BY GEORGIE BISHOP

PUBLIC LEADERSHIP: THE PROFESSION WE ALL DEPEND ON

Essential practices to see you through

On a day-to-day basis, public leaders are skilled at providing services to other public organizations and to the residents they serve. Most importantly, they understand their jobs, not in terms of titles or position descriptions, but in terms of "who depends on me."

Public leaders are also adept at getting others to understand who depends on them and for what. They work with numerous stakeholder groups to continuously innovate in the delivery of public services and meet challenges.

Also essential for any leader is the ability to engender trust—particularly public leaders. How they meet commitments and follow through even when things are difficult or uncomfortable is paramount to their ability to lead.

Here are other practices essential to public leadership:

1. Leaders don't rely on hearsay or anecdotal evidence. They base their decisions on the collection and analysis of hard data gathered from end users or customers and front-line workers to get a clear and honest picture of the current reality before they begin constructing a plan for what is needed. When leaders make decisions they also take into account both the intended and unintended consequences and make plans to manage both.

2. When leaders analyze the shortcomings of a current situation, they not only give people time to tell their war stories, but also know how to move the individuals quickly to a point where they are describing what they want and how they are going to get there.

3. Leaders rely on systems thinking and mapping to help their teams figure out where and how to leverage their investment of limited resources. Systems mapping is a drawing of an existing system that helps people see the complex cause-and-effect relationships that are part of every organization. In one local government, systems mapping helped public leaders understand how to combine areas of service that improved their financial reporting and saved the city money.

4. When conflict stands in the way of getting the job done, leaders resolve issues among staffers and with the public in ways that protect the relationships. Leaders ask questions and listen until they get to a point where the warring parties have exhausted their venting and can then move on to working with the upset party or resistor to solve the problems at hand.

5. Leaders evaluate individual performance in terms of the overall strategic goals of the organization. They help their teams align with where the organization is striving to go and make sure that everyone is on board and rowing in the same direction.

6. Leaders see their job as the development of the next generation of leaders. They identify and mentor those individuals who really want to learn the skills and competencies that are essential to great public leadership, and they help future leaders through training, work experiences, and rotational assignments.

7. Leaders set high standards and think in terms of not only achieving the mission but doing so in sustainable ways that preserve and protect the human, financial, and natural resources upon which society depends. When it comes to natural resources, leaders can take into account the fact that all people benefit from clean air, water, and other resources that are sometimes referred to as *the commons*.

8. When a crisis occurs, we often credit the public official who superbly handles the event by being up-front with the media and citizens as a great leader. True leaders, however, reward staffers who anticipate and plan for contingencies to eliminate a reactive workplace environment and avoid crises in the first place. **PM**

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