

From the Servant Leader

Good Leadership Planning

It's Bigger than You and Me!

February 13, 2014

This is bigger than you and me.

A few years ago I was on a nominating committee and asked a great guy to lead a local Cub Scout pack as Cubmaster. Everyone loved this man's enthusiasm, stage presence and humor in being the ringmaster at the monthly pack meetings. He put on quite a show!



The problem that developed later on was that he did all or most of the work himself. Everyone loved the final meeting product, and pitched in on the spot when he asked, so all the kids and parents were happy. He was recognized and treasured for his hard work, and he took his volunteer responsibility quite seriously.

But things were different behind the stage curtain. Because he did not ask for help easily, and thought he could do a job faster or easier himself rather than ask someone else to do it, his workload increased little by little each month. Meanwhile the other parents certainly didn't complain that they had less to do, and they appreciated his work. They were happier and happier each month as they sat on the sidelines. Over a couple of years though, even the best Cubmaster can become fatigued and begin to burn out. He turned to ask others to help and take over for him, and surprise, no one was there. He had moved from being indispensable by his great work to becoming indispensable by being a poor leader.

That's when the death spiral begins of an organization led by a charismatic leader. No one wants to replace Mr. Wonderful because of the inevitable comparison. And no one is trained any longer to step in and step up. So as the charismatic leader moves on, a void is all that remains. In some crisis situations a poor sucker, I mean volunteer will step in and even rebuild a leadership team and procession. Often, unfortunately, the organization simply crumbles.

I hear from conference and council presidents that they are in office, sometimes for many years, because “no one else would do it”. While that may seem to be true, it doesn’t need to be, and should not be that way. One of the first jobs of any leader is to select and train his or her successor. That sounds scary in a business (and maybe other) setting, because who wants the boss or the board to know that someone else can do our job if we can’t? There is some comfort in being indispensable! Just ask those “essential employees” the federal government allowed to work during the shutdown last year, right?

Wise leaders understand that the organization is bigger than themselves and their egos. A true test of any leader is how he or she builds the organization and future leaders into a lasting success well beyond their own tenure. The successor is not always named, but there is a succession plan for selecting, recruiting, appointing or electing the next leader. Even our President and our Pope have such plans!

We can point to Jesus Christ as an example, which come to think of it is usually a good idea! He knew He would not be living with us forever, so he chose twelve apostles to carry on his work and take his teaching across the world. He even selected Peter as the leader. Perhaps this was to keep the in-fighting down or to avoid the “no one else would take it” situation when sometimes, sorry to say, the best person is not the one who volunteers. The apostles naturally begged the Lord to stay with them, and were afraid that no one else could follow Him. While they were correct of course in the specifics of His presence and ministry, He trained them in the lessons they would each need to grow and protect the faith according to His word.

Our Rule has leadership term limits built into it. The wisdom of our founders was that even great leaders need to move on at some point and so should grow the Society through shared leadership experiences with others. Individuals, perhaps each with their own leadership style and personality, can take their turn and do their best possible job for the Society. Then they can advise the next leader, take on other leadership roles, or maybe simply return to everyday Vincentian service.

If the group assumes a leader will always be there, they take no action as a group to groom the next leader. But when a leader either states his/her departure date or announces the next election, a group has the need to rally around itself and start the recruitment and training process. While we often complain about Presidential primaries and elections over their length and scrutiny, the process does work to protect the Republic and the Presidency. Imagine if we simply waited until a President’s departure to get started, or if we took the first volunteer!

Great leaders don’t hand-pick their successors. Instead, they groom several candidates to be suitable for the next election or appointment. The leader’s job is not to be the

King- or Queen-maker, but instead to be the protector of the organization and its long-term success. Some organizations elect a second-in-command with the understanding, but not guarantee that he or she will become the next leader. They then have time to learn the job, understand the current leader's agenda, and get to know all the players and form their own strategies for the future with a proper context. Call it a trial run for the group and the candidate. Both will know that much earlier if the leader job will be a good fit.

If there is no one to take your place, then aren't you failing as a leader? Recruitment and training is always Job One. I call it the Trailways Question: If you are hit by a bus tomorrow, who steps in until the next election or appointment? Every position should have two-deep leadership, optimized with one experienced person and a junior counterpart so the likelihood is reduced of both departing at the same time. This actually makes it more fun!

Let's not rely solely on a succession process involving white smoke. Have a plan.