

A Tall Order

Organizational leaders achieve results through others. Leadership, then, requires vision, self-mastery, action, and a nurturing attitude – which in turn requires humility, great planning, spontaneity, management skills, and courage. That’s a tall order for any one person!

Leadership theory makes for great books and study. Applying all of these principles and living them out is quite another story. The reality can be much harder than expected — an executive role is very demanding. Within a short time, many leaders can find themselves overwhelmed or frustrated. Organizations, with challenging mandates, diverse personnel and interconnected functions, structures and operations, can be very complex.

In fact, organizations can be full of contradictions. By definition, they are driven by missions motivated by core beliefs or values. For example, a social justice organization seeks to help the poor. To accomplish such a daunting task requires good governance and an effective strategic plan, pursued by specialized personnel and executed in a coordinated fashion. But if it is to succeed, that organization cannot override its mandate – it cannot place its structure, staff, plans and processes above the people it is there to serve.

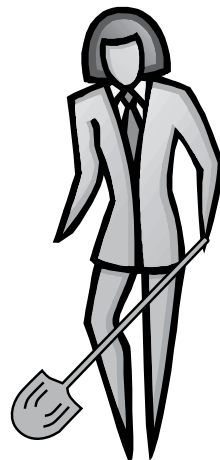
Many organizations find themselves in fundamental conflicts, hindering them from living out their values with integrity. This is particularly true of not-for-profit, human service organizations and government departments, as well as the for-profit sector. After years of attempting great things for their clients, these organizations can find themselves in need. Lacking key resources, they often turn inward, focusing on their own issues, becoming isolated from stakeholders. With time, they can be like an overgrown garden, out-of-control or mired in weeds.

Leaders may not know which specific issues they need to address, and this may create uncertainty within the organization. They may struggle with efficiency, effectiveness or accountability — focusing on their own needs rather than those they exist to serve. Often, they may take an ineffective approach, run out of money, and not know what to do. Or perhaps worse, they settle for mediocrity, continuing on despite doing little good.

Many leaders often perceive the organization's internal challenges. The organization itself may have a reluctant corporate culture, complex bureaucratic policies and procedures, staff and financial shortages, miscommunication, elusive stakeholders and uncaring societies.

Externally, the challenges may be even worse. It's difficult championing a cause in some environments even if everyone agrees on the end goals. Organizations sometimes have lofty goals set in troubling contexts with long-term struggles, such as homelessness or terrorism. As passionate as they may be, few leaders have the combination of gifts, entrepreneurial spirit, connections, resources and experience to pull everyone together to accomplish their organization's goals. This can reduce their capacity to effectively and efficiently address their mandate.

“Leaders are like gardeners who need tools for addressing issues and change in their organizations.”





Capacity
Building

If successful, capacity building addresses these issues head-on. It develops leaders and develops their organizations. It points them in the right direction, shows them how to go forward, and brings them closer to their goals, ultimately fulfilling their cause. When done in the right spirit, with the right goals and the right people, it can address many daunting challenges. It cultivates and equips leaders. It addresses strategic questions inside and outside organizations. Ultimately, it will align the organization's mandate, plan, people and processes.

Another Perspective on Organizations

Organizations are abstract entities, and are hard to get a grip on. It may be helpful to look at organizations in a fresh way.

“We are leaving the age of organized organizations and moving into an era where the ability to understand, facilitate, and encourage processes of self-organization will become a key competence. It's impossible to develop new styles of organization and management while continuing to think in old ways.”

Gareth Morgan

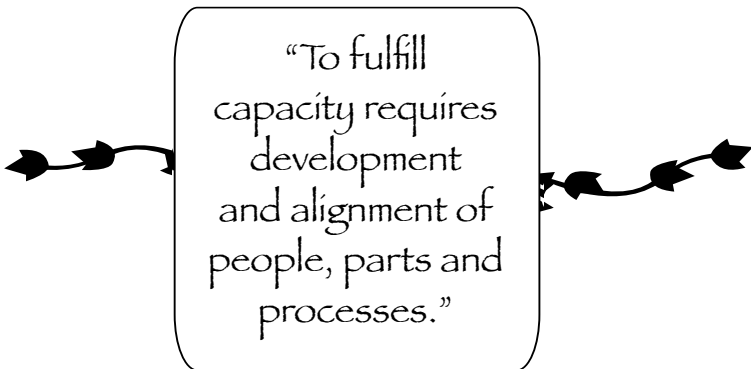
Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization*, suggests that organizations must continually adapt if they are to thrive and survive. One of his main principles is the value of decentralizing leadership in organizations to enhance everyone's productivity. Senge argues that organizations must build capacity at all levels to succeed.

Like a garden, each section of the organization needs to be growing and producing results in a way that adds to the overall envisioned harvest.

People are made of flesh and blood; they find themselves subject to psychological, social, political, and economic forces. An organization cannot simply be built, powered, harnessed and fixed like a machine.

“An organization has no presence beyond that of the people who bring it to life.” Gareth Morgan

Rather than seeing organizations as one realm, like an assembly line, set of relationships or reification of values, the new thinking is that organizations involve a network connecting all of these realms. To fulfill capacity requires development and alignment of people, parts and processes.



The Nurturing Leader

Rather than leading in all areas, nurturing leaders empower others to lead. They stand by their employees and managers - listening and learning as well as guiding.

The nurturing leader is also a great teacher - a trainer. This type of leader is a facilitator, asking key questions to help sort out the team's priorities and thinking things through. Above all, leaders should be advisors, giving cues when asked and needed.

Nurturing leaders equip others to fulfill their mandates. That way, leadership can be multiplied. In order to do that, the leader at times may have to stand back and remain in some ways a third party.

This is perhaps the most powerful secret to being a great leader. Standing by the employees, a leader can help them identify issues as they relate to the organization's mission and vision. This creates the synergy and space that employees need to address their particular issues and reach their full potential.

