

One of the first lessons I learned as a theatre student at Emerson College is that great directors constantly ask their actors the same question: “What do you want?” The American stage director William Ball wrote that the want is the “golden key” of the theatrical process because “wants are what the waking individual is never without” (Ball, 1984, p. 76). Through my directing work, I uncovered another golden key – *needs* - nearly synonymous with wants, but more urgent; thus, I would often ask the actors I worked with: What does your character need at this moment? This concept of golden keys is central to the work of nonprofit organizations and their leaders. Leaders in the social sector must employ the golden keys to ask (and keep asking): “What do we want? And what steps are we taking to achieve that want?” These are powerful, galvanizing questions that can unite a group of people in purpose and action. Yet great leaders do not stop there. No, they must constantly question their organizational systems with unfettered curiosity and empower others while doing so.

In addition to the golden keys, effective leaders know what other critical questions to ask and when to ask them. These critical questions are often prefaced by the words - who, what, when, where, why, and how. For instance, leaders in the social sector may ask the questions: **Who** do we serve? **What** public or communal want/need are we addressing? **How** are we going to fulfill those wants/needs? **Where** is the reach of our impact and the limits of it? **When** do we know we have succeeded or failed? **Why** does our work matter? There are countless ways that a person could formulate such critical questions, but I have learned that regardless of how you ask them, the intent is to create clarity and cohesiveness amongst a team. Indeed, the extent to which such clarity and cohesiveness are achieved is an apt indicator of effective (or ineffective) leadership.

Harkening back to my time as a director and actor, the worst productions I was involved in were always muddled in intention and disjointed in execution. I distinctly remember being cast in an adaptation of the Chinese epic, *Journey to the West*, which turned out to be an artistic and box-office flop. Blame it on the colorblind casting that underrepresented Asians in a Chinese narrative, the incomplete set complete with an unscalable rock wall, or just a sheer lack of purpose – but there was general confusion about why certain artistic choices were made and a lack of critical questioning of those choices. Many of the play's elements did not work together and the result was a collage of pseudo-gymnastics, puppetry, and disgruntled actors who literally weren't always on the same page. The process was marked with an unclear vision and ineffective leadership from the start. Effective leaders do not lose sight of the larger tapestry and the threads that weave it. These leaders will use critical questions to clarify and unify; they will scrutinize the larger tapestry and ensure that the actions of the organization are in alignment with its stated purpose. After all, cohesion is not solely created by words.

Can an organization have more than one leader? The imperative answer to this is “yes.” One of the hallmarks of effective leadership is a high level of self-awareness of one's interests, competencies, and limitations. The value of this self-awareness is that leaders are more likely to authentically collaborate with others and empower others to assume leadership positions as well. One of my favorite traits of leaders is when they employ the golden keys to ask their colleagues what their burning desires are: *What do you want? What are you interested in? What inspires you? Why are you here? How can we be better?* Leaders in the social sector must have a keen sense of such transformational leadership, a leadership approach that is “used to inspire employees to look ahead with a focus on the greater good and to function as a single unit with a common goal in mind” (DiFranza, 2019). This is especially relevant in the nonprofit field, where

financial incentives (high wages, bonuses, etc.) are not very prevalent and cannot be leveraged as reward-motivators as is the case in a transactional leadership approach. This is not to say that money is not a motivator but that it has its limitations in the context of the social sector and may even have pitfalls in the grander scheme of things. For example, a 2010 research study referenced in the Harvard Business Review found that what makes people perform at their best is not focusing on salaries but focusing on “satisfying their intellectual curiosity, learning new skills, or having fun” (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2013). Thus, effective leaders know how to motivate their team and keep them engaged in the long-run.

On the other end, ineffective leaders may subscribe to the adage of “fake it before you make it,” which can lead to more harm than good. A lack of awareness of their competencies and limitations can cause leaders to become arrogant and shortsighted. Ineffective leaders fail to look beyond themselves and instill a sense of transformational change in their environment. A leader’s overconfidence (lack of humility) can be a poison that paralyzes collaboration and innovation, undermining all parties involved. The strengths and interests of their team members may be insufficiently engaged, leading to underutilization, turnover, and souring of work culture. Look no further than Donald Trump’s tenure as the President of the United States, which recorded a whopping 92% turnover rate of the executive roles (Tenpas, 2021).

True leadership is not a singular noun but an active verb. I remind myself of this as grow as a leader, recognizing that the growth never stops and that I lead through my choices of what to do and what not to do. I choose to be self-aware, which has become one of my main strengths. I assure myself that I am not better than anyone else, yet also no worse. I constantly use the golden keys to mine my deeper purposes and motives while simultaneously questioning those around me to understand what moves them. My self-awareness and my curiosity have become the worn

wrenches in my leadership toolbox, which I have carried with me in rehearsal rooms for the past 10 years.

Admittedly, I am very new to the formality of the nonprofit world and lack some of the competencies that made me a bold theatre artist. Ideally, effective leaders have a healthy balance of competency and confidence, yet I lack intricate knowledge of nonprofit systems, which limits my ability to communicate with others, thereby limiting my ability to lead. As communication (clarity, cohesiveness) is an essential part of leadership, I am eager to increase my nonprofit vocabulary and understanding of the social sector so that I can reach people not only emotionally but also intellectually.

Moreover, while I have enjoyed collaborating with others in the past, I do struggle sometimes to delegate. I believe in leading by example, but this has led me to overextend myself and do too much. As I grow as a leader I would love to understand how and when to relinquish control while empowering others to act with more agency. With this comes a greater lesson: learning how to trust in myself, others, and the process. I was comfortable failing as an artist, and now I need to become more comfortable failing as a Trinity Fellow and leader in the social sector.

References

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