People are at the center of all leadership efforts. Leaders cannot lead unless they understand the people they are leading. One way to look at leadership is that the function of a leader is to lead and guide people who will follow with the same values. An effective leader thus must be able to build relationships and create communities. We can define leadership as inspiring people and planning for the future with the motivating factors of relationship building and community service. Relationships can happen between concepts, actions, and values. As for communities, one of the great advantages I have found working in higher education is leveraging the communities that exist for many different disciplines, interests, and practices. These communities provide, for anyone who wants to participate, opportunities to network and to become involved with others who share like values.

Beth Schaefer is the recipient of the EDUCAUSE 2015 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. Schaefer received the award for her mentorship, engagement, and encouragement of others in the profession; for exemplary practices and innovation in technology-enabled client services; for advancing professional development Beth Schaefer and technical training opportunities within the higher education community; and for leadership and outreach in highlighting and promoting the role of women in the IT profession. Schaefer is Director of Client Services, University Information Technology Services, at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee.
Values are important ideals that guide our priorities and are core to an organization. Values tie people together, set vision, and affect what we do as organizations and communities. Some of these qualities include thinking for the future and developing a vision. It is important to set goals and to realize that change can happen along the way. Leaders must recognize their own initiative, want to lead, and be willing to assume responsibility. Motivation can take on many meanings—from creating the incentive for good project outcomes to guiding a vision that gives your followers energy and direction.

Commitment to the cause for the values of the group is also necessary for a good leader. Through commitment, we find more meaning in our work and service, and when we find more meaning in our work and service, we find value. As John W. Gardner said in his book On Leadership: “Leaders must not only have their own commitments, they must move the rest of us toward commitment.”

It is easy to lead for yourself. It is more difficult to lead for others. Honesty, integrity, and the ability to be supportive will create a more successful environment. We all want to know that our leaders are deserving of our trust. It’s about having trust in their knowledge of who and what they are leading, trust in why they have chosen to lead, and trust in their ability to accomplish the vision and goals that have been set forward.

Another way leaders can grow themselves and the people around them is to identify where relationship building can be maintained and where it can be strengthened. Connecting with others is one of the most effective ways one can lead. In The Leadership Challenge, James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner say: “When leadership is a relationship founded on trust and confidence, people take risks, make changes, keep organizations and movements alive. Through that relationship, leaders turn their constituents into leaders themselves.”

In both maintaining and strengthening relationships, it is important to value people for who they are. Ask questions, really listen, and develop a mutual commitment. Encouraging others to take a chance, going along with them even when you don’t know what the outcomes will be, and having the courage to support their decisions is something you can do to help lead. You must also develop your own communication skills and in turn help others to develop theirs. Communication is a very powerful strategy when you are working to accomplish a goal. Making sure that you and your expectations are understood will benefit everyone. This will help you focus on teamwork and the prioritization of goals—which is especially important since it takes a group to attain those goals.

In building relationships and creating communities, good leaders are better able to acclimate to changes and work with more diverse teams. But where do you find the opportunities to lead? In 2008 at the EDUCAUSE annual conference, Deborah Keyek-Franssen was sponsoring a gathering for attendees to talk about ways to advocate for women in higher education information technology. She and I had attended the Frye Leadership Institute...
(now the Leading Change Institute) that previous summer and had developed a friendship. I admired Deb for contacting EDUCAUSE and for having the initiative to request a meeting room for what would become the Women in IT Constituent group. As a result of our friendship and my interest in the topic, Deb asked if I would like to join her in leading this group. Together we have seen the group become very productive in promoting the advocacy of women in the areas of IT recruitment, retention, and advancement efforts in higher education. These efforts have succeeded because of the effective and responsive community. Through the continual development of the values of the community, we have been able to see the growth of individuals and watch them realize their potential.

To become a leader, take note of the opportunities around you and reach out to others. When you purposefully work toward building relationships and creating communities, you’ll become an effective leader—both for yourself and for others.

Notes

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