

To Real Leadership, Alignment is Everything



A cartoon showed a rapidly sinking boat with people furiously bailing out water at the nearly submerged end. At the momentarily high-and-dry end, one person happily says to another, “Wow! I’m sure glad the leak isn’t at our end!”

And there’s the problem. Too narrow a view of “development”—one that hopes for development in

this industry or that region, within this educational level or that social stratum—ultimately leads to feeble results. If the boat is sinking, only some may drown, but eventually everyone gets wet.

Perhaps we have more talk than results on economic development because we haven’t taken the time to define alignment, the great goal of transforming leadership.

We’re mistaken when we assume that alignment means “compromise,” “losing diversity,” “micromanagement,” or “to put in a straight line or bring into line.”

At its best, to *align* is to “bring oneself into agreement or alliance with a cause.” It implies voluntary movement toward a compelling vision. It gives people something bigger and better to devote themselves to than their own self-interest.

In our work with groups in New York, including its 58 county commissioners, we’ve seen the power of alignment—and the waste when that alignment disintegrates. An ill-defined sense of alignment can cripple our ability to bring our energies and resources to bear on long-term economic development. If civic and business leaders debate who is in charge, even as they try to dodge responsibility, they’re telling us that they are ill-equipped to define a “cause.”

Although it is impossible to have leaders devoid of self-interest, it is equally impossible to have sustainable development devoid of selfless leaders.

The benefits of alignment around a set of unifying themes are huge. We can:

- Avoid presiding over an evaporating realm (as I watched so many self-centered leaders do in my hometown of St. Louis, once the fourth-largest city in the country and now a dilapidating disaster).
- Take our focus off the petty and try to develop more profits (in the full sense of that word) for everyone.

- Create a sense of urgency around important actions.
- Inspire many to find countless ways to create real value.

How, in any community riddled with conflicting interest groups, confusion about directions, and misunderstandings about what constitutes “good government” and “economic development”—which is to say, all communities—can we hope to produce effective alignment? Leaders have to:

- *Face Reality*—Leadership has to acknowledge the presence and severity of obstacles—political, economic, social, technological, structural—that are preventing cohesion. Only then can we address and eliminate them.
- *Find Common Themes*—You can’t beat something with nothing. We have to agree on a central core—the vision and values that will pull our community into the future. When we have an agreement about the kind of community we want to become, we can defeat small-minded opposition.
- *Welcome Positive Discontent*—Leadership should welcome discontent, a real enemy to inertia and lethargy and friend of always hard-to-get growth, even as it sets guidelines for civil disagreement.
- *Create Safety Nets*—Leadership works hard to eliminate cheap shots at “big-picture” players. It never lets a special interest annihilate the *general* interest.
- *Major on the Major*—Leadership faces a million challenges, but stays focused on the fabulous 5% that can have significant impact on development.

We can’t have harmony if everyone sings the same note. Alignment is not about uniformity or squelching dissent, but rather about building a commonly accepted vision against which we can check our priceless but rowdy diversity.

It’s easy to talk about change, because this makes us feel good. But it’s hard to actually change, because changing is difficult and can make us feel bad. Great leadership finds a way to pull people together around a few great, unifying ideas that will allow them to go beyond surviving change, and creates an environment where change can be welcomed and exploited for the common good. Most communities and organizations don’t have this kind of leadership.

But anything less isn’t leadership at all. It’s egotism with a very big title—and very little impact. ■

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