

Six Key Leadership Behaviors That Support Culture Change

By Michele D. Holleran, Ph.D.

Over the past decade, scholars have concluded that leaders are made, not born, and that good leadership can indeed be learned. Researchers have identified more than 35 distinct leadership styles, each with its own set of constructs outlining the behavioral characteristics of the ideal leader. Barnes & Noble offers for sale more than 27,000 books with the key word “leader” or “leadership” in the title. Leadership is arguably one of the most discussed and debated management topics of our day.

Nowhere is the topic of leadership more pertinent than in the field of aging services. People are captivated by the idea of leadership, and many current studies around culture change focus on leadership as a cornerstone. Because leadership has taken center stage in our field, the question of “Which particular leadership style is best?” has been raised in many circles and in numerous studies commissioned by research institutes and foundations. There is great hope that strong and deliberate leadership will drive efforts to promote the culture change we seek in our field.

Leadership Models

Popular leadership styles in aging-services organizations range from servant leadership (Greenleaf) to transformational leadership (Burns) to Level 5 leadership (Collins). Scholars Chait, Ryan and Taylor advocate generative leadership, a process of creating meaning instead of a straight problem-solving orientation. Goleman and his colleagues have developed an important leadership concept known as emotional intelligence, the idea that reading people and becoming expert in relationship management is as important as or more critical than one’s intellectual quotient. Kouzes and Posner advocate five exemplary leadership practices. However, no one model or style has been developed exclusively for aging services or contains all the elements necessary for deep culture change in aging-services environments.

Many of the models are heavy on the affective side of leadership, meaning they emphasize relationship over task. This is a long-awaited departure from the command and control, hierarchical style traditionally associated with health care organizations. But in emphasizing the “soft side” of leadership, the affective models underestimate the need for accountability.

The transformational leadership model, the most popular leadership theory today (as measured by number of articles written and number of research studies conducted to measure it), has been embraced by the health care world (nurses, in particular) due to its emphasis on empowerment. Yet empowerment without accountability is a flawed concept, and nowhere in the transformational leadership model is accountability or anything similar to it mentioned.

Level 5 leadership (Collins) underscores the importance of accountability (professional will through disciplined people, disciplined thought and disciplined action), but it does not go into any great detail about the need for leaders to make personal connections with followers, arguably one of the keys to retaining motivated workers.

Greenleaf (servant leadership) places great emphasis on listening to followers, having empathy with them, healing them, being aware of their needs, committing to the growth of people and building community. He also advocates being a good steward, implying accountability, but because servant leadership advocates the unconditional acceptance of others, it is seen by some to lack the discipline or rigor required to go from good to great.

Chait and colleagues wrote in *Governance as Leadership* that no single style, model or aptitude explains leadership in its entirety. After thousands of studies on leadership and culture change, there remains an unmet need for the perfect leadership model.

Key Leadership Themes

A research study recently conducted within the field of aging services focused exclusively on the question of leadership and culture change, and discovered six key leadership themes emerging from the data. This study was conducted at a large, midwestern provider organization with more than 4,000 employees. The organization has experienced deep culture change over a three-year period under a new CEO and leadership team, resulting in an “employer of choice” designation two years in a row, as well as dramatic decreases in turnover on many of its campuses.

The study identified six leadership themes critical to culture change in aging services:

1. Transparency
2. Trustworthiness
3. Connectivity
4. Accountability
5. Empowerment
6. Optimism

No one leadership theory contains all of these elements, but all of the elements are contained within the transformational leadership, Level 5 leadership and servant leadership theories.

Transparency

Transparency is the state of being easily understood, candid, frank and open. Transparency is strongly connected to emotional intelligence (Goleman) because it is dependent on self-awareness, emotional management and emotional connection. Boyatzis argues that resonant leadership is based on “being in tune with or on the same wavelength as others,” which requires authenticity on the part of the leader. Transparency comes about when leaders are confident and humble enough to show their true colors, translucent in their thoughts and deeds so others can see who they truly are at their core.

The notion of personal humility is a premise of Level 5 leadership as envisioned by Collins, who states that social sector leaders must get things accomplished within a diffused power structure. Such leaders place emphasis on developing relationships with a wide

variety of constituents, including residents, employees, family members, referral agents and the community at large. These relationships will flourish if the leader is perceived to be transparent, willing to be like an “open book.” Integrity is tightly linked to transparency, because both are high when the leader “walks the talk,” and his or her “espoused values” (the values one talks about) align with actual actions and deeds.

Trustworthiness

This leadership theme includes the components of ability, benevolence and integrity. Mayer, Davis & Schoorman reviewed the elements of trust extensively and found that ability, benevolence and integrity were three that repeatedly emerged in every trust model. Ability (also known as credibility and competence) allows a leader to have influence within a specific domain, based on past performance perceived positively by stakeholders. Benevolence relates to honorable intention, care and compassion for individuals. Integrity is based on ethical behavior, doing the right thing, and treating others with fairness.

Trustworthiness is a key element in both transformational leadership theory and servant leadership. Trusting relationships are central to Boyatzis’ intentional change theory, as described in the book *Primal Leadership*, a primer on emotional intelligence.

Connectivity

When leaders invite feedback and collaboration with others, they are considered connected. This type of connectivity is embodied in the individualized consideration construct of transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio). The leveraging of social capital, formation of alliances and sharing of information are other ways that leaders encourage connectivity within organizations and create organizational legitimacy as a result of those connections (King).

Greenleaf’s servant leadership model contains the concepts of awareness and community building, both of which resonate with connectivity. Connectivity is especially vital in the social sectors where a diffused power structure exists and legislative leadership is required. Legislative leadership relies upon political currency and shared interests,

according to Collins in *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*.

Accountability

Notable in both Collins' work (professional will) and the work of Greenleaf (stewardship), accountability is a cornerstone of effective leadership, and balances empowerment. Accountability in the form of clear expectations being set and resultant outcomes being measured is imperative to the "professional will" side of the Level 5 leadership equation, as conceptualized by Collins. However, in the social sectors, the way outputs are measured often differs from the way they are measured in the private sector. As Collins writes, "It doesn't really matter whether you can quantify your results. What matters is that you rigorously assemble evidence—quantitative or qualitative—to track your progress." The servant leadership model refers to this type of accountability as stewardship, which in part addresses the need for fiscal responsibility, but also responds to the need for accountability to others and the environment.

Empowerment

The notion of empowerment has been the most readily associated with health care culture change and workforce retention. Empowerment involves sharing power with others, regardless of official position or title within an organization. Empowerment is central to transformational leadership theory as embodied by two constructs known as inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation (Bass & Avolio). It is also a cornerstone of the learning organization model presented by Senge, as well as the generative leadership concept (Chait).

Optimism

Optimism is characterized by a tendency to expect the most favorable outcome of events or conditions, as well as seeing the best in others. Optimism is a central theme of inspirational motivation in the transformational leadership model and is also found in Boyatzis' work (*Primal Leadership*). It is deeply embedded in the Stockdale principle in *Good to Great* (Collins).

Conclusion

While it is tempting to embrace these six themes as a new super-sized leadership theory combining the best of its predecessors and customized to meet the culture change needs of aging services, the reality is that leadership is a multi-dimensional concept. It is dynamic and continuously evolving. Therefore, the leadership framework described here is not presented as a model frozen in time, but rather a flexible framework that encourages an iterative approach to leadership research and model-building for the future.

The aging services leader who seeks to encourage deep culture change must possess a broad set of competencies and leadership styles tailored to his or her organizational needs. Culture change typically takes seven to 10 years to implement fully, and the leadership competencies required will change during this period. For example, trustworthiness needs to be established fairly quickly at the beginning of the change process, while empowerment may not be fully realized until further on, after structural systems have taken hold and employees feel comfort with a fair degree of autonomy. Knowing how and when to emphasize certain themes of leadership during the culture change process is part of the art of leadership, requiring high levels of intuition and sensitivity.

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