Leadership in Economic Development: Inspire a Shared Vision

By Joy Wilkins, CEcD

What truly pulls people forward, especially in the more difficult times, is the exciting possibility that what they are doing can make a profound difference to the future of their families, friends, colleagues, customers, and communities. They want to know that what they do matters. – James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner

Very little in life can provide the sense of euphoria that comes from knowing you helped those you serve achieve something for the game-changing better. Years ago, a local leader, when considering the fruits borne from the economic development program she helped to design, once relayed the following reflection:

“When I look back at that time in my life, it was perhaps the most meaningful work I’ve ever done. There were so many of us who came together, fitting like pieces in some mosaic puzzle. Had any one piece been missing, it would have never worked.”

Unbeknownst to her at the time, this local leader followed one of the basic principles for bringing about exciting change in her community, as described by leadership writers Kouzes and Posner in The Leadership Challenge. As not noted in the previous article in this series, the authors have conducted research for more than 25 years to identify five best practices for becoming an exemplary leader. These include:

1. Model the way,
2. Inspire a shared vision,
3. Challenge the process,
4. Enable others to act, and
5. Encourage the heart.

The focus of this article is on the second practice, “inspire a shared vision.”

Envision the future

“What you envision for the future is really all about expressing your passion,” say Kouzes and Posner. Oftentimes, this passion has manifested itself in your life in some way for some time and becomes the “theme” of your life. And as this theme is repeated, they point out, it is a powerful reminder for those around you about the entirety of the work you do. Say the authors: “It’s all about what gets you up in the morning and won’t let you sleep at night. It’s all about something that you find so important that you’re willing to put in the time, suffer the inevitable setbacks, and make the necessary sacrifices.”
While economic developers broadly share a passion for improving the human condition, the role we choose to play usually is driven by our specific passions. For example, some of us may have a special place in our heart for company CEOs who have the weight of the world on their shoulders as they work to make their operations successful. Others of us may feel especially in tune with entrepreneurs who risk their life’s savings to create a dream enterprise, perhaps one after another after another. And some of us may feel a particular call to help the underserved and less fortunate.

While passionate leadership is important, it is only impactful if it is shared. Determining what’s important to your constituents is imperative for turning your personal passion into a shared vision, point out Kouzes and Posner. “You can’t mobilize people to willingly travel to places they don’t want to go,” they note, pointing to the need for a common purpose.

They recommend four key steps for developing that common purpose. The first two are to listen deeply to others and determine what is meaningful to them. In other words, really get to know those you serve. And to really get to know those you serve, you have to enable them to get to really know you. In doing so, you learn how their priorities synergize with theirs, which becomes a shared purpose. Making this purpose into a commitment to move forward together is the third step the authors recommend. Fourth, they reiterate the importance of taking the time to look forward – that is, seeing the forest beyond the trees – in times of rapid change.

Following are some of the questions Kouzes and Posner recommend we ask ourselves when developing our shared vision, whether it is for the organizations or communities we serve:

- What keeps us awake at night?
- What drives us to do the very best we know how?
- If we could create our ideal organization [community], what would it look like?
- What are the qualities that would make our organization [community] a great place to work [and live]?
- How would we describe the kind of organization [or community] that makes us say, “I can’t wait to go there?”
- What is unique about our hopes, dreams and aspirations?
- What images come to mind when thinking about the future? What does it look like, sound like, taste like, and feel like?
- How does our vision serve the common good?

**Enlist others**

Kouzes and Posner point to the importance of inspired leadership to enlist others. “We all need vast reserves of energy and excitement to sustain our commitment to a distant dream, and leaders are expected to be a major source of that energy,” they note.

They explain how it is not only important to appeal to common ideals, but also to animate the vision through impactful messaging. As noted in IEDC’s other published works on leadership in
economic development, being a highly effective communicator is essential for being a high-performing leader.

Kouzes and Posner point to a number of ways for communicating effectively: using symbolic language such as metaphors and anecdotes; illustrating images of the future through relevant storytelling; and practicing positive communication in general. Others point to soft skills such as making eye contact; using proper pitch and tone when making the delivery; understanding the importance of gestures and other forms of body language, and so on.

However, being able to communicate well is only a part of the equation to influencing others through your messaging. There are times in a leader’s life when it is best to show those you serve what you really care about by expressing your emotions in an authentic, genuine manner. Ultimately, reaching them heart-to-heart is what enables you to truly connect with them. As Kouzes and Posner point out, they will care about what you care about if you let them truly see it. Indeed, leaders who speak from the heart are often described as “magnetic,” exuding a natural attraction on others. And often, their emotions affect the emotions – and by extension, overall productivity – of the organization as a whole, which can have profound impact.

Closing reflections

The local leader quoted at the beginning of this article felt particular heartburn for several hundred workers who had lost their jobs due to a major plant closure in her community. This led to her to become a change agent who was convinced that her community would not only survive but thrive despite this devastating event. People were drawn to her because they knew her belief was genuine and authentic – and they, too, then believed that together they could make a difference.

The result was efforts that led to dozens of new businesses and significant job growth that continued even during the recent economic downturn. What makes this story even more amazing is that she had little prior experience as an economic development professional before taking on such a role. What she had, however, turned out to be far more valuable for all concerned – a heart for the people she was serving, and an innate understanding that she could not do it alone.

Serving with your heart is the critical component for becoming a leader who people will want to follow. In our increasingly distracted, stressful and uncertain world, it is ever more challenging to stick to principles and to act confidently on those beliefs. When you serve with your heart, you feel it, those you serve feel it, and the world around you feels it. It leads to people to accept you despite your mistakes, to take risks with you despite the hurdles, and to follow you with loyalty through the ups and downs of organizational life.

It will lead to an amazing journey where you and others you care about come together like pieces in a mosaic puzzle to change the world around you.

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