



It's Time for Followers to Lead

"The Leadership industry has failed."

Harvard professor and renowned leadership authority and author, Barbara Kellerman, made this declaration at the international leadership conference 1500 leadership trainers, professors, researchers and I attended in 2016.

The "industry" has studied the characteristics, styles, and behaviors of those at the top of our organizational ladders resulting in thousands of books and probably millions of articles (including now, this article, and the books that Leadership Greater Hartford features in our annual "Lessons in Leadership" series). This work informs trainers and teachers of those who aspire to reach the top of those ladders.

Dr. Kellerman observed, however, that we have overlooked the importance of teaching followers the skills they need to make our organizations and our governing bodies work. She asked, "What are we, as leadership professionals, doing to ensure that 'the rest of us' who are not at the top of those ladders are equipped to actively and effectively engage in the decision making that our democratic philosophy and collaborative, inclusive leadership require?"

There is a disturbing tension inherent in the ideals of "democracy" and "collaborative, inclusive leadership." If we are going to fully engage in our organizations and our society, and if we are freely and fully committed to participation, where do we find the time to do so? It's already challenging to find time to make the money to pay the bills, care for our families, rest, play at

least a little bit and otherwise find “balance” in our lives. So we often opt out of the hard work needed to be effective in that decision making, leaving it to others to make decisions for us. We might grumble about some of those decisions, but we, ourselves, have created the void that allows top-down decision making, autocratic governance and, at its worst, tyranny. Few leadership scholars have studied “bad” leadership (Dr. Kellerman is one), but the evidence shows that leaders can and do take us to bad places if “the rest of us,” the followers, allow them to do so.

I find an interesting paradox in the concept of “community.” In a powerful documentary film, *I AM*, Academy Award winning director Tom Shadyack travels around the world talking with thought leaders, writers, scientists and others asking “What’s wrong with the world and what can we do about it?” He learns that it is “community” that makes us human; and that collaborating with others is the basis of our superiority over species that are bigger, stronger or faster than human beings. Recognizing that our world today is driven by the negative impulses of greed, competition and conflict, he asks, “How do we change this?” Journalist Lynn McTaggart tells him, “ We are all connected....Once we start embracing the idea that we are all one and really take that one on board, then we will start fixing things.” “It’s not about what do I get out of it, but how do I bring out the good in you?” adds Dacher Keltner, psychologist who founded the Greater Good Science Center. Historian Howard Zinn explains, “Not one heroic act, but tiny acts, often unnoticed acts seized upon...and emulated by others is how change happens.” And Desmond Tutu sums it up: “Change happens because you are concerned, and you have a coalition that becomes a movement.” The iconic image of a lone student blocking the progress of the tank in Tiananmen Square challenges us to appreciate the power each one of us has—the power of one—to change what is wrong in the world.

Community Works: The Revival of Civil Society in America, a collection of essays edited by E.J. Dionne, Jr. in 1998, explores whether our communities are in crisis. The same question is relevant today as we experience the debilitating effects of

violence, injustice and racial hatred. Respect for all people, a commitment to inclusive, collaborative approaches to solving problems and the belief that all people have a capacity for and a responsibility to provide leadership are needed. Leadership development is not for the ambitious few, but is the universal prerequisite to reviving the civil society that is slipping away. The followers, the “rest of us,” must find our individual voices and our courage to block whatever tank is threatening our community, to demand that our leaders look us in the eye and listen to us. And together we must hold them accountable if they do not.

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