Viewpoint: Lessons in Leading

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Most of us would agree that effective leadership is vital in business, but is the same thing true in the public sector? Does visionary leadership matter? I would argue that it certainly does. Great public-sector leaders communicate the mission and objectives of an organization, motivate people, and lead teams to more efficient and productive outcomes.

But what traits make up a great public-sector leader? Scholars have researched many different models of effective leadership in business. Yet for public-sector leaders I tend to think the perspective of UC Berkeley professor Richard Lyons has the most resonance. Lyons has discussed four key principles that hold lessons for leaders. They are: confidence (without pretense or attitude); questioning the norm and standing up for what you know to be true; learning from anyone and never ceasing in knowledge gathering; and service to something greater than yourself.

Confidence is important. Robert Bertini, a professor at CalPoly and former deputy administrator for the U.S. Department of Transportation, in fact encourages outright ambitiousness. In my management classes, he advises future planners to “be ambitious but patient. . . . Big projects take a long time.”

When he joined the Obama administration in 2008, it faced major transportation challenges and confidence was needed to reenvision the way things were organized and prioritized. Bertini advises planners to be receptive to others’ ideas, from colleagues who have worked there for 30 minutes or 30 years. Just remember to shed your ego at the door.

Then there’s questioning the norm. Eric Angstadt, the planning director in Berkeley, California, has talked to my students about being inquisitive while still staying in touch with the community. He considers questions and challenges from the public as important things to take to heart. And Angstadt uses this citizen questioning to inform his own questions, providing filters for looking at the municipal budget, evaluating what works and what does not.

Good leaders never stop learning. While this may sound clichéd coming from a professor, it’s something that I have found essential in my years of practice and public service. Many times the best ideas come from other fields, and I’ve found that when I’m not engaged as a “student” (of people, places, culture, etc.) I am less creative and have less to offer my clients and colleagues. However, when I’m engaged in social learning, learning from everyone and everything around me, I am most effective at providing solutions to urban issues.

Finally, the capstone for public sector management is service. Service to a higher purpose is an excellent motivator. According to my friend David Storms, the division director for the Office of Public Housing of the federal Department Housing and Urban Development, most people who go into government want to make the world a better place. Storms likes to remind his staff of their personal values and how they are related to institutional goals, helping them to see how their work serves something greater than themselves.

These four lessons in leading provide a guidebook for those entering public sector leadership positions. Leadership in this milieu is malleable and dynamic—more about creating an environment for success and unleashing the power of others than about being powerful in your own right. And while I believe these concepts are not a magic “special sauce,” perhaps being more organic in nature than we imagine, they offer lessons in creating a culture of innovation and teamwork that can help in solving the complex problems of today’s cities.

William Riggs, AICP, is a planning consultant and professor of city planning at CalPoly, San Luis Obispo. His primary work areas are in transportation, housing, land use, environmental planning, and urban informatics. He also serves as a commissioner on the San Luis Obispo Planning Commission.