Leading as an Intentional Journey

By Theresa Rowe

Leadership is a journey. We don’t wake up one morning and announce: “Today I am a leader!” Successful leaders create their own unique path, often not even realizing that it will eventually take them to a leadership position. As they move along that path, they develop their skills. They also encourage others to share their path and join their journey. And then, somewhere along the way, the path becomes an intentional journey.
Theresa Rowe is one of two recipients of the 2014 EDUCAUSE Community Leadership Award, which recognizes members for their roles as community leaders and active volunteers in professional service to the broader higher education IT community. The award is sponsored by Moran Technology Consulting, an EDUCAUSE Silver Partner.

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I’ve asked many leaders in the IT profession: Did you start your career with the intention of someday becoming a leader? What started you on that path? None of them described their entry into leadership as being the result of getting a new position or a new job title. Instead, many of them talked about a life-changing moment, a moment when they discovered that they could make a contribution in a different way. Many mentioned a sudden career shift. Something in their job or career didn’t work out quite the way they had thought it was going to, forcing them to move in a new direction. Several leaders talked about serendipity—that moment of joyful realization that they were very happy and deeply engaged in what they were doing.

Many IT leaders began their path with a love of solving problems. When that successful problem solving involved many other people, they discovered an increased level of satisfaction. Some of the leaders noted that over time, they became aware that they were highly successful in communicating and collaborating with others. They realized that other people were listening to them and were being motivated by what they said. Often, they were part of a group or a project that they did not want to see fail. Sensing a competence vacuum, they stepped forward. Or perhaps everyone else stepped back, but they stayed in place. Either way, they found their leadership role. Desmond Tutu, archbishop emeritus of Cape Town, recognized this source of personal motivation when he said of himself in 1983: “I am a leader by default, only because nature does not allow a vacuum.”

Once they have started on their path, those who will become successful leaders are able to engage others. They can do so because they have vision: the ability to see a different future, one with new possibilities. But this ability must be developed; it doesn’t just happen. Many leaders develop this vision by asking questions, rather than providing answers. As they acquire foundational expertise in an area, they gain confidence and, through deep engagement, can begin to envision a new way to the future.

After acquiring a vision for the future, the next step is to encourage others to join the journey. Successful leaders attract followers. I often hear that many people aren’t interested in becoming leaders because they perceive the role as being “too political.” But what constitutes politics? Persuasion, influence, and negotiation. In the higher ed IT profession, we technologists need strong expertise. But all technology involves implementation and use by others. We cannot accomplish our goals alone, and we also cannot dictate that others follow. To bring others along, we must develop the skills of persuasion, influence, and negotiation. Additionally, we must be able to find the joy in these actions; if we can’t, a leadership role will not bring professional satisfaction.

We also need to continually expand our experiences and our horizons. In his book Winning, Jack Welch, former chairman and CEO of General Electric, wrote: “Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself.” One way to do so is through role models and mentors. I’m always looking for role models and mentors for myself. Many of the role
models and mentors I’m seeking now are people who are just starting their careers or who are working in different professions. They give me an entirely new viewpoint. Be sure to look broadly. Role models and mentors should freshen your perspective, giving you ideas that you hadn’t thought about before and helping you find problem-solving techniques that you hadn’t previously considered.

Another way to grow is to engage with and involve others in your community. Professional organizations can help here. The more we reach out, the more we collectively draw circles that include other people, thus broadening our own leadership and our own community building.

Third, be ready to volunteer for challenging “stretch projects”—those projects that are beyond your usual scope but that can help you grow. It’s better to have ten different years of experience than to have the same year of experience ten times.

Finally, make decisions. The American computer scientist and U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Grace Hopper has been quoted as saying: “If it’s a good idea, go ahead and do it. It is much easier to apologize than it is to get permission.” Being a leader means looking for the problems that need to be solved and making a commitment to the community to solve those problems. Successful leaders keep that commitment by being prepared to take action.

However, growing yourself is not enough. There is a second part to Welch’s quotation above. He adds: “When you become a leader, success is all about growing others.” Leadership in a community is about growing the people around you. It’s about helping them become the best that they can be. The management consultant and author Peter Drucker stated: “Leadership is lifting a person’s vision to high sights, the raising of a person’s performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations.” We should encourage our staff members to move through various levels so that they can become comfortable acting independently and checking in with management. We also need to recognize those who struggle, even if there is near-term failure. The scientist Neil deGrasse Tyson has noted: “It’s curious that we spend more time congratulating people who have succeeded than encouraging people who have not.” Empowering our staff is essential—and rewarding. Those staff members who enjoy the responsibilities associated with handling urgent matters, fighting fires, and leading the charge will soon be on their own leadership path.

In summary, developing as a leader is a process. Leaders create their own path, envision a future, and encourage others to follow them to that future. Leadership may not start out as a destination, but for successful leaders, it becomes an intentional journey.