

## The Nature of Practical Leadership

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Though much is said about leadership, it is often hard to know what it will mean in practice, as words and deeds may seem plausible at first glance, but be revealed by later events to have been off the mark. Given this ambiguity, it is unavoidable that potential leaders and their proposals will be greeted with skepticism and this doubtfulness may be warranted. The same cannot be said for leaders that have actually been tested by events and have established a track record of impressive results. These are leaders whose words and accomplishments are there to be examined first hand, thereby making it possible to more confidently conclude that they did exercise effective leadership. By working out what they specifically did that ensured a beneficial outcome, it also becomes possible to understand the basis of their success. Though many people may miss the significance, there is great advantage to studying and drawing upon the insight, wisdom and experience of leaders who have actually made a difference in the real world and have something to show for it. These are leaders whose values, example, thinking, methods and priorities are not speculative or untested, but have shown potency and efficacy in the real world in terms of good results. Learning from them is consequently justified, at least within the limitations of their accomplishments. They are, by right of their track record, "practical" leaders.

Practical leaders can be drawn from any walk of life and background, so there is no group in society that is somehow endowed with greater leadership capacity. It is often easy enough for privileged groups and individuals to gain formal roles of leadership. This simply gives them access to institutional authority and resources, but it does not in any way assure that they will actually achieve anything of merit. Actual leadership accomplishments require that beneficial changes be made in the real world and in the case of service to one's fellow human beings, it requires that people lives did genuinely improve for the better. By looking for instances where this has occurred it becomes possible to work out retrospectively what the specific and positive leadership contribution actually was.

In this edition of Crucial Times, a variety of examples of beneficial leadership from a number of countries have been selected because of what had been achieved, but also because of the various types of leadership challenges they successfully addressed and the kind of leadership that was needed to do so.

In the case of Washington State in the United States there has been a sustained effort by a collection of likeminded leaders for several decades or longer to expand the number of people with disabilities who have regular jobs in the community. Prior to the recent deep recession the State of Washington had been able to improve its community employment rate for people with disabilities to 70%. In other words seven out of ten people with disabilities was regularly working in the community on an averaged basis.

A small self-directed home support project supporting aged persons with dementia in Dunedin, New Zealand a highly person centered and empowering small service was able to generate strikingly positive results in the lives

of people by keeping them well supported in their own home and personal lifestyles and networks. Notably, this was done at a cost that was significantly lower than what it would have cost to institutionalize these persons.

The story of SAMS, a long running and innovative New Zealand initiative, allows us to see leadership being expressed in finding ways that service quality issues can be routinely evaluated first hand by service users and families and in which service evaluation can be moved from an auditing model to a developmental model, thereby emphasizing quality enhancement.

Also in New Zealand, in the Auckland region, were several related efforts to ensure that people with a history of persistent mental illness could successfully establish homes and lifestyles of their own design that would make it unnecessary for them to rely upon traditional 24/7 staffed group home living. In the process, these people ended up needing much less staff support and demonstrated that it was better from a recovery viewpoint to place an emphasis on relationship, values and vision and meeting needs normatively.

In Western Australia, a governmental initiative was undertaken, involving many hundreds of people, to develop an overall strategic plan to ensure that as many of the benefits of community living could be made available for the greatest number of persons with disabilities. This eventually resulted in a high level of consensus embodied in strategic plan with a very strong value base in terms of good lives for people in the community.

In each of these examples, we see practical leadership at work in generating beneficial outcomes for people in our communities that are often at risk of social devaluation, marginalization and exclusion i.e. aged persons, persons with mental illness and persons with disabilities as well as the people in their lives, personal networks and communities. These changes manifested at many levels, including at very personal levels as well as agency, systems and community change. It is noteworthy that achieving these changes was, in every instance, complicated and inherently challenging, yet they occurred through the deliberate efforts of people who were committed to getting results.

### **Key Ingredients Of Practical Leadership**

- **The Recognition Of Where Leadership Is Needed**

It is useful to note what the examples outlined in this edition can show us in terms of what constitutes practical leadership. It begins with the recognition, in each instance, that something important needed doing in the world. In several examples we see that this began with unhappiness with what the effects of custodial residential care settings was and would be for people with dementia and persons with mental illness. In another, it was the recognition that if progressive change in governmental strategy were to develop, it would require the building of a community wide consensus on values and direction. Similarly, in Washington State, it was not simply that an emerging consensus was intentionally fostered that regular individualized community employment would be possible for much larger numbers of people with disabilities. The vision extended to the recognition that the challenge was multi-dimensional and would only yield to long term, coordinated and persistent leadership at a variety of levels.

In all instances, the basis for this ability to make an informed determination about what might be needed in the world, did not come about from the thoughts and actions of just one person acting alone, but more typically it involved various forms of collective leadership i.e. individual leaders acting jointly with others. For example, in the instance of the developmental evaluations, service quality was seen as eventually improving, not simply

through the conduct of evaluations, but rather through the process of consciousness raising and discussion about quality that was built into evaluations. In effect, this acted as a catalyst and joined up the efforts of numerous individual staff people interested in quality with the quality agenda of SAMS, thereby magnifying the interest in what was needed.

- **A Willingness To Engage Constructive Proposals For Change**

The world has ample unaddressed problems requiring leadership. What practical leaders do is to meet and engage these problems by constructing, as best as can be managed, proposals that establish a better way forward. Remedying the unemployment and underemployment of people with disabilities is an extensive multi-year and multi-dimensional challenge, as is supporting people with dementia to obtain quality lifestyles. Nonetheless, in both instances a positive way forward was imagined and pursued thereby not leaving the originating problem neglected and unaddressed. The problems were faced “head on” and a constructive antidote was fashioned and implemented. In effect, such leaders took on responsibility for the problem so to be sure that progress would be made.

- **A Willingness To Bear The Costs And Difficulties Of Change**

Avoiding challenging problems can be quite appealing to many, as it typically does not ask anything of them and it can help avoid taking on onerous and demanding responsibilities. It is, however, a surefire recipe for ineffectuality. Little is achieved in the real world until people, especially leaders, are willing to pay the price for change through a decision to take on its inherent costs and burdens. Rarely are these entirely known in advance, but it can be realized very early on that there will be such demands and that meeting them is the only way forward. The whole area of public policy in disability or any other sector is riddled with incipient conflicts, divisions, controversies and vested interests, yet all of these parties and interests will need to be fully engaged if a meaningful and durable consensus on positive strategy is to emerge from the body politic, sufficient for a government to act. It would be easier to not open up such a “can of worms”, but this would come at the price of establishing positive direction. Practical leaders know and accept that everything has a price and that all advances will demand something proportional to the challenge of the leaders involved.

- **Commitment And Perseverance In Getting The Job Done**

Few challenges yield easily. It is the people who are prepared to stay the course and see things through to the end are more likely to succeed than those who lack commitment and perseverance. Those who lack the necessary determination and resolve simply will not withstand the demands that will come with change. We can see that in the example of SAMS which has over a twenty year track record of conducting evaluations, within a still innovative framework, despite many years in which it was not that clear whether SAMS would survive. Similarly, it takes considerable resolve to patiently and respectfully enter into the lives of many people with persistent mental illness and gradually help them as they rebuild their lives. Such commitments are typically open ended enough that there is very little option but to accept that it will require of leadership to do “whatever it takes” with no assurance in advance that good things will prevail.

- **Embracing Realistic Idealism**

It is not very likely that people will improve very much in themselves and the world unless they set some sort of ideal for themselves. These sorts of ideals challenge people and define what is being sought. Normally, this means eventually bringing something into the world that was not there, but is nonetheless needed if people are to benefit and thrive. Ideals, properly pursued, tend to bring out the best in people, as it asks people to do and be better. This is reinforced by the challenge of “imagining better” that is embodied in any process of proposal development for what any needed change should optimally look like. This was at the crux of the exercises to define what the good life could be for people with mental illness or dementia, much as it was in the effort to build a guiding consensus on community living.

However, ideals are not singularly sufficient, as it is important that people be practical enough to make the ideals manifest into real results in daily life. Idealism needs to be coupled with realism in order to manifest its potential. Obviously, seeking to have more people with disabilities employed is praiseworthy, but it is quite another thing to actually get people jobs in practice. Hence, we can see the value of practical idealists taking on leadership challenges.

- **Selecting Strategies That Work**

We live at a time when many people confuse goals and intentions with actual achievements on the ground. However, there is a vast distance between words and deeds and it is always challenging to find the best means to help words become transformed into effective action. A key element in this regard will be whether the leaders involved were careful in their selection of implementation strategies that would largely ensure that the results being sought would be attained in practice. This requires the ability in leaders to be able to discern and distinguish operational strategies that are feasible and effective from those that are not. Intentions are not enough, as the means for actualizing these must work in practice. When people actually obtain real homes of their own and lifestyles that help them thrive, then we can be sure that sound means have been selected, as the results speak for themselves.

- **Magnifying Impact Through Strategic Alliances With Others**

There is a temptation to cast personal leadership into the genre of being due to some sort of exceptional qualities in a few select people. This is not actually consistent with how things get accomplished in the real world, as few people, even those with strikingly above average talent, can get much done unless others cooperate with them. Competence with the art of gaining that necessary cooperation and support is a key feature of practical leaders whether the initiative is large or small, as ensuing that people are “pulling together” will make all challenges that much easier and increase the likelihood of eventual success. It takes all kinds of people acting with similar intent to change service quality and service models. However, if these people are invested in and come to share the same vision, then gaining the ground to get there is made much more achievable.

- **Investing In Renewal And Rebuilding**

All hard challenges will take their toll on the people who commit themselves to achieving them. So, if they have no means available to them to recharge and revitalize their efforts, it is predictable that they will become a spent force. If they can rebuild and renew themselves and their efforts periodically they can fend off the stagnation, fatigue, demoralization and loss of focus and priority that are ever present dangers in terms of moving forward and offsetting decline. The very fact that we see change efforts in Washington State, New Zealand and elsewhere that have maintained their vitality for decades, clearly suggest that renewal and rebuilding strategies had been employed on many occasions in order to achieve such lengthy track records. Practical leaders must be able to sustain ambitious and demanding initiatives and this makes renewal not only desirable, but a necessity.

**Conclusion**

Practical leadership clearly exists and it is always valuable to be alert to its presence and the many valuable things it can reveal to us. This is only possible because those offering such leadership actually did accomplish something important in the world. It is this track record that signals practical leaders from impractical ones and it should be obvious as to which leaders will have the soundest guidance to offer others.