Leadership and Change

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Many of our efforts in achieving good lives for people with disabilities mean that we must deal with change: we have to initiate it, point it in the right direction, survive it, sustain it and, importantly, safeguard it. Change efforts require having enough critical mass of stamina for a long haul even though individual people may need to withdraw for a while to restore energy or attend to pressing personal or family issues. And there are times when a proposed change would have negative implications for people, families or communities. How many change initiatives have been promoted as innovative but a closer analysis has revealed major flaws that would have led to negative or even harmful consequences for vulnerable people? Under these circumstances we need the capacity for discerning flaws and for resisting harmful change. Central to all change efforts, however, is leadership.

One of the leadership challenges is to recognise the different forms that leadership may take. Change efforts need different kinds of leadership that can address the complexities of systems and community. For example, large-scale change occurs over a range of different situations, systems and contexts.

In contrast, some leaders never work in the public arena; they work invisibly, quietly making a difference in the lives of families and vulnerable people. Other leaders make incremental changes over long periods of time. Some leaders work to develop new knowledge or theory that will make a difference, and others work to make opportunities available for innovators.

Most of us carry assumptions about what 'leadership' is. Leadership has become such a gripping subject that it has frightened off many people. Richard Louv, a writer for the San Diego *Tribune*, and author of many books on community life in America, claims that too many of us think that being a leader is a job for someone else; that only celebrities qualify for the position; or that "leaders somehow appear magically – summoned by fate, endowed with charisma, and usually good hair". In many organisations leadership is seen as somehow the same as management. Although good managers need to be good leaders, I would argue that the vast majority of leaders are not managers.

Joseph Rost, an expert on leadership theory, explains that most ideas about leadership reflect the values and assumptions of the industrial model of organising, which dominated the twentieth century. He says that the ideas have been "management oriented, personalistic in focusing only on the leader, goal-achievement-dominated, self-interested and individualistic in outlook, male-oriented [and we would add to that: mostly white], utilitarian and materialistic in ethical perspective, rationalistic, technocratic, linear, quantitative and scientific in language and methodology".

Rost goes on to say that the values and assumptions that leadership needs to reflect upon are "collaboration, common good, global concern, diversity and pluralism in structures and participation, client orientation, civic virtues, freedom of expression in all organizations, critical dialogue, qualitative language and methodologies, substantive justice, and consensus-oriented policy-making process". I think that this describes a more hopeful standpoint. Social movements such as those that strive for a better and fairer world need collaborative and transformative types of leadership. Our understanding of the world is changing rapidly, so searching for alternative approaches to the study of leadership may be in order.

Leadership is often situation specific and this is so for the disability movement. Some people possess great leadership qualities but they haven't been placed in a situation where these qualities can come to the fore. Specific

situations can bring out qualities in people or groups where leadership is called for, and different situations require different kinds of capacities, skills and attributes. In a movement for change, there are many situations across different contexts and time, each calling for its own kind of leadership.

It is important for us to understand that leadership itself needs to be developed. Most people will be familiar with the famous story about Rosa Parks, an African American woman who refused to give up her seat at the front of a bus to a white man. This story is often used as an example of the power of one brave act of leadership, which set off bus boycotts and the civil rights movement in America in the 1950s. Most people assume that, in a moment of indignant resistance, Rosa sat at the front of the bus, which was reserved for whites. What is less well known is that Rosa was not acting on a whim. She had been involved in social justice activities since high school and had spent twelve years leading the local chapter of a national organisation, and just before her bus sit-down she had attended a ten-day session at a training school for leaders in civil rights. Rosa was not a spontaneous leader; she spent long years preparing for the 'fabled moment'. She had been working at the grass roots and was involved in deliberate leadership development over a long period of time.

For those who have been involved in social movements, there is an acute awareness that efforts for change take a long time, and most of the theory and research on change would argue that slow deliberate change is the most sustainable. This is also true for leadership development in change movements; it takes time. While leadership development opportunities are prolific in the business sector, for example, in the disability sector they are patchy at best. (CRU is one organisation that has provided opportunities for leadership development for at least a decade. The most impactful of these are the formal strategic programs for leadership development that they conduct. These efforts and others like them need to be supported if we are to sustain a movement for positive change into the future.)

Nowadays change is so rapid that it sometimes seems we need to be working for stability rather than for more change. As the world becomes more complex and turbulent, efforts for change become more difficult to implement. Followers are more resistant and perhaps less optimistic, and so this too will call for different kinds of leadership, and we will need to time our change efforts to the situation at hand.

The following are some principles that I have gleaned from other leaders I have been privileged to follow, from reading, from teaching others, and from my own modest efforts at leadership.

- Put people first. At the heart of our movement are people with disabilities and families. It is their lives that are ultimately affected by any efforts we make.

- Make sure the values underpinning the change are ones you agree with. Ask: will this work towards a better life for people with disabilities and families?

- Be flexible in approaches and strategy. We will face a range of situations, some of which are new and unknown. We need to be open to different approaches and try another way if needed. Leadership needs creativity and innovation.

- Sustain optimism even when things are bad. This is key in a movement such as ours. We have faced tough times with despair and it is hard to dust off and keep going. Leadership can help sustain optimism.

- Balance caution with optimism. This is related to the previous point. We need to carefully consider what we do before we act.

- Lead by example. It is no good expecting others to do what we are not prepared to do ourselves.

- Work with others. When we need collaborative leadership, we need many others around us.

- Striving to create more inclusive communities will always involve a call for change, and leadership will always play a vital role in bringing about such change.