

IS RENEWED LEADERSHIP THE ANSWER?

by

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Speech Reprint

Thank you, Daryl Heasley, for that kind introduction. I am delighted to be here with you this morning, and not to be like Christopher Columbus on one of his returns to Spain a few decades ago. It is reported that when Columbus got back to Spain he reflected on his journey and he realized the following: that when he set out he did not know where he was going; when he got there he did not know where he was; when he got home he did not know where he was; when he got home he did not know where he had been; and, he did it all on borrowed money.

I was also delighted a few months ago when I saw the title that Bernard Vavrek had selected for this talk. I was ill when the final brochure details were being addressed and Bernard, with his infinite wisdom, came up with the wonderful title, "Is Renewed Leadership the Answer?" My first thought when I saw it was the answer to what? or to whom?

As I reflected on the "to what?" I thought of a CHANGING RURAL AMERICA. A Rural America:

- ♦ that is geographically isolated though technologically connected (or at least connectable) with the rest of the world;
- ♦ that recognizes in some quarters its need for looking beyond the county line, although being "from away" is still close to criminal activity in many areas;
- ♦ that is beset with a huge litany of economic, social and cultural issues:
 - drug and alcohol abuse

- spouse and child abuse
- increasing dropout rates
- "drop-in" rates also increasing (drop-in refers to young people go to school because there is nothing else to do and whose "presence" is marginal in class activities)
- public schools unable to meet diverse constituent needs
- severe economic issues
- growth which causes major taxation changes and makes life difficult for locals who are poor or on fixed incomes
- apathy and lack of involvement
- ♦ that has fabulously underutilized the community resource represented by women, children, and older persons.

We live in a Rural America that is part of a changing world, a Rural America that is characterized by:

- ♦ Increasing complexity
- ♦ Globalism
- ♦ A part of a worldwide economy for which it is not prepared
- ♦ A part of a world culture.

Statements like these are not often comforting and yet my reading suggests that they are true. Our view of the world will play a large part in determining how well we cope with these changes. For example, in workshop settings on leadership, I often ask participants this question:

WHEN YOU THINK OF YOURSELF IS IT AS A CITIZEN OF:

Your hometown
Your county
Your state
The USA
North America
Another country
The world

Often, in a spirit of globalism, people will say, "Of course I am a citizen of the world." At which point, I say – at least in this region where most people are white – that by saying that you are a citizen of the world you recognize that you are in a minority, as the majority of the world is populated by people of color. That is often a sobering realization for workshop members, especially as it hastens the real need for dealing with diversity.

So it might, as I reflected in preparing this talk, be fairly safe to assume that all is not well and good in rural America. I asked myself what kind of leadership has been in place to get us, for the most part, to where we are today.

And for the most part, my answer is that we have experienced what is known to many as Transactional Leadership. This is characterized by being white male dominated, top-down, hierarchical, reactionary, non-inclusive, with limited vision, perpetuating the status quo and not given to change other than that which is in the exclusive interests of the leaders.

And before getting to an answer for the question title of this talk, there is another implicit question needing to be answered and that is – what is renewed leadership. For my purposes renewed leadership is akin to what contemporary literature refers to as transformational leadership.

Transformational leaders have several qualities and skills which I will briefly touch upon.

QUALITIES AND SKILLS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERS

A transformational leader possesses these qualities:

1. Is committed to a cause and is passionate about it;
2. Makes time to think, plan, and read;
3. Is a visionary;
4. Possesses a record of success;
5. Is innovative and willing to try new approaches;
6. Is a proactive doer rather than a reactive naysayer;
7. Has few sacred cows – and yet handles tradition with elegance;
8. Appreciates and embraces the beauty of differences;

9. Has little fear of the unknown;
10. Welcomes change as a necessary dynamic;
11. Is a risk-taker;
12. Is a person of caring and integrity;
13. Is open and not a "game-player."

The transformational leader brings these skills:

1. Is able to manage money – both procurement and budgeting;
2. Is skilled in teambuilding;
3. Can relate well to multiple stakeholders and broaden political and power bases;
4. Motivates and inspires;
5. Encourages and appreciates differences;
6. Knows how and with whom to plan;
7. Assesses feelings pro and con – addresses them and moves on;
8. Knows one's own style and limitations;
9. Rewards and recognizes others;
10. Handles transitions effectively – deals with endings before beginnings;
11. Handles conflicts and differences competently and fairly;
12. Is able to openly give and receive feedback;
13. Expects failures in others and self occasionally;
14. Can make decisions when necessary – in ways that are timely, clear, and decisive.

And now to return to the question: Is Renewed Leadership the Answer? I hope it is. However, our application of these qualities and skills will give us a much better answer in the years ahead. I am persuaded that these qualities and skills do provide the means that will result in not only a Rural America, but a world that is more peaceful, environmentally, economically and culturally viable than is presently the case.

At the University of Maine Cooperative Extension where I do my work, we have a number of leadership efforts underway in which the qualities and skills of transformational leadership form the basis of our curriculum offerings. These efforts include the Family Community Leadership Program (FCL), the

Young Farmer Leadership Institute, the Maine Kellogg Community Education Leadership Project – all of which offer a range of workshops in community leadership. We put equal if not more emphasis on follow-up activities to these trainings. It is simply not enough anymore to mount an interesting, stimulating and enjoyable program for a day, weekend, or week and then never have the participants hear from you again. The program in leadership training is but one event on a long journey and we must prepare for the program as well as the rest of the journey.

I will close with a brief recognition of the fact that transformational leadership as an answer to the needs of Rural America will not be a panacea. There will be resistance – especially on the part of persons or groups whose long standing vested interests will inevitably be challenged. There will be fear and anxiety on the parts of those not “in power” for the reactions and retributions that engaging in transformational behaviors may bring on. There will be a great need for extensive training – and for recognizing that the changes may be a long time in coming for what has to be changed is very well entrenched. However, when we look at the state of Rural America (and other parts of this country and the world) – with its environmental ecology on the verge of irreversible collapse, and with its people crying out for greater human interaction and understanding – then by revising our question to read **SHOULD RENEWED LEADERSHIP QUALITIES AND SKILLS BE APPLIED TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF RURAL AMERICA?**, I submit the answer is a resounding **YES**.