if all members of an organization believe and uphold the commandments, the groundwork for the motivation of employees and followers has been established.

## CONCLUSION

The leader of a leisure service organization faces many challenges during daily operation. From planning programs and facilities

to maintaining positive customer relations, a common thread among successful operation of an organization is effective leadership. The above outlined leadership techniques may serve as a catalyst for individual and organization improvement. When these and

other individually identified leadership techniques are committed to and implemented, a new leadership paradigm is created, which enhances the opportunity for individual and organizational success.

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