



CATALYTIC LEADERSHIP

Every month or two, we read the latest book on leadership or organization success and quote it in the office or at cocktail parties. You might hold forth about the basic tenets that have gone viral from some of them – Covey, Welch, Gladwell, Collins. There is something unique in each book, some new method of analysis or a fresh look at leadership. Mostly, however, these books are reminders that leadership is not something that just happens.

This is not a theoretical consideration for chambers and communities. Leadership, both volunteer and executive, is arguably the biggest factor in determining the future of chambers and, by extension, the success of communities.

In *The Coming Jobs War*, Jim Clifton says: “If you were to ask me, ‘From all the data you have studied so far, where will the next economic breakthrough come from?’ my answer would be: *From the combination... of the forces within cities, great universities, and powerful local leaders.* Those three compose the most reliable, controllable solution. Their combined effect is the most predictable solution to America’s biggest current problem, which is winning the global war for good jobs.” The last of these three—powerful local leaders—should get double weighting because it will be the catalyst.

Unfortunately, according to Michael Porter and Jan Rifkin’s recent research, there may be an attitudinal problem that chambers have to address to bring business leaders to the table. They summarize corporate sentiments this way: “I can’t just worry about America, I run a global company, we’re not an American company anymore.” According to Porter, the notion in business that “this is *our* country and we own its challenges has diminished.”

Grow Your Own

Fortunately, Rifkin and Porter see the beginnings of a resurrection of business leaders’ focus on the importance of place and collective purpose. They call it the “business commons.” This is a shared recognition that “. . . a skilled workforce, an educated populace, vibrant local suppliers, basic rule of law” matter to companies as well as to communities. “The good news is, we see a large number of business leaders who recognize the importance of reinvesting [in business commons] at this point.”

“Every city has strong, caring leaders working on numerous committees and initiatives to fuel their local economic growth,” says Clifton. “The feat these leaders have to pull off is doubling their entrepreneurial energy by aligning all their local forces.” That’s where you come in.

Issues related to finding leaders and demonstrating leadership face chamber execs constantly. Time poverty is an issue, but it always has been. Abdication of corporate social responsibility is still an ugly trend in some places. Risk tolerance, distraction, family responsibilities, management transience and volunteer fatigue all affect the ability of a chamber to lead. The struggle for willing and able volunteer leadership is likely to intensify over the next 10 years, even as the need grows. This will make catalytic chamber professional leadership all the more important.

Uncommonly Well

“The secret of success is doing common tasks uncommonly well,” said John D. Rockefeller. Chamber work may not be common, but it isn’t hard to learn the basics. It’s like chess: easy to learn and hard to master. Community leaders have always had staggering levels of focus, commitment to excellence, fiery passion, persistence that rivals Sisyphus, and humble understanding that only the power of a team can yield success. Those qualities, nurtured through professional and volunteer leadership development, will be the secret of success for chambers in 2025, just as it was in 1925.

Successful chambers of the future, whether their main focus is economic development, advocacy, individual business support, promotion, place making, or information dissemination, will all require at least a handful of leaders who exhibit these traits. In perhaps the most dramatic way since the elevation of the Greatest Generation into leadership positions, civic entrepreneurs 10 years from now will crave results because they are comfortable with change and uncomfortable with the status quo.

Prepare and Plan...then Act

While broad-based networks and collaboration will grow in importance, chamber leaders will have less luxury in the future to spend months seeding, fertilizing and watering unanimous decisions about the objectives their organizations and communities must pursue. Robert Grow of Envision Utah notes that in the ever more diverse communities of the future, leaders and leading organizations may have to move forward even when they can only muster “grudging consent, rather than consensus.” Too often in the recent past, chamber leadership seemed willing to wait indefinitely for permission to act. When it comes to chamber and community, leadership is not a feeling or a philosophy. It’s an action.

The ultimate historical example was described at an ACCE Board meeting in Philadelphia in late 2014 when Chairman Tom Baldrige shared the epiphany he had as he walked through Independence Hall. He was struck by the approach and commitment from a small group of self-appointed leaders who met in secrecy 240 years ago to decide the fate of a new nation. They accomplished this monumental world-changer through conflict resolution and negotiation spanning just four months.

Today, a good many chambers, not to mention national associations and governments, can’t move on a modest policy change or event decision without a task force formed by a stand-

ing committee, which had been named by a board, with support documents from consultants that have been examined during a retreat and vetted by a higher power. How can chambers be leaders for our community in 2025 if they cannot change the ways their organizations run today?

Catalytic Leaders

How does a chamber and its leadership become catalytic? It starts when those involved begin to define their vision in terms of *what the organization will be, rather than what it will do*. Then, a vision emerges of the chamber as a change agent for the community/economy. The organization sees itself as an instigator of change, rather than a resource to help people cope with change. The propagation, rather than mere acceptance, of change will be new to many chambers and therefore to their would-be leaders.

ACCE’s Horizon Task Force Chairman David Brown, president and CEO of the Greater Omaha Chamber, said, “Imagine the impact if most of the 7,000 chambers of commerce covering this continent decided that their mission was initiating and sustaining positive change. What an amazing sight that would be!”

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This doesn’t mean that the goals of a membership organization—serving member and investor needs—are not important. *The enterprise and business advancement aspects of chamber work will require agents for change at least as much as the policy and community development sides of the shop.* The business side of the chamber will require leaders who cause change to happen in communications, marketing, program development, event design and direct member support, rather than merely coping with emerging realities.

Intentional and Contemporary

Old systems for strategizing will be too slow to deal with the pace of a wired and volatile world. And the professionals, starting with ►

the CEO, must craft and drive new methods for staying ahead of trends. This leader must be comfortable with the demonstrations of community and business leadership, irrespective of age or experience.

‘Servant leader’ is an effective, often powerful, management style. ‘Leading servant,’ however, is an inadequate self-image. Over the next 10 years, a larger portion of senior staff members in a chamber will learn to comfortably wear the mantle of catalytic leader and then act the part. Or, they may have to clear the way, or provide necessary support for, people who can.

This could be harsh and sudden in some cases. The patience quotient of chamber boards has been shrinking since the onset of the recession (with high rates of CEO turnover). Over the next 10 years, the expectations of communities and company leaders will be greater and the potential for casualties in executive leadership may grow. Likewise, board imposed limitations on executives who seek to be catalytic leaders could drive some of the very best chamber CEOs out of the industry in search of positions in which their change instigator role is valued.

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Since leaders are made not born, it will be necessary for chamber executives and staff teams to learn an array of new skills, while increasing their knowledge of community and policy issues. These skills include the ability to collaborate with organizations of all sizes and agendas, even some that might appear to be at odds with the goals of most chambers. Thinking and planning strategically will be necessary in future decades when the ‘imperative of the immediate’ is more pressing than ever.

Whatcha Got?

The menu of individual qualities and traits of good leadership can be drawn from any of a hundred wonderful leadership books.

Communication, negotiation, ownership, humility—they all will be on full display in a highly functioning chamber in 2025. The more important difference between now and a decade from now is likely to be the mindset as much as the skill set. Again, over the next 10 years, true leaders must accept and embrace the role of catalytic change agent.

Staffs will have to be both better and better led in the future. Every year, the drive for talent within chamber teams is growing, but so is the clamor by staffs for clarity and support from top leaders. Boards will need leadership support and guidance from staffs if expected to travel paths they’ve never walked before. Members are likely to follow the chamber’s leadership only by choice, rather than through feelings of obligation or responsibility.

Define your vision in terms of what the organization will be, rather than what it will do.

Networked

The imperative for what Ted Abernathy calls “networked leadership” will trump traditional hierarchies or pinnacles of authority. The source of strength for both chamber executives and officers in the past may have sprung as much from organizational position (agent of corporate CEOs), as from personal leadership capacity. Both are important, but the more inclusive governance models of today and tomorrow require wider support built on collaboration and trust outside the organization itself. You can’t build that support as an agent alone.

The benefits of intentional and complete orientation of each successive class of chamber directors (beyond governance 101) include more likely success on subsequent networked leadership challenges. Eventually, graduates’ from highly-functioning chamber boards begin to appear in other critical leadership boards around the region.

More than one chamber has made it an unspoken goal to nominate like-minded, economy-focused people in non-profit and quasi-public board positions elsewhere around the community. Others will need to follow that lead in the coming years in ▷

order to create the network of leaders required to advance critical initiatives.

Related to the “networked” leadership imperative is the power of aligned leadership. Alignment is, in many ways, the holy grail of community advancement. When elected officials, bureaucrats, corporate power players, chamber staffs, economic developers, media, non-profits, pastors, minority spokespeople and other “influentials” begin singing from the same hymnal across a region, truly remarkable things can happen. This aligned model has been evident in Oklahoma City as it emerged from declining urban center to dynamic big-league region over a prolonged period. Aligned leadership can be a beautiful thing!

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The Few. The Proud.

The abdication of corporate responsibility for local-civic success, which has been evident in some regions of the country for a decade, may actually reverse course over the next 10 years. Michal Porter notes: “One of the optimistic findings of this [business common] project is the enormous readiness of many in the business community to roll up their sleeves and do things in their communities and companies to make America more competitive.”

Realistically, a chamber needs only a few activist leaders. A handful of fully energized and well-guided private sector leaders will be sufficient because the “fragmentation factor” will create a shortage of effective leaders in most institutions. Put simply, your opponents and competitors won’t have many true leaders either.

And anthropologist Margaret Mead’s famous quote will be as true in 2025 as it was a hundred years earlier: “Never doubt that

a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Out There

Clearly, the kind of leadership described here assumes that the chamber exec not only may be permitted to spend time and energy on non-traditional community issues, but that he or she is *inspired, expected and required to do so*. By 2025, only people who were hired for, or learn to take responsibility for, catalytic, prosperity-focused change are likely to occupy CEO positions in large and mid-size chambers.

In 2025, potential members and investors will have an infinite supply of information, networking opportunities and service providers to choose from outside the chamber. At the same time, when it comes to entities dedicated 100 percent to helping their companies and communities succeed, the choices are extremely limited. Chambers have competition on networking, events, business communications and recognition programs. When it comes to business and community advocacy, place making, and business problem solving, however, they are in a unique position to be of value to these investors, especially when they take on a catalytic leadership mindset. Imagine the impact on this continent if most of the 7,000+ chambers of commerce decided that their mission was initiating and sustaining positive change – and then figured out how to make it happen. ☑

Action Steps: Leadership

In the end, the quality and drive of professional and volunteer leadership will determine the success of the chamber, and by extension, the community. This can’t be overstated in light of the other seven influences described in this paper. Hiring, attracting, nurturing, growing and motivating leaders is more critical to your chamber’s success than any program or policy position. If you have to choose between paying attention to board development and running the spring expo, choose wisely. Over the next 10 years, there will be a new quality required for professional chamber leaders. “Catalytic” leadership requires that a chamber exec *crave and create* change, rather than simply helping members and the community cope with change. Each year, ACCE’s convention provides a leadership track and powerful speakers focused on building both volunteer and professional leaders.