

Responsible leadership in the economic downturn

In the context of the uncertain economy, living and leading responsibly has taken on an importance that offers challenging choices each day

Our challenge is to stay in the world of possibility. We may not be free of fear, but we can choose to be part of the solutions and to grow a new community order together. Such is the promise and the price of citizenship.

— Nan Carle, Community Connecting
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by Nan Carle



O I am beginning to remember December 2008 when they came to take the light bulbs out of our offices – as the ‘good old days’. For the first time in my professional career, I am party to reducing and in some cases, terminating services, to people with learning disabilities. The economic and political situation for the State of Arizona is complicated and the level of uncertainty is grave. Fear is everywhere. No one is untouched by our economic downturn. We hope we have ‘hit bottom’ – but we cannot be sure that it will not get worse for 2010.

In this context living and leading responsibly has taken on an importance that offers challenging choices each day to develop into being the leader I most want to be. A friend of mine, Anna Eliatamy asked me to write my ‘story’ for a book she is writing called, *Seven Dimensions for Principled Leadership and Sustainability* which is currently in press. Writing for her publication made me sit back and think more clearly about what I was doing and why. I offer the five components I earmarked for my definition of leading responsibly in the economic downturn. It was helpful to reframe my thinking and my actions with a reflective look on recessions and the hardships – yet the opportunities that become present. The highlights follow.

Promoting emotional wellbeing

Fear is pervasive in the world that surrounds our service system. Services are being cut or delayed, individuals and

families are angry, staff are worried about losing their jobs, party politics are noisy and confusing and the radio is blaring hate talk shows. Many of us are often working at the crossroads of human despair. Staying emotionally healthy is a critical discipline for all of us.

Things that help:

- Stay present and out of the fear zone
- Stay available
- Communicate often and with a routine
- Breathing as a practice.

Responsible Leadership occurs when we hold compassion for others and then let go of the emotions. It is the leader’s responsibility to set the conditions for emotional strength in the face of change.

It would be irresponsible to demonstrate fearful and hateful leadership in response to the surrounding chaos.

Managing meaning

Now more than ever our values represent the spine of our character. Throughout my career I have stood for promoting strong and healthy communities able to include all our members. And now, 25 years after being part of starting the Southwark Consortium (now Choice Support), the battle for institutional closure has intensified with ever more at stake than ever before.

Things that help:

- Take a stand – mine is: a personal responsibility to promote strong and healthy communities able to include all our members
- Acknowledge people as individuals

- Work with the individual’s teams – and, most important, support their circles of support
- Work across systems to harness resources – the more complex the need the more important it is to do so.

Responsible Leadership occurs when we ask the question: How does this decision move us forward or away from strengthening and protecting the interests and rights of each person using our services?

“Tough decisions” must be made in ways that support people to be part of the solution.

It would be irresponsible to make decisions absent of the core meaning and purpose of valuing people.

Inclusive conversations that embrace dissent

It would be easy to move into ‘us and them’ ways of operating. Providers are suing the State of Arizona and with reduced state funds, person centred planning is considered by some to be ‘pie in the sky’. But the problems we face are about all of us – how we value each other, especially when we disagree – is the key test of this time

Things that help:

- Person Centred Planning is an excellent way of mobilising natural networks – and it is people’s natural networks that matter most at this time
- Hosting meetings with providers who are directly working along side people using services
- Hosting meetings of individuals, families and friends to increase awareness and understanding of the size and nature of the problem.

Responsible leadership occurs when we work in ways that include views that are diverse from our own. Together, we can solve our problems. And, it takes dialogue and conversation to make sure we are

solving the right problems.

It would be irresponsible to avoid conflict and change.

Remembering that the cup is half full

The cup is certainly half empty but looking at the resources that are available is the way to climb out of the morass of scarcity and fear. It is my experience that strategies of the half empty cup lead to more dependence and powerlessness. Reframing the 'cup as half full' is a better way to generate a renewed sense of what is positive and possible.

Things that help:

- Look for the new tools that present themselves during a recession e.g. new technologies for sharing information, such as Facebook, Skype, other social networks of our times that are immediate and available for all
- Look for gaps between rhetoric and reality that go unspoken in times of economic well-being
- Look for a renewed sense of what is important
- Things will never be the same – how do we influence the 'new reality'?

Responsible leadership occurs when we listen to the concerns around us and help reframe the questions in ways that we can positively apply our values.

It would be irresponsible to move into command and control approaches that would ultimately create more dependence and learned helplessness in every aspect of our community.

Intellectual stimulation

Create a work environment where everyone is using his or her brainpower to make a difference and are always learning something new.

Things that help:

- Sharing skills and talents in new ways - e.g. webinars
- Free downloads for learning and sharing
- New ways of solving problems and demonstrating talents
- Be a place where people are learning and growing regardless of downsizing or moving on...

Responsible leadership occurs when we create an environment where staff want to learn something new every day.

It would be irresponsible to demean a person's potential to be all he or she can be.

These five components for navigating in the economic circumstance of our times represent what is important to me. I urge all the readers of *Community Connecting* to consider what is important to you? What matters most? What will you keep as your standards when and if the times get truly tough for people you care about and for yourself?

Let's continue the conversation. All comments welcomed. Contact Nan at: nancarle@mac.com

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