

Leaders Under Stress: Top-Down Versus Bottom-Up Decision Making in Health Promotion

...by Paul Terry

leadership in health promotion

Strong leaders run toward problems, and their legacy stories often revolve around the leader's actions when under pressure. Robert Greenleaf, known as father of the empowerment movement in American business, wrote that "management is the ability to state a goal and reach it, through the efforts of other people, and satisfy those whose judgment one respects, under conditions of stress."

hours on end), but also quite petite, with an unassuming leadership style. This made it all the more astonishing when I watched how ruthlessly she broke up a frightful dog fight. She left no doubt among the dogs, or we novice mushers, who the alpha dog was in this erstwhile pack.

Bria, who has interned at health centers in India, Kenya, and Somalia, joins the health professional ranks

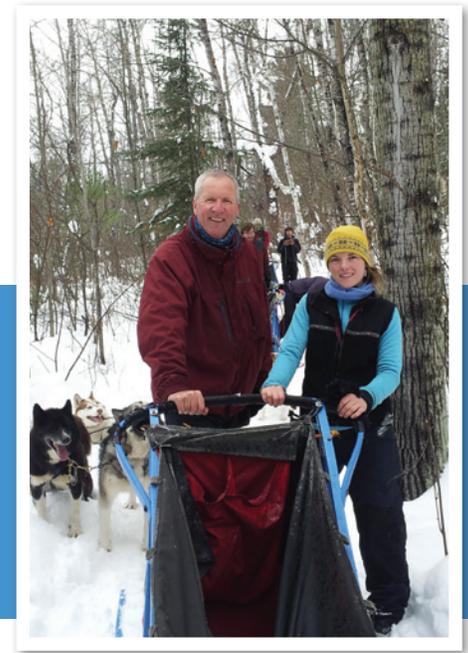


Paul Terry, PhD

"Trust comes by following through with your words, developing real relationships, being sincere, and showing humility and humor. Essentially, be the leader people want to follow, rather than the leader they are told to follow."

I was vividly reminded of take charge decisions by leaders during a recent dog-sledding outing in northern Minnesota. Our brief expedition was led by Bria Schurke, an accomplished musher who is also an emerging leader in international public health. She had forewarned us that our sled dogs, though very friendly with people, were hierarchical pack animals with a volatile pecking order. Bria is extraordinarily fit (her duties involve skiing ahead of strong Canadian Inuit sled dogs for

with an edifying list of outdoor leadership experiences that have reinforced her preference for consensus decision making but have also honed her instincts for when to impose her authority. (Check out the link under References to learn about her 2900-kilometer Siberia expedition as an example of Bria's propensity for immersion experiences that teach thorough lessons about decision making under stress.) In expedition leadership Bria says, "I favor more introverted,



Bria Schurke leads the author in a dog-sledding outing.

'architect analyst' leadership styles, where I am fully aware of the big picture, but step back and lead quietly. I start out with thorough instruction, ensuring that clientele have understood my expectations, but often try to step back after the group has 'formed and normed' to allow more group dialogue and decision making. I want people to feel like they have really learned

new skills and managed a wilderness experience to a certain extent on their own, and not feel like they were hand-held the entire way.”

Sounds nice, but what about when others are out of their element? “I often have to be full driver and firefighter,” notes Bria. “I need to anticipate every possible series of seemingly inconsequential events that could lead to problems. As their guide, clientele are much more dependent on me to make all decisions and manage most situations.” And when the going gets really tough? “I am very directive whenever safety issues are at stake and I know that time is a concern. Sometimes I have had to tell participants: ‘Do X; I can’t explain why right now, but I will later. I need you to listen and trust me at this moment.’”

Though Bria has ready examples of when directive leadership is needed during expeditions, she is more taciturn when reflecting about leading change in another culture. Though her work in Somalia left her with the indelible images that come from working to abate the world’s highest maternal and child mortality rates, Bria agitates about the naiveté of do-gooders who don’t consciously temper their expertise with sensitivity to local issues. “I received good feedback from a supervisor who challenged me to consider my impact on all of my coworkers with everything I say. We never know how our words and actions can affect people. For me, exemplary leadership is quiet humility with a persistent ego-checker.” I expect Greenleaf, best known for his seminal essays on “servant leadership,” would appreciate Bria’s reticence about expert power and her deference to the local needs and values of those she serves.

Greenleaf wrote that the best test for whether other peoples’ highest-priority



needs are being served is, “Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”

But with crisis-level mortality rates, or closer to home, with an organization’s success in jeopardy from chronic diseases and unchecked obesity rates, isn’t it time to say “Do X; trust me at this moment?” On this, Bria is clear that leadership and followership are intermingled: “Well, consider Dave and Amy Freeman, a couple who recently won National Geographic Adventurers of the Year for an incredible 12,000-kilometer expedition around North America. They are completely selfless, hard-working, helpful, and quiet about their achievement. Essentially, they are not above anything or anyone and work humbly for their mission to educate people around the world. They have so much to brag about, but they have garnered incredible respect because they haven’t.” Such a description echoes Greenleaf’s view when he wrote: “Authentic leaders are chosen by followers; the ability to lead with

integrity depends on the leader’s skills for withdrawal and action.”

Paradoxical as it may seem, when it comes to improving an organization’s health, working from the top down involves facilitating change that grows up from the bottom. Why are stories of leaders who reached out to others while also making tough decisions the most memorable? Because they show how great leaders seek consensus while still making risky choices, often under intense pressure. Kennedy’s covert communications with Khrushchev during the Bay of Pigs crisis, Mandela’s truth and reconciliation councils, Giuliani’s frequent appearances after the World Trade Center attack... though not as visible, the stakes related to decision making in health promotion are every bit as far-reaching. (For a vibrant example of how the Cleveland Clinic’s wellness policies required top-down as well as bottom-up orchestration, visit the webinar discussion under References.)

As Bria seeks to bring a balanced leadership approach to her work in

community health, she will be well served to let her demanding outdoor adventures guide her judgment. She explains, “The strong expedition leader facilitates emotional and physical growth by highlighting people’s strengths, like staying positive through a major rain storm, problem solving during a white-out, and challenging team members to learn and grow from their struggles.”

And what of the polarizing effects of unpopular choices, I asked, mindful of Cleveland Clinic’s decision to not hire smokers and CVS Pharmacy’s announcement that it will no longer sell tobacco? “Every experience can be seen as an opportunity for feedback. I think we fear the word feedback in a way, because it can imply shaming and nitpicking. But a good expedition leader should be able to facilitate effective feedback in a way that it becomes a normal part of the group culture. In fact the wilderness is a perfect setting to practice this skill. In the wilderness we are all forced to be our raw selves, the good and the bad of it, continually exposed to each other’s true strengths and shortcomings. We see what each other is truly like under pressure and how we each react to the emotional and physical roller coaster. There is nowhere to hide.”

Just as Bria has tested her leadership mettle through exposure to physical extremes, health promotion leaders must also be willing to test boundaries, as have Cleveland Clinic and CVS, if we are to be able to give and receive authentic feedback about what it takes to effect change. As much as Bria seems comfortable with, if not insistent upon, pushing forward relentlessly on her personal capacity to change and grow, she is decidedly cautious about exercising leadership in a culture that is

not her own. Related to this, Greenleaf wrote: “And what is the effect (of your leadership) on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or, at least, not be further deprived?”

If you have occasion to test your leadership skills with an outdoor adventure, there are few better metaphors for what it takes to set a goal and work through others to make progress, especially under stress. For Bria, her expedition experiences are never more relevant than when assessing her ability to work effectively within a different culture. “I have found that it is much more difficult to walk into an already formed group that has not developed the culture of feedback I described. To create a more inclusive culture as a leader, this takes time, and I believe the biggest way to address this is to build trust with the community. Trust comes by following through with your words, developing real relationships, being sincere, and showing humility and humor. Essentially, be the leader people *want* to follow, rather than the leader they are *told* to follow.”

And what about those sled dogs Bria so brazenly tore apart to stop their fighting? I have no question they would contentedly follow her to the ends of the earth. Well, actually, they already have.

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