

Mission-Centered Leadership

The following message could have been titled:

"5 Secrets to Winning the Race To Be You"

These are the words of Paula Van Ness, CEO of [Starlight Starbright Children's Foundation](#), in her Keynote Address to the American Association of Grant Professionals, October 26, 2005.

(If you don't have time to read it all right now, print it for later, and skip to the quote at the end for a quick lift.)

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"Recognize there are ties between us...all men and women...living on the earth.

Ties of hope and love...sister and brotherhood.

We are bound together in our desire to see the world become a place in which our children can grow free and strong.

We are bound together by the task that stands before us and the road that lies ahead; we are bound and we are bound.

There's a feeling like the clenching of a fist...theres a hunger in the center of the chest...there is a passage through the darkness and the mist.

And though the body sleeps, the heart will never rest."

These are words I listened to on my iPod last evening as I was jetting across the country to be with you all today. These words, sung so beautifully by James Taylor, honor the life and legacy of the great Martin Luther King. These words touch our hearts and affirm our connection to each other and the causes we care about.

As James Taylor sings about "shedding just a little light so that we can all see," do you think there might be a message there for all of us? I do.

Remembering that Martin Luther King was a man who dared to dream and who was a masterful storyteller, his efforts to "shed a little light" still inspire and light the way for so many people around the globe.

By remembering that we are bound together as people dedicated to making the world a better place, a master story teller points out that our professional impact springs forth from our own ability to "shed a little light" on the causes and organizations we care about. We are first and foremost storytellers.

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If you think really long and hard can you remember when you first had a concept of yourself as a storyteller? For me, it happened in fifth grade. I had an amazing teacher, a former journalist, who really concentrated on building our writing skills. She gave all of us the encouragement and guidance that resulted in at least one of those 11 year olds--the one standing before you today feeling confident and also compelled to write and write and write. And to tell stories. And so its no accident that storytelling is one of the essential tools of my professional life. Perhaps yours as well. It is our role and our gift to the organizations we serve.

Then, lets start from the assumption that everyone in this room is a storyteller. And as storytellers, you weave your stories and act as catalysts for positive change in your communities, your country, and the world at large.

You are often the voice not just for yourself but for your cause. You convey the values, vision and mission that your organization stands for, believes in and pursues with determination. These are stories you tell about the people touched by your organization, whether you work in higher education...K-12 education...social welfare...services for children, youth and families...the elderly...the disabled...the environment...arts and culture...civic engagement...museums...civil rights...or communities of faith and action...whether it is on the local level, or national or even international in scope.

I appreciate being given the opportunity to reflect on being a mission-centered leader and to share some thoughts with you today as counterparts who aspire to be consistent mission-focused leaders.

Yes, we tell the stories, and when we do it well, others invest in our work. But there is more to being mission-centered than that.

I would like to suggest that who we are and how we think about ourselves and our organizations makes a real difference. I'll get back to that notion in a minute.

An excellent organization knows its mission. It is on the tip of everyone's tongue --they don't have to consult a piece of paper in order to say it right. And in those kinds of organizations, it is visible everywhere and the people of the organization are seen living the mission. Once it's decided, we must hold ourselves to a high standard. You then use the mission daily, visibly and consistently. You can't just say or write the words. You need to get close to the mission in action. See it...feel it...touch it.

If a part of your mission is to be culturally sensitive, to be mission-centered means that you have to be the most culturally sensitive person you can be. If the mission calls for you to advocate for children, you need to meet and interact with some of those children and then do your best to articulate and be a living symbol of that mission. Do it, don't just write about it. Do it, don't just write about it.

Putting actions behind your words is non-negotiable in my book.

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And get a "booster shot" of mission every once in a while. If you raise funds for a school, sit in a classroom regularly and watch students learn. If you work for a museum, walk the halls, listen to conversations and ask questions of your visitors about their experience of your museum.

If there's only one thought that you take away from today, it is this. If it's time for you to get your own booster shot of your mission, resolve to do that as soon as you get home from this conference.

This is an exciting time to be in the not-for-profit world. There are both more challenges and opportunities to respond to the ever-increasing community needs than ever before. So many great causes and worthy organizations are out there, needing people with your talents, passion and skills.

It's a given: we all want and need our organizations to succeed. As our organizations function less as "charities" and act more like mission-centered "businesses", we staff members play a role as stewards of the resources we garner and take responsibility for using all those resources at our command to achieve our mission. By acting more like business people, we get more mission for our money, doing more with the available resources, stretching them as far as we can in smart ways. Paying attention to the bottom line, defining a strategic direction and vision, negotiating funding in good faith and from a position of strength, allow us - as leaders - to bring our organizations to their fullest potential.

I like to keep front and center the understanding that the services our organizations provide are all provided by people and they are all provided to people. When you look in between those two sets of people, you should find your mission: it is the what and why of your organization. It's the reason for being. The mission is what binds those people together. And to take it a step further, please remember that our funders are not mere institutions; they too are people. They are people who respond to our stories of compelling need and opportunity, who join forces with us to make a world of difference. That is their reason for being. And, as they respond to our proposals by investing in our efforts to deliver on our missions, they are the third point of what I like to think of as the essential triangle of mission fulfillment...starting at the top point with the people we serve, then a second point of ourselves and our organizational colleagues and directly across from us, our funding sources.

We champion our mission both in our organizations and our communities on behalf of those we serve and we provide an opportunity for those who fund our organizations --our new ideas and tried-and-true programs -- to fulfill their mission. By investing in us, they achieve their fullest potential, too.

While it may seem ridiculous to stand before a group of grant professionals and say that you do not really get gifts or grants. I think that is true. I know it's what all of us call them, but the problem with thinking of those financial transactions

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as gifts or donations is that when our organizations act like charities, we become supplicants. I don't think that's healthy. We run the risk of getting stuck in a self-defeating mentality that our survival is dependent on benefactors - people or organizations that are richer than we are. Now it may be true, but just try thinking of it another way for a minute and see if it makes a difference.

Suppose you ask me for a \$100 donation for a great service your organization provides and I write you that check. Did I make that donation to you? Of course not. Did I make a gift to your organization? That's closer, but what really happened is that I purchased services for someone who cannot pay. Whether it's for a sick child, a homeless single mom, or future generations - I gave you my money with the expectation of an outcome. You earned that money -- whether it came from me, the Ford Foundation or Xerox. Understanding and remembering this may help you be a better mission-centered leader in your organization.

Like your other funders, I bought into the concept of helping people I do not know and will never meet. You convinced me that my help is needed and that I can place my faith in your promise to deliver your mission and I can trust your organization to follow through with excellence.

And so let's also assume that everyone in this room is a mission-centered leader. Everyone in this room takes responsibility for his/her own actions and understands what it means to be accountable. In my book, that's a part of being a leader. Some of you may feel that you've been honing your craft as story tellers and leaders since 5th grade or even earlier, while others of you may feel that you are in the throes of the first, real leadership opportunity of your life.

One of my favorite teachers, Burt Nanus, now an elder statesman of leadership development as a professor emeritus at USC said something about leadership that I believe directly relates to the critically important role each of you play in your own organizations.

"Leaders...dream dreams and then translate them into reality. Leaders attract the voluntary commitment of followers, energize them and transform organizations into new entities with greater potential for survival, growth and excellence. Effective leadership empowers an organization to maximize its contribution to the well-being of its members and the larger society of which it is a part. If managers are known for their skills in solving problems, then leaders are known for being masters in designing and building institutions; they are the architects of the organizations future."

I would add to that definition of leadership a postscript about grant professionals as leaders. You are the co-architects of your organization's future when you help develop a dream - a concept - into something real, achievable and worth investing in. You also help your organization stay on track and be mission-focused by not following the money in a mad scramble to get what you can, wherever you can.

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I know that's easier said than done sometimes but it's worth the effort for the sake of the integrity of your mission, as well as your own.

It is my belief that reaching our own potential as caring human beings means that we will be better able to help our organizations fulfill their potential. So let's look at our own lives first. That's our vital connection to mission.

As we weave a tapestry of intentions and create whole lives for ourselves, there are profound implications in our lives and the lives of those around us. As human beings, we are constantly seeking meaning in our lives. Here again, the vital connection to mission. In our jobs we want to know why the organization is doing what it does, how it will benefit others, and ourselves; where our contributions and we fit into the grand scheme of things. Most of us find personal fulfillment in working with others for a worthwhile purpose. As super volunteers and those pursuing professional careers, our lives have complicated intertwined career and life challenges. Let's take a brief look now at those five key themes that contribute to weaving our personal stories all together and allow us to be truly mission-centered in our life's work.

Authenticity can be described as a healthy alignment between what is inside (our values and beliefs) and what is outside (our behaviors). It is a condition not a personality trait. It's not like an MBA, something you achieve and keep. Authenticity is something that you have to achieve and maintain with intentional work. Authentic people understand their own priorities, fashioning lives that reflect those priorities. I'd guess that many of us feel that we are currently leading authentic lives.

For others, authenticity may be missing. You might be in a job or career that you don't like or that doesn't make a contribution to the world in the way you'd like. Perhaps it includes having to act unnaturally in order to be successful. Or heaven forbid you are working for a cause with a mission that does not move or motivate you. It just doesn't work. If you can't light a fire in your own heart for your cause, how can you do that for anyone else? When it all comes together the heart never rests. And to be authentic and successful, your heart can never rest either.

Many people have set aside dreams they had for their lives, perhaps because of financial or family pressure or because they may have felt that they had to do something more conventional than writing that great American novel, painting watercolors all day every day, becoming a professional basketball player or legal aid attorney. As time passes, that un-lived dream takes on more importance and the cost of ignoring it increases. It is often unthinkable or impractical to stop everything, switch gears and pursue a dream - but we can maintain authenticity by making small changes. Our volunteer work which ignites our passions for social justice and compassion is often a way that people work toward their un-lived dreams. The organizations we choose to work for may indeed help us fulfill those dreams; whether it is our day job or volunteering at night for a cause we care about.

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Let's think a minute about that dreamer who envisioned a life defending the defenseless. She gets involved as a grantwriter for a women's crisis shelter. It reignites that fire within her and maybe even someday she'll have the financial cushion she needs that will allow her to go back to school and get that law degree after all. Even if she never makes it back to law school, she lives a more authentic life.

Another dreamer dreams of writing that great American novel, after years of just thinking about it but not actively doing any writing - a writer who doesn't write - one day he realizes that he can write a little bit each day - mornings, weekends, whatever time he can find. Working on that book gives him great pleasure and an outlet to express his inner creativity. Maybe the book even gets published, but if it doesn't, he's still become a writer who actually writes. And then, when he takes the next step of applying his skills and talents as a grant professional, he's found a way to be more authentic.

Once these two people understood the importance of their dreams, they took steps to turn fantasy into reality.

When big life changes happen-- like a life-threatening illness -- it can shake up your life and turn everything upside down. A former colleague once said, "when I got cancer I was so surprised - not so much scared - but surprised. I kept asking - how come? I've been doing my work. This shouldn't be happening to me, I'm on track with my life. But cancer ended up being the greatest gift of all because it forced me to stop and look for work that makes my heart sing. If I hadn't had cancer, I don't think I ever would've slowed down long enough to do that." Cancer prompted her to review how well aligned her values and priorities were with how she spent her time. What she found, she didn't like. The rest of us can learn from her experience, not waiting for our lives to be turned upside down before we take that long, hard look at our selves.

So if authenticity is so important and if it's something that is lacking in your life, what can you do about it? Small changes are a good start. If you love music, indulge yourself more. Get an iPod and load it up with 1,000 songs you love. If you realize that you make time for everything and everyone but you, snag some time for nurturing your inner self - whether it's making time to exercise, taking a long luxurious bath, reading a new book a week or saying "yes" to a new work or a volunteer opportunity that makes your heart sing. However, if you're working for a cause that fails to make your heart sing, do yourself and your organization a favor. Move on. Find a cause that allows you to be your best self and work toward a mission that fits who you are, what you believe in, and plays to your passion.

At it's best, inspired leadership transforms and renews organizations and energizes the people inside those organizations. Effective leaders have agendas; they are above all else results oriented. For all of us who strive to be

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extraordinary leaders, its important to remember that it's all about results. And when we make a promise in a grant proposal, we must deliver on that promise.

While there is no data to back this up, who among us doubts that September 11th pushed many adults to examine their priorities - what used to be major endeavors seemed trivial and it prompted people to take actions to live more authentic lives.

The bottom line on being an authentic leader is to listen and pay attention to yourself. If someday your daughter begs you to become her Girl Scout leader and upon reflection, you realize you hate camping - you've always hated camping and the last time you did anything close to artsy craftsy was the 5th grade AND that you're much more comfortable in the world of numbers than in the world of pre-teens - say "no" to the leadership position but then ask if you can do the books for your local Girl Scout Council. Organizations need good treasurers, trust me. And even though you may be working full time for a non-profit, that doesnt mean that should be your only outlet for making a difference in the world.

Let's say you've been touched by the heartbreak of teen pregnancy and you decide to do something about it. Perhaps you're offered a position on the board of a community clinic that serves those teens, but if what you really want to do is sit across the table from teenagers and counsel them, you should trust your instincts, saying no to the board slot and yes to a direct service volunteer job.

Or you may be a cancer survivor yourself. What better place to draw on your own life experience than to manage grants for a cancer organization? Your passion would be a powerful asset and your future employer will recognize that.

Im spending a lot of time on authenticity because it truly is an imperative for a nonprofit mission-centered leader in todays world. Be truly who you are. Listen deeply to yourself first and then to others. That brings you to the condition of being authentic and then your behavior as an authentic person will follow. When you are leading a congruent life, you must walk your talk, there's no other way.

Now lets turn our attention to the next theme: connection.

Connection refers to the basic drive that we all feel in wanting to be close to other human beings. Psychologists tell us that the need for intimacy motivates human behavior and while it is important to feel attached or connected to others, many people today report that they have no one to share concerns with. We desire community, a feeling of belonging to something larger than ourselves.

Relationships do bring joy, comfort and meaning to our lives. Leadership roles often mean that the position limits what people will say to the leader and what she can reveal. A high-level position requires selectivity in showing vulnerability or sharing confidences. I've been learning that lesson the hard way the last few years myself.

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Many of the leaders I've spoken with have talked about the importance of having people in their lives that serve as sounding boards and mentors. Connecting with and helping each other on a one-to-one level was extremely important to the leaders I spoke with. You move along in your lives and careers, it is a natural outgrowth to begin to think about acting as a mentor for another. Thus, the cycle continues and lo and behold, the mentor often derives as much satisfaction and nurturing out of that relationship as the protege he is mentoring.

I spoke to a self-described "recovering task master" the other day. When I asked, "what lesson have you learned about leadership that you wish you would've learned sooner?" - without hesitation, the answer popped out - "People come before the work. The work doesn't get done if you don't take care of the people." How true it is and how long it takes some of us to learn that fact.

If connectedness is lacking in your life and you want to develop greater connection, there are some very specific steps that you can take. Slow down - take more time for informal conversations, slot time for telephoning or e-mailing friends on the weekends, join a group or establish a mentoring relationship for yourself. Reconnect with your past by taking time to visit with or contact a friend or associate you've lost touch with. Jobs come and go, but relationships can endure. And your work colleagues with whom you connect today may indeed end up being lifelong friends.

Dozens of research studies have documented the strong association between personal connections and good spiritual, mental and physical health. A Cornell University study found that "women who engaged in multiple roles and in particular, who were members of volunteer organizations lived longer and were healthier physically and psychologically than those who were not." That bodes well for those of us who volunteer (or work with volunteers). And how nice it is to have confirmation of what our instincts tell us - that often the volunteer's life is as enriched as the people she serves through that volunteer role.

Controlling your destiny, the third theme, represents another fundamental human drive. Think of it as taking initiative on your own behalf and being very intentional in doing whatever it takes to excel. In setting goals for ourselves, whether it is to start a career...stop smoking...apply for a new job or write your first mega Federal grant proposal...go back to school for that Masters Degree or take on a new responsibility that will mean more visibility within your organization. When we take the necessary steps to accomplish those goals, we are exerting more power and control over our lives as leaders.

The researchers tell us that the most effective mission-centered leaders and managers spend time in self-reflection at the gym or the golf course or by using journals and other tools to chronicle and analyze their thoughts, feelings, ideas and goals. Julia Camerons advice in the book, The Artist's Way, has had a profound impact on thousands of people who now make daily entries in their morning pages. In my own experience, I know I am a much better leader when I

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do that daily journal. It's not that whatever you're writing is so profound, but it is the process of consciously acknowledging risks and fears that allow us to address them head on.

Wholeness was the fourth theme identified by Center for Creative Leadership researchers. We ache to assimilate our different life roles to include involvement outside our homes that is "comfortable, rewarding and joyous" yet we want to be part of a family and have connections at home that make us feel whole. We often fear we're not good enough as employees, mothers, wives, husbands, boyfriends, girlfriends, volunteers - and that the trade-offs from investing in a career may mean that we fail at home. Or the flip side of that is that focusing on our families means that we cannot have successful lives in the outside world.

I remember attending a panel discussion about 30 years ago featuring five incredibly successful career women who spoke openly about the challenges of making their lives whole. Not one of them felt that her life was whole and in balance. Each one had a different story to tell. If things were going well in her job, it meant she was ignoring her children. If she focused on her child, her husband didn't get enough time and attention. If she spent too much time and effort in her volunteer involvement, it cost her a promotion at work. Caring for an elderly parent meant that something else had to give. They felt guilty at work and guilty at home. That was a wake-up call for me and pointed to a path that I didn't want to follow. Consequently, this desire for wholeness -- a well-rounded variety of life experiences -- motivates many of us as we strive to grow and achieve greater well being. Yet it may be the most elusive of all. The best news may be an indication in the research that as we get older, particularly in the 50s and beyond, we tend to feel more whole.

The final theme - self clarity - involves understanding ourselves better -- our strengths and weaknesses, values and beliefs, motives, priorities, and even our own behaviors in today's world. Some of us struggle to not take things so personally, particularly work-related and inter-personal problems. From time to time, I still find myself taking a "no" personally, like yesterday when we received a form turn down letter from a foundation. Then I had to remind myself to get over it -- it wasn't personal!

You always know it when you meet a person with high self clarity. She can describe patterns in her life with insight. She usually describes herself as a lifelong learner and sees events as interconnected -- how the different pieces of her life fit together and the hardships along the way are part of her own evolution. She uses feedback effectively. And the one I like best -- she has roles but she is not them. She understands that she is separate from her work, family, career, and other duties.

If you feel self-clarity is something you'd like to work on, there are some things you can do to refine your sense of self-clarity. First, seek feedback about how you are doing and what others think you might do differently. Examine you own

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behavior, looking for patterns in your life to help you keep from repeating mistakes or running into the same old barriers again and again. Journaling can enhance that process of refining self-clarity. Pay attention to your environment. And make continuous learning about yourself a priority. If you make a mistake, turn it into a learning opportunity. Ask what went wrong and try to think about how you might have acted differently to make things turn out differently.

These five themes or fundamental human needs authenticity, connection, controlling your destiny, wholeness and self-clarity -- combine in different ways at different times of our lives as mission-centered leaders. These needs are separate and distinct, yet they cross over each other and intertwine, building on each other with the simultaneous simplicity and complexity of a spiders web. Think of it as a tapestry portraying a life of vitality and meaning or a magnificent web of relationships, each of those connections accenting trueness, wholeness, self-knowledge and the search for excellence. Yes, there are plenty of obstacles in the way, but as we learn to identify them and keep moving ahead, we gain wisdom about life, learn about how to make better choices, improve our ability to be resilient and achieve inner peace. As we tell powerful stories about our mission in action -- shedding a little light so others can see what we see, we will achieve organizational success. Attending to these themes can bring meaning and fulfillment into our lives.

I wish each of you a life with no unlived dreams and an appreciation for the gift of who you are. I suggest that you remember the epiphany of my friend, the cancer survivor, and start to think of your life as a terminal condition because if you do, you will live it with the kind of joy and passion that it ought to be lived. And don't waste your precious life -- that is all too short anyway -- working anywhere but the place that makes your heart sing. Indeed, we are bound together and those ties of hope and love, sister and brotherhood ensure our hearts will never rest.

In closing, I'll share with you a quote that hangs in my office. I have no idea where it came from, but I just like it and I hope you do too.

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**"You can't be all things to all people.
You can't do all things at once.
You can't do all things equally well.
You can't do all things better than everyone else.
Your humanity is showing just like everyone else's.**

So:

**You have to find out who you are and be that.
You have to decide what comes first, and do that.
You have to discover your strengths and use them.
You have to learn not to compete with others,
Because no one else is in the contest of being you.**

Then:

**You will have learned to accept your own uniqueness.
You will have learned to set priorities and make decisions.
You will have learned to live with your limitations.
You will have learned to give yourself the respect that is due.
And you'll be a most vital mortal.**

Dare to Believe:

**That you're a wonderful, unique person.
That you are a once-in-all-history event.
That it's more than a right, it's your duty, to be who you are.
And that life is not a problem to solve, but a gift to cherish."**