

Is This Your Time to Lead?

~ Sylvia Henderson

Is this your time to lead? I asked this exact question of myself - twice - when I became President of two organizations at two separate times.



Both organizations - membership-based associations - experienced downward-trending years prior to my presidential terms. Attendance at events dwindled. Membership numbers fell. Volunteerism was a challenge internally. Predecessors created negative environments through their own personalities, cliques they formed with people who catered to their needs, gossip, disinformation to members, and ego-centric behaviors. I became an “instant president” in one of the organizations, when my predecessor left after only 3 weeks into his term. I did not have the opportunity to attend that organization’s class that prepared vice-presidents to identify their board nominees and prepare their strategies for their presidential term. Board members were handling day-to-day operational details and were too over-committed to handle the governance issues they should have been tackling.

As President - both times - I determined that board members needed to understand their governance roles and be positioned to carry-out those roles. I provided training on how to be Board leaders, and with their help created organizational charts with defined roles. The structure enabled each person to reach out to members to serve on committees that the Board leaders oversaw. As difficult as it was for me as a decisive leader, I controlled my own reactions to opposing viewpoints in Board meetings. Additionally, I facilitated listen-to-understand sessions and took every board member to a 1:1 lunch to learn the person as well as her or his purpose and motivations. Finally, I gave uplifting - yet organizationally honest - President’s Reports in regular chapter and national conference meetings, and communicated extensively so that members realized their roles in helping their organizations meet their needs.

When each of my presidential terms ended - one year and three years respectively - not only did I have hard data (financial, membership, and volunteer numbers rebounded to prior “healthy” levels). I also heard from many members

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that they had renewed enthusiasm for each organization and wanted to help their organizations grow.

How does this relate to “is this your time to lead”?

When both of my terms ended, numbers had rebounded to prior “good levels”; they did not grow higher than those levels. I felt I had not served each organization based on growth. I doubt many leaders who consider themselves strong leaders are content with “back to earlier numbers” as their end result. What I failed to realize until others pointed it out to me was that my leadership style was *exactly* what each organization needed at their respective times. Due to my leadership, each organization came back up to positive energy levels, renewed volunteer commitments, restored member numbers, and more-sustainable financials. The results allowed my successors to establish systems and processes that caused the organizations to grow stronger. Neither could grow until they recovered.

A more-public example of “right leaders/right times” is a look at start-up and growth companies. If you study stories in the Wall Street Journal, Inc., Fortune, Forbes, Entrepreneur, and similar business publications, time and again you learn of start-up ventures whose founders start with a flourish. They grow their companies quickly, yet hit walls at some point during their growth. Then either their businesses fail, or they bring in leadership of a different type to run their companies. The repeat pattern implies that one type of leader - the creative, visionary founder - is the right leader for starting and rapidly growing the company, yet a more-experienced, frequently older, mature, even-keeled (or differently-assertive) leader is the “right leader” to maintain and sustain business growth. There are also turn-around leaders, and in older, long-term companies a yet-again different leader is sometimes brought in to lead the organization to its succession or exit stage.

So how do you know whether you are the right leader for the times in which you are leading or seeking to lead?

If you study leadership styles you quickly learn of the plethora of leadership gurus with varying theories and numerous assessments that identify and

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measure the type of leader you are or can be. I spent a good portion of my MBA degree studies and professional development in my corporate career focused on leadership theories and competencies. What I've discovered in practice, however, is to ask a few questions that seem simple enough, yet yield the complex realization of whether I - or you - are the right leader at the right time. If not, you can determine what needs to happen to bring both your leadership and your organization into sync.

Some of the questions to ask yourself (and mentors or advisors you trust) are:

- At what stage of growth is your organization?
- What is going on - or has occurred - that causes you to assess the organization's status?
- Are you happier working with people, projects, or data (numbers, coding, or other non-human-interaction pursuits)?
- Do you have the emotional intelligence quotient to deal with situations that are not "natural" for you?
- Do you have, or can you gather around you, people who compliment the areas where you are not so strong or who can assume responsibility and implement what you cannot or choose not to do?
- Are you coachable...open to input, receiving sometimes-difficult feedback, and able to discern what's best as next steps for your people and your business?
- Are you naturally more-visionary and big-picture, creative, detail-oriented, or strategic? Do you welcome conflict, making difficult choices, enjoy negotiating, or relish communicating in the spotlight? Do you enjoy "silly" and fun, have energy that exudes trust and encourages followership, or prefer quiet, behind-the-scenes "just get it done"?

By the way, your answers to the above are neither "right or wrong", "good or bad". Be honest with self-identification by what is your reality and who you are. Then ask,

- Is this what your organization needs at this time in order to meet its objectives and be what its founders, members, executive suite, and/or employees want it to be?

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Is this your time to lead? While yes, there are “bad leaders”, more often there are simply leaders with styles and actions that are not in sync with what their organizations or people need at the time. Leadership development, mentorship, and other tools and resources abound that can help if you need to bridge your own leadership / organizational results gap.

Here in the Women’s Information Network you will find business coaches who can also serve you to help you determine if this is your time to lead.

Sylvia Henderson