

Leadership

The Best Leaders May Be Those Who “Give Up”

Leadership is often defined by lists of character qualities, values, or skills. But what if the best leaders are simply those who can willingly give up things they value?

By **Vu Le** | Jun. 26, 2018

What is required for successful leadership in 21st-century civil society? When I was asked to answer this question for this article, I racked my brain for weeks, pondering it between meetings, grant proposals, reports, and the endless small and big fires that a nonprofit executive director must attend to. It is a good question. It is also similar to one that has guided the work of my organization, **Rainier Valley Corps** (<https://rainiervalleycorps.org/>), as we develop pipelines of leaders of color who can address Seattle’s worsening societal problems: What kind of leaders do we need in this time and place? A partner organization, the **Center for Ethical Leadership** (<http://www.ethicalleadership.org/>), first posed this simple-but-profound question to us when it was helping shape our curriculum.

At first, I thought of the leadership paradigms that must shift. In this very challenging time in America’s history, we need leaders who are humble, not arrogant; servants, not heroes; adaptive, not technical; curious, not certain; unifiers, not dividers. In addition, they must be able to embrace chaos and complexity, genuinely listen (even to opposing viewpoints), balance continual reflection and quick actions, take big risks, accept failure, and inspire with a vision that includes a place for everyone.

I was thinking of these qualities while on the light rail with my kids, ages five and two, heading home from preschool. They love the train, but on this day, it was crowded and there were no seats. As the train moved, the five-year-old fell against a stranger, while I held the two-year-old and braced for a bumpy ride. Soon, two women seated near us got up. One tapped me on the shoulder, and they insisted the boys and I take their seats. We traded places, and they stood, jostled by the moving train. Although the world has been darker lately, it was nice to be reminded that most people are still kind, still willing to give up their own comfort to help others.

It made me think that while the leadership traits I note above are all necessary, another trait—one we do not talk about often—may be the most important leadership quality of all: The leaders we need in this time and place must be willing to give up things that make their existence comfortable, even meaningful.

A few months ago, I learned about an organization called **Can You Not PAC** (<http://canyounot.org/>). While there are organizations that encourage and support women, people of color, and LGBTQIA candidates to run for public office, Can You Not's mission is to discourage straight, white men—who have dominated public office for hundreds of years—from running.

Although the organization “started out as a fun joke,” according to its **Facebook page** (<https://www.facebook.com/canyounotPAC>), it does make a critical point. I have seen straight, white men running for public office in neighborhoods where residents are predominantly people of color. Can You Not's suggestion that these white guys might want to sit it out and use their influence to lift up others who historically have not had formal power is often unsettling or offensive, even to the most progressive of them. This parallels the thinking of those who say they want to help poor people but oppose the low-income housing unit in their neighborhood. Or those who proclaim they are invested in public education but fight the increase in taxes that would support it.

How is this relevant to civil society? The societal disparities that we as a sector are trying to address are many, but we may be perpetuating them through our own practices and unwillingness to surrender our privilege. For example, the vast majority of nonprofit directors, foundations CEOs, and board members **are white** (<https://www.fastcompany.com/40430178/5-charts-that-illustrate-the-racial-bias-in-the-nonprofit-world>). Although the sector **is majority women** (<https://www.missionbox.com/article/127/women-in-nonprofit-leadership-is-there-a-gender-gap>), the leaders of larger, and thus more-influential, organizations tend to be cis-gender men. And although most people affected by injustice are people of color, only around 10 percent of philanthropic dollars **go to organizations led by communities of color** (<http://greenlining.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/FundingtheNewMajority.pdf>).

In light of the challenges facing our communities, civil society leaders must be willing to give up the things they care about, not out of pity and charity, but in recognition of and in response to systemic injustice. Among other things, it means sometimes we men do not apply for that perfect job, even if we think we are well qualified for it. It means white allies sometimes do not take the microphone, literally or figuratively, so that others can have a chance to speak and be heard. It means larger organizations sometimes do not pursue catalytic grants, even if they have a high chance of getting them, and instead support the smaller, grassroots

organizations led by marginalized communities. It means foundations share decision-making power with nonprofits and communities who have lived through the inequity they are trying to address.

And, probably hardest of all, it means all of us must let go of our own emotional comfort and ego so that we can have honest conversations about systemic racism, historical and ongoing atrocities, political divisiveness, and other root causes of inequity. By letting go, we can talk about how, in our pursuit of economic gains or existential meaning, we may unwittingly perpetuate injustice even as we seek to end it.

A white colleague of mine once told me that she will never again apply for an executive director position at an organization that serves primarily people of color. Another colleague told me she plans to give her entire inheritance back to the Native community, after discovering that her family's wealth came from displacing Native families. On the train heading toward a just and equitable society, we must acknowledge who always gets to be conductor, who always is forced to stand and struggle for balance, whether we got our seat only because of unearned privilege, and whether it is now time for us to get up so that another can sit down.

Although it seems that by yielding to others we are giving up a lot, there is also much to gain. My kids on the train, for example, learned a lesson about kindness, which I hope they will pay forward and thus strengthen our community. When each of us, following our leaders, examines our own privileges, power, and resources, and thoughtfully understands how we got them and when to intentionally let them go, it leads to a better community—one we all benefit from.

But relinquishing the things we are used to having is not easy to do, and there is no certainty that our sacrifices will lead to the ideal outcome. Who is to say that when my white colleague does not apply for this executive director job, it will go to a person of color? What if a guy does not run for office to increase the chances for women candidates to succeed, and another dude runs and wins, but has awful policies? What if I let down my guard, reveal my weaknesses and inexperience with talking about race or transgender identity or disability, and get called out?

There are no guarantees that these things won't happen. And it is paradoxical that the kind of leaders we need must be willing to give up being a leader at all. However, the comfort of certainty, simplicity, linearity, and clear-cut answers is another privilege that the leaders we need in this time and place must be willing to sacrifice.



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