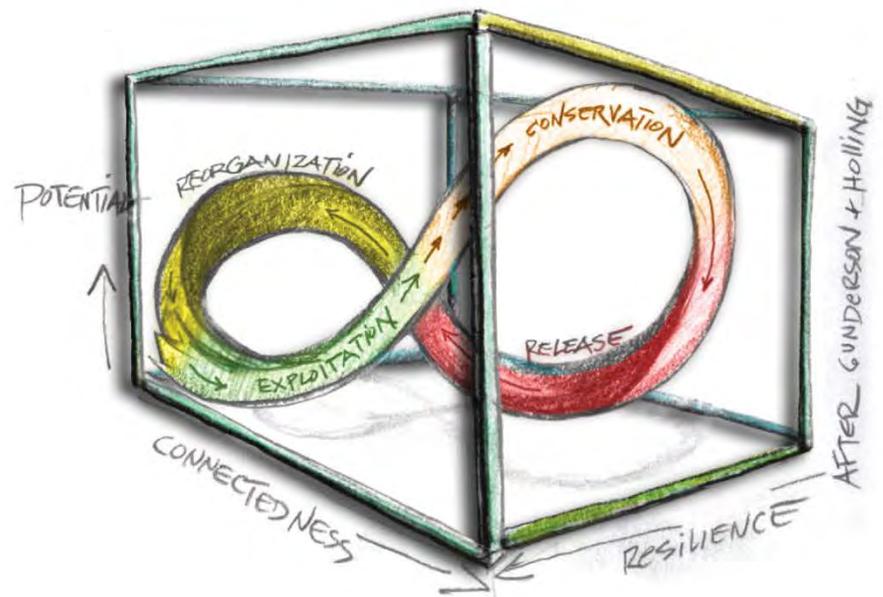


# WHAT IT TAKES THE PRACTICE OF LEADERSHIP

Tom Soma



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## **ABOUT GARY HUBBELL CONSULTING CONVERSATION**

Annually, Gary Hubbell Consulting convenes and hosts a small hand-picked group of social sector professionals from throughout North America for three days of intense dialogue and critical thinking. We strive to create a thought-provoking, mind-opening, and stimulating conversation about philanthropy, organizational leadership, and social sector change. This deep exploration of the nature and challenges of the philanthropic environment is intended to engage, inform, and inspire senior leaders to be catalysts for change in their own organizations and communities of influence. With each *GHC Conversation*, we seek to establish the seeds of a continuing and enriching network that nourishes us as individuals and helps each of us change how we converse, inspire, and seek



## PARTICIPANT BIO

### **Tom Soma**

Executive Director, Ronald McDonald House Charities, Portland, OR

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A 1979 graduate of Notre Dame and long-time resident of Portland, Oregon, Tom recently began his 15th year as Executive Director of Ronald McDonald House Charities® of Oregon and Southwest Washington (RMHC®). A frequent writer, periodic consultant, and former development staff member at the University of Portland and Lewis & Clark College, he devoted eight years of his professional life to the full-time parenting of three daughters (who initially provided rich inspiration and have lately begun rewarding him with grandchildren!).

In recent years, Tom has published articles on leadership development, planned giving, and corporate—non-profit partnerships. In December of 2012, he authored his first book (*No Small Thing—and Other Periodic Musings*), a collection of essays paired with the stunning portraits of award-winning photographer, Bob Ray. With four colleagues, he created and continues to conduct a model program for mentoring non-profit professionals. An amateur poet and lyricist, Tom also serves as resident chef and proprietor of “The Lodge”—an affectionate reference to his home, where visitors are always welcome (and generally well-fed).

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RMHC has been recognized as one of Oregon’s top green businesses for the past three years, and one of Oregon’s “Top 100 Nonprofits to Work For” during each of the past four years (ranked in the top five among medium-sized organizations in 2011 and 2012).

This is Tom’s fifth *GHC Conversation*.



# What it Takes

## *The Practice of Leadership*

Tom Soma

During the past few years, four colleagues and I have mentored graduate students and aspiring non-profit leaders through a program we created and continue to adapt. One benefit of the initiative is that it forces me to evaluate and re-consider decisions on a regular basis. Another—it keeps me honest!

Case in point. David—a mentee—recently sent me the following questions and observations—grouped under the tongue-in-cheek heading, “Lonely at the top”:

*How does an Executive Director deal with the challenges of being in the driver’s seat (the buck stops here)? Yes, you can have a great team, but aren’t there some pressures that are unique to your position? People look to you for strength, confidence, assurance, answers. How have you learned to handle the pressures, public visibility, and responsibilities of the role? How do you manage your relationships inside your organization? In some ways I think I’d be a good Executive Director, but there are other parts of the job that make me doubt whether I have what it takes.*

In my 15<sup>th</sup> year at the organizational helm, I’ve grown accustomed to being in charge. Arguably, I’ve been effective—especially if effectiveness is defined strictly (and narrowly) in terms of results. By every measurable standard, the organization has grown considerably. The annual number of donors and families served have both doubled; endowment and reserve funds have increased ten-fold.

Looking back, I’d give myself an “A” for effort. But despite the achievements, I’d rate my overall performance lower, especially early on. That’s because, the longer I’m in the role, the more my perception of leadership changes—and the higher my expectations grow.

At this point in my career, I believe that *developing people is far more important than delivering results*—something I only barely considered at the outset of my executive tenure, when I was necessarily and almost myopically focused on raising money. Over time, I’ve seen that qualified, empowered people deliver better, more sustainable results than what even the most driven or charismatic leader can hope to generate. Ultimately, a leader’s *style* will dictate substance. *How* one leads eventually produces the most meaningful results—by nearly every criteria.

I also find myself weighing in differently on the age-old question: Are leaders born or bred? Previously I would have said both, with a lean toward nature over nurture. While some leaders may be born with magnetic personalities, I'm now convinced that *effective* leadership requires effort and experience. And rather than *bred*, I'd say *formed and forged*. While charisma may come naturally, great leadership is cultivated through personal discipline and refined through trial and error.

To use an analogy: Strategic planning experts will insist that an inclusive process is essential to an enduring product. In the same vein, an aware, empowering leader is vital to an organization's sustained success. Employees may *perform* well temporarily—for reasons that may have nothing to do with their leader. But they will only continue to deliver if they believe and buy in—not only to the organization's mission, but more importantly to its values. Leaders must not merely *express* the values—they must *embody* them.

Here I need to distinguish between "leadership" and "power." The former is *exercised*; the latter, while initially inherited, must ultimately be *earned*—by virtue of persuasion, not rank. Granted, a title buys time—but not much. Sooner rather than later, leaders must perform—and by perform, I mean empower and engage an effective team in the fulfillment of organizational goals that have been thoughtfully crafted and are enthusiastically embraced by as many stakeholders as possible. The old expression, "My way or the highway," may have a nice ring—but as a leadership axiom, it's a prescription for failure.

To David, I would begin with this. Yes, people look to me for strength, confidence, and assurance—all of which come with the territory and must be cultivated and conveyed in disciplined fashion. As for answers—my job is not to *have* them, but rather to ensure that we generate them collectively.

I like to think of my style as "collaborative" rather than "prescriptive." I embrace wonder and aspire to humility. I believe that the best leader must be the best *listener*. And being a good listener requires relinquishing personal baggage and biases, paying attention to others, asking good questions, and finding ways to give every employee a voice (which takes time when you're working with introverts).

Of course, I don't always live up to these aims—but I continue aspiring to them. And obviously, I make plenty of mistakes—but hopefully, I continue learning from them!

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In 1930, the Scottish novelist, poet, and politician John Buchan wrote, “The task of leadership is not to put greatness into people, but to elicit it, for the greatness is there already.”<sup>1</sup> Decades later, Kenneth Blanchard, author of *The One Minute Manager*, observed, “The key to successful leadership today is influence, not authority.”<sup>2</sup> Both echo the ancient wisdom of Lao Tsu, who, 2500 years earlier in his *Tao Te Ching*, proposed: “When the Master governs, the people are hardly aware that he exists...When his work is done, the people say, ‘Amazing: we did it, all by ourselves!’”<sup>3</sup>

If you accept the premise that leadership *must be formed and forged*, how does an aspiring leader develop the capacities to which Buchan, Blanchard, and Lao Tsu so eloquently allude? Again, to David, I would say: There is not *one* way. There are *many*.

Nearly 75 years ago, Brenda Ueland authored the lovely book, *If You Want to Write*. If a reader were to replace “writing” with *any* other activity or vocation, nearly every one of Ueland’s conclusions would apply. Especially this: “...the only way to become a better writer is to become a better person.”<sup>4</sup>

That contention is especially true when it comes to *leading*. Which points to the obvious: **If** you aspire to developing others, you must begin by developing yourself.

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I think the most effective leaders possess three distinct qualities. They’re genuine. They’re receptive. And they’re articulate.

By *genuine*, I mean authentic and compassionate; confidence tempered by humility. It starts with the Socratic precept to “know thyself,” and incorporates a sincere desire to know (and *appreciate*) others. It’s evidenced by a bearing that emanates simplicity, integrity, enthusiasm, and passion, and a style that’s respectful and empowering. The genuine leader engenders trust and confidence.

By *receptive*, I mean patient, tolerant, and curious. Receptivity demands a high degree of emotional awareness—of one’s self and others. The receptive leader is open to input and

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<sup>1</sup> Buchan, John, *Montrose and Leadership*, Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1930, p 24.

<sup>2</sup> Blanchard, Kenneth, as quoted in <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kevinkruse/2012/10/16/quotes-on-leadership/>, January 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell, Stephen, *Tao Te Ching*, HarperCollinsPublishers, New York, 1988, p 17.

<sup>4</sup> Ueland, Brenda, *If You Want to Write*, Second Edition, Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, MN, 1987, p. 129.

criticism, doesn't take either praise or blame personally, and willingly admits and learns from mistakes.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, he or she breeds and bolsters inclusivity.

By *articulate*, I mean a thoughtful communicator—someone who thinks, speaks, and writes clearly, succinctly, and convincingly. While personal magnetism helps, one shouldn't confuse charisma with clarity in writing and speech. Leaders must tell good stories—in ways that are easily and widely understood. That takes discipline.

Here it's important to point out—the articulate leader doesn't have to be (and usually isn't) the most creative person in the room. Rather, he or she needs to be able to elicit, recognize, distill and disseminate the creativity of others. And not be threatened by it. Most importantly—and here's where humility again enters the picture—he or she must credit and acknowledge others. Great leaders don't take ownership for the ideas and efforts of others. They know every successful initiative demands a team—and they give credit where credit is due: to the team.

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Once more, to David. I believe aspiring leaders can hone the ability to be genuine, receptive, and articulate. How? Not simply *by* practice, but more fundamentally, by establishing and adhering *to a practice*—specifically, an intentional, daily effort to invite the awareness found in solitude.

This aspect of leadership *can only be formed*. And yet, again, there is no definitive formation process. The way for one can't be named by another. The secret—if there is one—can only be discovered along an interior journey—over one's own unique course and in one's own good time.

Here, I *can't* be prescriptive. I can't say *what* to practice. But I *can* share a strong conviction that any aspiring leader must cultivate a regular, faithful practice of some sort.

My own practice involves three elements: reading, reflection, and renewal. The first two are more solitary; the third a combination of solitary and communal pursuits.

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<sup>5</sup> Changing one's mind about serious matters—contrary to conventional political wisdom—does *not* necessarily reveal a weak spine and indicate “flip-flopping.” On the contrary, it may signal an open, inquisitive mind and disposition (which are true assets of a receptive leader).

For me, *reading* opens a door to the wisdom of others. I gravitate to a wide range and variety of spiritual writers—indulging at least two or three short pieces every morning (with frequent evening supplements).

*Reflection* opens a door to the wisdom within; it takes the form of daily meditation. Even when it's difficult to still a restless mind, I benefit from 10-15 minutes of silence at the start of each day. And I continue to be amazed at what emerges in those brief moments of patience, waiting, and passivity.

*Renewal* is the conscious effort to indulge that which I find restorative. I happen to be restored by simple pursuits: solitary walks, conversations with friends, baking, writing, literature (yes, more reading!). My work itself incorporates many of these interests—and in that sense, the job itself is fundamentally renewing. (As an aside: I find it tragic that, in a culture founded upon an inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness, so few people invest their time in what they truly love).

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Back to David: Do *you* have “what it takes”?

To that I can only respond with two questions: What are the qualities *you* consider fundamental to great leadership? And are you willing to commit yourself to their ongoing cultivation?

The most critical prerequisite for leadership is an unquenchable thirst for growth—and an equivalent desire to engage and support others on their own respective quests.

Leadership—and its practice—is a *dynamic* proposition. You can never stop preparing. You can never stop learning. You can never stop growing. And you can never stop sharing. If you believe and adhere to that, you *can prepare for* and *grow into* leadership.

At this point in my life, I've determined not only that I *want* to lead—but that I *enjoy* the opportunities afforded by leadership, both personally and professionally. More importantly, I've identified specific qualities to which I aspire and implemented a practice that reinforces their pursuit.

For me, the effort to be genuine, receptive, and articulate is an attempt not just to *be* myself—but to be my *best* self. When all is said and done, that's a process, not a destination. I welcome each day as an opportunity to recreate myself—and thus to lead more

compassionately, creatively, and effectively. My practice serves as a map. The fact that the journey never ends is ultimately the best part.

Despite (and more likely, because of) a keen awareness of my own *weaknesses*, I think I'm a better leader now than I was 14 or 10 or even two years ago. I'm certainly less controlling and more encouraging—and ultimately, far more focused on enabling and empowering than I was when I initially assumed the role.

In the end, I'm just like you, David—a work in progress. With that in mind, I'll close on an encouraging note, with these simple suggestions. Identify the qualities to which you aspire. Commit to a practice. Enjoy the process of learning and growing. Understand that you can lead in many ways and from many places within an organization. Decide where *you're* most comfortable. If that happens to be at the top—and a senior leadership role presents itself—consider inviting a mentee to help keep *you* honest!

Good luck!