



We All Need to Step up to Plate The Evolution of Leadership Thinking

By Mike Stolte

"The only definition of leader is someone who has followers". Peter Drucker, 1995

"There are as many definitions of leadership as there are people." Jan Wright, 2007

Charlton Heston passed away recently. To many, the roles he played in movies - inspired, fierce, decisive, strong, wise, superhuman (or fatally flawed) moral and ethical character - are a throwback to the "great man" and "trait" theories of leadership that dominated at the beginning of the 20th century. Leaders were born, not created. People, in general, were incapable of making wise decisions. We were "blessed" with an elite few who just "knew" better.

In many ways, this theory is comforting. We all want someone to take care of us and look after our interests just like mom and dad did. It doesn't require us to be personally responsible. It allows us off the hook when things go wrong; we can blame incompetency, bad behavior and most importantly, find heroes and scapegoats. It sells papers and inspires movies. Think JFK, Braveheart, and Alexander the Great.

However, research has found this theory to be lacking and wrong in many ways. It also makes us shortsighted in building a strong, diverse and broad leadership base, something communities increasingly need.

"We search for special individuals with leadership potential, rather than developing leadership potential in everyone," laments Peter Senge, one of the truly great thinkers of our time. He believes leadership is about ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

What do we want and admire in our leaders? Thankfully, the highly-respected research team of Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner have come up with the best answer yet surveying more than 20,000 people over more than two decades. We want our leaders to be honest, forward-thinking, inspiring, and competent. Honesty is listed as the number one attribute by 88% of those surveyed.

A growing body of research increasingly recognizes that leadership is most effective when shared amongst many. We now know that leadership can be taught and the skills can be passed on; "Leadership is after all a set of skills. And any skill can be strengthened and honed and enhanced if we have the proper motivation and desire along with practice and feedback, role models and coaching" (Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* 1995).

This new thinking on leadership recognizes that everyone is a leader in some respect. It may be playing a key role in a minor hockey association, in a work environment, or on a parent advisory council. It recognizes and honours the diverse talents and resources of others.

This "shared" leadership creates stronger communities, where people are more open to collaboration. When collaboration works, people feel better about community life. Decisions made through a collaborative process are more solid and lasting. People feel like they are contributing to community life and are more empowered. This environment is more likely to lead to greater trust and respect, building the social capital many experts suggest is the cornerstone of community health and vitality.



We can't all part the Red Sea. Nor can we all win the chariot race or hope to inspire a nation. However, our words, deeds and actions can inspire our children, our friends and our neighbours, something our communities need more than ever these days.

If you pay your taxes and sit back, you are part of a city. If you step in and get involved, you are part of a community, something far richer and more meaningful.

"We are the leaders we have been waiting for." Hopi Elder