

# BEST



# PRACTICES

**VOL. 9**

**ISSUE 1**

## WHEN LEADERS DO LESS

You're a leader. People count on you and wait for your thoughts before they take action.

We have a suggestion. Consider doing less. In this issue of *Best Practices*, we invite you to put up your feet, take some satisfying deep breaths, maybe even take a quick nap. Then get yourself a tall, cold glass of tea and sit here to think with us about improving your work, your civic activities, and your personal life by the unorthodox strategy of doing less.

Some examples:

◆ *Direct less.* Maybe if you do less directing, others will take more responsibility. You can lead in ways that retain appropriate authority at the same time you loosen control over decisions others are capable of making. See pages 2-3.

◆ *Judge less.* Have you ever noticed how much better you work or play when someone watches you with kindly interest?

Consider how much you might gain by doing less evaluating and more observing, just being around. Could you get the benefits of improved performance just by letting others know that you are paying attention?

◆ *Rescue less.* You are overwrought about the decline in civic participation, and perhaps you're single-handedly trying to reverse the trend — "rescue" is your middle name. The cure? Allow others to do more. Let some things resolve themselves.

Doing less gives you more time for just being. Leaders inspire by who they are, even more than by what they do. Taking time to *be*, to cultivate a rich inner life, will power up your leadership.

We address this issue of *Best Practices* mostly to leaders and managers. Enjoy that glass of tea — or iced latté — and see if we can convince you to improve things all around you by less doing and more being.



In a world where shared power is more effective than individual power, the tasks of leadership must be widely shared. No one person can embody all the needed qualities or perform all the tasks.

-- John M. Bryson and Barbara C. Crosby\*\*

\*\*Bryson, John M. and Barbara C. Crosby. *Leadership for the Common Good: Tackling Public Problems in a Shared-Power World.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1992.

**&** Roberts & Kay, Inc. presents Best Practices, a publication highlighting progressive strategies for the private and public sectors.



have learned with our clients that some approaches to leadership seem to handle this tension very well. These are roles leaders can play by doing less themselves, while investing more in others:

◆ *Catalyst*: The leader who brings people, ideas, and resources together to make innovations and progress happen.

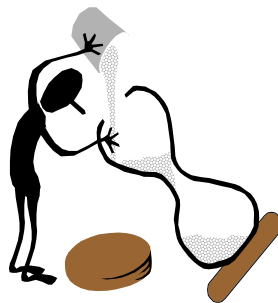
◆ *Servant*: The leader who assists others in doing their work well.

◆ *Steward*: The leader who tends carefully to the people, the work, and the promise of results.

◆ *Coach*: The leader who provides corrections and rewards that lead to choice-oriented behavior and high performance among group members.

◆ *Mirror*: The leader who plays the role of reflecting back to people what their work is, how they are proceeding with it, and where they are having success and problems.

These roles raise the premium on *being* — serving as a positive presence that encourages others. All of these evolving roles require that leaders and managers do less themselves. The focus is on increasing the number of engaged contributors. This “do less” form of leadership means sharing the load, building a broader, better set of ideas, and simply getting more shoulders pressing against more wheels.



## PERSONALLY SPEAKING

Awhile back, I complained regularly to friends about my failure to make progress on a favorite, vulnerable civic project. One wise friend and colleague calls this “having an over-active civic gene.”

Another said, “You can’t do what you would like to, but that just makes room for somebody else to take leadership.” I saw I was stuck in a mode I have named “Valiant Rescue.”

Daniel Kemmis, who wrote *The Good City and the Good Life: Renewing the Sense of Community* when he was the mayor of Missoula, Montana,

pointed out that well-meaning citizens often weaken the leadership fabric of communities, even though our intent is just the opposite.

It seems that overdoing, in civic life as in Chinese martial arts like aikido, unbalances us. We do too much and wonder why others don’t do more. I’m not talking about dumping or ignoring commitments we have already made. But could we say “No” to the next several civic requests, while working to find people with more reason to say “Yes?”

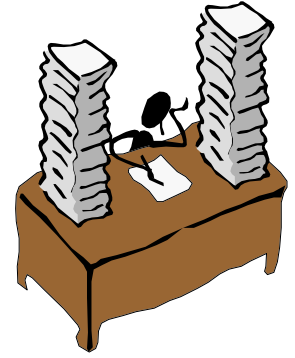
--Rona Roberts

◆ Even if the weight of carrying people’s hopes and pains may fall mainly, for a time, on one person’s shoulders, leadership cannot be exercised alone. The lone-warrior model of leadership is heroic suicide. Each of us has blind spots that require the vision of others. Each of us has passions that need to be contained by others.

--Ronald A. Heifetz,  
*Leadership Without Easy Answers*

## IN PRACTICE

◆ A hard working Organization Development colleague was thinking of leaving her new job. It was too hard on her health and her home life. Instead, a new plant manager appeared. As he began his second week on the job, he stopped in to see our colleague. "I've been looking at your time sheets. I see you spend a huge amount of evening and weekend time here at the plant. What can we do about that?" With his firm support, our friend did less at work, and stayed with the company four more years. Value added to the corporation?? Substantial.



◆ A partner in a prominent national non-profit mediation organization worried aloud to us about the nearly 20 years he had spent working extra hours, accumulating no "equity." No bonuses, no shares in a valuable corporation will ease his way toward retirement. He feels cheated.

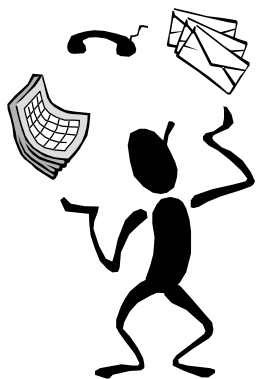
One of our colleagues who founded a non-profit organization has thoughtfully observed this situation from another perspective. When non-profit employees contribute too many extra hours to their work because the needs are so great and the resources so slender, they sacrifice personal, family, and civic energy and time. Our colleague notes that then, as a tacit form of return on their investment in their work, employees feel as if they "own" the non-profit organization. While commitment to meaningful work is good, "owning" something that rightfully belongs to a community or a community board can lead to explosive situations. Excellent people with a false sense of ownership can leave in a destructive hurry, harming the organization and damaging their own career options.

These examples suggest that both corporate leaders and non-profit boards and managers can set a climate of reasonable expectations. Counseling employees to be good stewards of their own energies builds employee loyalty and tenure while avoiding the problems associated with "over-owning."



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