



Leading in lean times: Influence that *matters*

Imagine a team of elected officials and staff who consistently address their township's current needs and future plans because they are willing and able to:

- *communicate effectively about even the most controversial and challenging issues*
- *have respectful, civil debates that produce quality decisions because all ideas are understood and examined*
- *work productively with each other even though team members have differing opinions*
- *increase productivity by simple yet powerful human interactions that bring out the best in each team member*
- *cultivate a collaborative culture that generates creative and courageous ideas needed in today's challenging world*

Some officials may read this and think, "Hey, that sounds just like us!" Others may have noticed a few improvements their township team could make. And, a few probably reacted immediately with, "Are you kidding?"

So, let's frame it another way: Perhaps such a township team is required to meet the economic realities of reduced budgets, tight constraints and frustrated citizens. However, how many township officials are willing and able to collaborate so productively? What behaviors can a leader use to help create this type of environment? And, what must we leave behind that no longer serves us to embrace the performance possibilities of effective working relationships?



This continuing education article and accompanying self-assessment is worth 2.0 elective credits in MTA's Township Governance Academy. See page 24 for details.

OBJECTIVES

- Discusses personal behavior and techniques officials can use to foster a positive township environment
- Offers insights into how to inspire and lead effective township officials, employees and volunteers

CORE COMPETENCIES

- To utilize consensus-building techniques
- To possess persuasive/influential abilities
- To motivate others to achieve desired outcomes

Every organization has limited resources—and always has. However, townships are currently challenged in ways many officials have never before experienced. Look around. How much energy has been shifted to cost-cutting measures, pressuring people to do more with less, and strategizing ways to eliminate positions and projects—just to survive?

This survival mode can cause townships to pay a price. However, it could also be a catalyst for necessary individual and collective behavioral shifts required by the New Economy.

Ineffective communication, unaligned team efforts, lone leadership and mediocre environments threaten the ability to make quality decisions and reduce any hope of creating a better tomorrow. No matter what position one holds within the township, *all* officials have the influence to inspire their township team to produce excellence by monitoring and adjusting one's own behaviors and encouraging others on your team to do the same.

It's time to take Gandhi's statement seriously, "Become the change you want to see in the world."

BRINGING OUT THE BEST IN PEOPLE

As an elected official, you probably face frustrated, angry and perhaps desperate citizens on a regular basis. You may feel the same internal angst. After severe cost cutting, what happens to staff members who are left? While many may feel grateful for still having a job, they are probably also experiencing a plethora of emotions. That same frustration, anger or desperation may be felt by walking into a township office. In the midst of attempting to solve urgent, complex problems, too often, little energy is allocated to appreciating, recognizing and bringing out the best in the people who are diligently laboring to get the work done.

The effects of a lack of appreciation and recognition are stronger than we might expect. Human resource consulting firm Towers Perrin's groundbreaking research concludes that engaged people consistently produce superior work, they innovate more, deliver better customer service, and go out of their way to manage costs and meet expectations. And, they behave this way because they *want* to, not because they are expected to.

Effective township leaders understand that people who consistently perform at their best are our most valuable source of productivity. Be honest. Do your behaviors consistently help people around you engage or disengage from the work before them? How much time have you invested in exploring ways to be right and kind at the same time? Or, would you rather be known for your ability to be victorious in any debate even at the expense of bringing out the best in others or producing effective working relationships? Do you consciously provide a forum for all viewpoints to be heard to ensure higher quality decisions? Or, is the majority of your energy expended in getting your position heard and accepted?

Yes, township leaders are tasked with getting results with even tighter budgets. And, yes that reality may include cost-saving

initiatives. So, how does one really do more with less? Common sense tells us that won't happen by neglecting, pressuring, de-edifying or abusing fellow board members, staff, volunteers or citizens. Lean times require officials to focus on and invest in the human capital necessary to carry on day-to-day operations and execute plans for the future. Thank goodness, conclusive research results are available to help navigate through what used to seem like a mystery.

Look around and you'll see shifts needed to achieve collaborative desired outcomes. Shifts in our thinking and acting; shifts in the way we get results; and shifts in the deliberate impact we have on the environments within which we expect to get those results. Each individual must make his or her own modifications; however, cultural shifts can be accelerated by leaders who bring out the best in others and create an environment where people choose to excel. This is called influence.

And, after all, isn't that what leadership is really all about—*influence*?

"A leader in today's townships means to be an informative servant of the people—to be available, friendly and knowledgeable. Leadership is being prepared for everyday challenges of traditional and non-traditional township government responsibilities, sharing knowledge (not opinion), and being accountable."

**—Dorothy Hart, Clerk
Locke Township (Ingham Co.)**

A leader with no influence holds a position by title only. Influential leaders harness the imagination and energy of their fellow board members, the staff and the community, tapping into intellectual and emotional resources that are required to address today's challenges. As John Maxwell, author of several books on leadership, writes, "If you look behind and no one's following, you're just out for a walk."

An influential leadership team optimizes its strengths and minimizes its weaknesses. Rather than acting in isolation, each member draws from the information, expertise, experience and ingenuity of each of its members. Diversity is leveraged and creativity is encouraged. Deliberate collaboration is essential if a team expects to address today's challenges.

PEOPLE MUST WANT TO FOLLOW YOU

Never stop developing your people skills.

I was coaching a township supervisor a few months ago whose response to a suggestion for improvement was, "But I'm just not good with people."



Township officials' ability to work productively with people and to build relationships based on trust are significant determining factors in how well ideas will translate into actions with, and through, others.

"Excuse me?" I replied. Let's think this through ... you're a leader. If we were talking about budgets, plans and organization, would you look at me and say, "But I'm just not good with logic" or, "I'm just not that good with decision-making, or numbers?" Absolutely not! So, why do we think it's acceptable to be less than exceptional with people!?! Leadership is about people!

Few leaders succeed unless a lot of people want them to. The lone leader has been obsolete for decades. No matter what you're trying to accomplish, you won't achieve much of anything beyond mediocre by yourself. However, greatness can be achieved by a collaborative few. Cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote, "Never underestimate the ability of a small handful of people to change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Developing plans, allocating resources and containing a budget are all managing activities. Although managing is part of a leader's skill set, managing tasks brilliantly does not make one a leader. Leadership is about influencing, orchestrating, inspiring, developing and bringing out the best in people. Township officials' ability to work productively with people and to build relationships based on trust are significant determining factors in how well ideas will translate into actions with, and through, others. Limited people skills limit success.

Recognition and praise are skills worth developing.

How often do you recognize or praise people's contributions? What we appreciate, appreciates. What we depreciate, depreciates. Sounds simple? The Gallup Organization has conducted the largest worldwide study of employee engagement in history, researching more than 10 million people in 114 countries, conducted in 41 languages. For a leader who is searching for ways to lead in lean times, several of their conclusions are worth reviewing. The research combines two separate measures: rational commitment and emotional attachment. Both are critical to achieving results.

Gallup's research translates into elements based on human needs that predict performance. When those needs are met, the organization benefits dramatically. One of the elements of a productive organization is consistent recognition and praise for good work. Less than one in three people gave a positive answer to the Gallup question, "In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work." In fact, the responses were more like, "Not only have I not received praise lately, my best efforts are routinely ignored!" Praise is painfully absent in most environments. How much talent is going untapped in our townships—among staff, boards, committees and volunteers?

Before you dismiss the idea of recognition as nice but unimportant, consider this: Neuroscientists say that recognition or praise literally releases dopamine into our system, giving us a feeling of enjoyment and satisfaction. Since our brains crave the surges of dopamine, people will alter their behavior to get those energizing bursts. Moms often tell their children, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." Well, it appears she was right once again! Positive words are not just nice and polite; they activate the part of the brain related to reward! Effective leaders reinforce and solidify productive behaviors by looking for them, recognizing their value, and praising them as they occur.

Teams with high quotients of recognition and praise perform better than those in a culture of constant correction, gossip, unnecessary pressure, back-stabbing, sniping, games of "gotcha" and other counter-productive behaviors. Here's an added benefit for those who provide the recognition and praise: increases in happiness and decreases in depression were cited in those who gave praise as well as those who received it. Unfortunately, cultures of recognition are rare, and performance suffers.

This is not to say that feedback and course correction aren't critical. However, how skilled are you in giving feedback that's heard and actually results in change? Effective feedback isn't about finding people or teams doing things wrong and correcting them. Constant correction does not increase performance. Effective feedback helps people leverage their strengths and address behaviors they need to improve. A leader with effective people skills assists others by compassionately "holding up a mirror" to help them honor and celebrate successes as well as adjust the behaviors that hinder their ability to get their desired results.

This doesn't mean we ignore poor performance, especially among our fellow board and staff members. It means we get better at feedback that actually works. Yes, we need to address that which is not working. To do so, let's start with ourselves.

What are you doing to contribute to the productive workings of your board? Is there anything you do that hinders the ability of the team to work together productively? What do you need to

change to help your board become more productive, creative, courageous, innovative or effective? What are you currently doing that causes distress, angst or counterproductivity of the team?

It's easy, yet ineffective to complain about and try to change the behaviors of others. It's much harder to look into our own mirror and change that which isn't working. Yet, doing so reaps the greatest rewards for yourself and for your team. Specifically, what do *you* need to improve?

YOU ARE THE PROJECT

Continuously improve your emotional intelligence.

Governance starts with self-governance. If you want something to change, change yourself. If you find yourself saying, "Someone should do something about that," that someone is you! See a need? Take an action!

Leadership is as much about who we are as it is about what we do. Unfortunately, few of us have developed enough emotional intelligence to really understand ourselves or the impact we have on others.

Articles, books and seminars are easily available to understand emotional intelligence. If you're not familiar with the concept and its applications, reviewing the information might be a good next step, since your emotional intelligence quotient is *twice* the indicator of your leadership effectiveness as your technical competency and IQ combined!

Emotional intelligence has two parts: Self-competency and social competency.

Self-competency is about self-awareness and self-management.

Recently, a trustee with a temper told me she knew she got impatient with people and "flew off the handle" from time to time, however, she "had no control over it" when she was frustrated. I've seen others like her, mindlessly acting with



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displays of anger, frustration, angst or disgust on recordings of township meetings. Your citizens observe them as well. Such behaviors don't increase people's desire to follow.

Self-awareness means we understand where we excel as well as what we need to improve to be more effective and more influential. Self-management means we are disciplined and deliberate in our actions with increased awareness of their effect on the situation, others and results. Emotionally and attitudinally, be positively predictable. Exceptional teams are not led by emotional roller coasters.

Social competency involves social awareness and relationship management. In any given situation, how intensely and deliberately do you work to understand others' feelings, needs and concerns? Or, are you only concerned about making sure your voice is heard? If leading is the desired outcome, people must want to follow you. This requires building relationships based on trust.

"Officials must not talk about each other, and we must understand that we can agree to disagree and still provide for or meet the needs of our residents and volunteers."

—Adrienne Glover, Supervisor
Calvin Township (Cass Co.)

Relationships drive results.

Relationships have taken on a whole new meaning when it comes to getting results. Relationship management is about the ability to build relationships based on trust. Without trust, real influence doesn't exist. You may get compliance; however, commitment is unlikely. As one leader explained, "There are fewer of us and far less resources. Together we can figure out what to do ... as long as we continue to remember that everyone's opinion matters, to respect each other, and to continue to cultivate trust among ourselves. That doesn't mean we'll always agree. However, it does mean we must always disagree with respect and with the intent to collaboratively get to the best solution."

CONCENTRATE ON THREE AREAS OF EXCELLENCE

Commit to continuous improvement with the "3 Cs."

For a leader, continuous improvement is not optional—and the opportunities for growth are unlimited. So, where can we best invest our learning energy? Look inside. Personal growth takes place deep within the leader and can result in exponential benefits. As leader and author Stephen Covey writes, "Internal victories precede external victories."

Begin by self-assessing in three areas of your leadership. Think about what really makes people follow. Focus on improvement



A commitment to change

A young Benjamin Franklin, who eventually became a skilled entrepreneur, writer, printer, scientist, inventor and statesman, was brilliant, eloquent, driven—and opinionated and argumentative.

On a trip to Europe, one courageous confidant was kind and bold enough to pull him aside and give him feedback. He told Franklin it didn't matter how intelligent or well-spoken he was, no one cared. People would literally avoid him because they couldn't tolerate being in his presence. Rather than push back, ignore or resist the feedback, Franklin decided to create a plan for improvement.

Okay, you may not be opinionated and argumentative; however: *What feedback do you need to hear?*

Although Ben Franklin was devastated by the feedback, it didn't cause him to deny, rationalize, wallow, blame or resist. Instead, he started a focused, deliberate self-improvement process. He began by listing what he believed to be the attributes of an influential leader and prioritized them. Then, he selected 13 virtues he felt most worthy of his attention and organized himself around a demanding schedule of acting, monitoring and improving.

He focused on one attribute each week for 13 weeks then, started all over again. Rotating through his "top 13" translated into deliberate improvement of a specific quality four times each year. His continuous improvement increased his circle of influence and his ability to lead large numbers of people.

Hell is when who you are meets who you could have been.

—Benjamin Franklin

It's never too late to become who you could have been. Leading in lean times requires highly developed influential skills. Working to improve yourself and your relationships with others is no longer a luxury.

What will you improve today? What will you continue to improve?

that matters most by reviewing the influential behaviors that are organized into the three categories listed below. For a leader to succeed, she or he must be competent in managing tasks and able to get things done. Connectivity—building communities based on trust—is equally as valuable. And, no one will follow a person without character for very long. So, assess yourself in these Cs:

Competency—Ability to get things done

Community—Ability to build relationships based on trust

Character—Possessing integrity worth following

With laser beam focus, examine yourself in these three critical areas. Leaders must be able to execute tasks and get results. To do so, they need to accomplish things with (and for) people. And, people must be able to trust the leader's words and actions without suspicion. A leader's principles, words and actions must be integrated, or their influence will disintegrate.

List what you would consider the attributes of excellence in each of the "3 Cs."

Examine your behaviors against the attributes of excellence you listed.

Act your way into leadership worth following by improving behaviors in the "3 Cs."

Deliberately monitor your behaviors and adjust to achieve your desired results.

"I know what it's like to feel appreciated, so I look for people's strong points. Then, I recognize and verbalize them. I do what I can to accentuate those points with the intention to bring them out in people."

—Terri Mellinger, Supervisor

Kalamazoo Charter Township (Kalamazoo Co.)

Self assess.

On a scale of 1–10, rate yourself with each quality you listed as attributes of excellence in each of the "3 Cs." Perhaps it is best to begin working on the attribute in which you scored lowest. In a disciplined, deliberate way, improve in that area by working on a specific behavior that reflects your lowest score. Once you improve or once you achieve a bit of mastery with one quality, move onto another one, never diminishing the progress you've made with previous work.

HELP CREATE A CULTURE WHERE SUCCESS IS THE INEVITABLE OUTCOME

Environment matters in the creation of success and failure.

How would you respond to the question, "What are the necessary components of a culture that inspires the thinking and actions necessary to achieve success today?" If your first



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response is, “Whose got time to think about such nonsense, we’ve got real stuff that’s got to be addressed!” you’re missing the real stuff that is required to achieve results today. What we used to refer to as the “soft” stuff is now understood as the stuff that drives “hard” results!

Success today requires S-T-R-E-T-C-Hed thinking. We’d all rather stay in our comfort zones—the place that’s familiar and feels safe—because we know what to expect there. Learning, however, requires risk. If pushed into the panic zone, we’ll run back to our comfort zone as quickly as possible. That safe retreat will diminish our ability to expand, learn and be more creative in responding to whatever challenges stand before us. For a leader, the magic is to keep yourself in your stretch zone and help others stay stretched without panic. If people are expending all their energy to be “safe,” because of a need to avoid criticism or feelings of being incapable, they have little to no energy left to address the challenges that require risk and courage.

Cultivate a culture of hope.

Hope in the future gives power to the present. Times are uncertain. People are feeling frightened and many are consumed by hopelessness. Remember the saying, “This too shall pass.” Odds are we won’t rise from this difficult time into the same world that plunged us into the experience. Global markets, shifting resources and world adjustments will continue to result in changes—some we haven’t even thought of yet. As a leader, the frame you put around the transitions contribute to hope as well as hopelessness.

It’s time to stop wishing for less struggles and start developing more skills. Let’s quit wishing for less challenges and begin seeking more wisdom. Help people understand what we can control and what we can’t by facilitating conversations about what is probable, possible and preferred in our communities.

Help people focus on the future and address those things we can put our arms around together and change. Don’t shout of unrealistic optimism, rather speak of what is possible and help people learn from even the toughest lessons of our current situation. Share stories of visions, struggles and triumphs. Celebrate even the smallest victories.

For soon, we’ll be experiencing the tomorrow we’re envisioning today, and sharing the stories of how we got there. So, let’s focus on improving ourselves, acknowledging the contributions of others, collaboratively focusing on addressing immediate challenges and inspiring futures as the process of creating stories of overcoming. ■

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Turn to page 24 for a continuing education self-assessment, worth 2.0 elective credits in MTA’s Township Governance Academy.

Continuing Education Self-Assessment



Participants enrolled in the Township Governance Academy (TGA), a credentialing program offered through MTA, may obtain 2.0 elective credits for successful completion of this quiz. To obtain credit, participants must answer the following 10 multiple-choice questions by circling the correct answer and receive a minimum passing score of 70 percent. The questions are based on content from the article, "Leading in lean times: Influence that *matters*," beginning on page 18.

There is no charge for MTA members to take the quiz or to obtain TGA credit. Completed quizzes should be sent to: MTA Education Center, 512 Westshire Drive, Lansing, MI 48917, or faxed to (517) 321-8908. MTA will notify you of your results within two weeks after receiving your quiz. **IMPORTANT:** Please keep a copy of your completed quiz in your TGA binder.

Township officials interested in enrolling in TGA may call Shelley Tucker, MTA education specialist, at (517) 321-6467, ext. 251, or for more information, visit www.michigantownships.org/tga.asp.

TGA Continuing Education—June 2010 Leading in lean times: Influence that *matters* 2.0 Elective Credits

(To receive credit, this quiz must be completed by June 1, 2014.)

NAME: _____ **TOWNSHIP & COUNTY:** _____

ADDRESS: _____ **CITY/ZIP:** _____

E-MAIL ADDRESS: _____

- According to the article, lean times require officials to:**
 - focus on and invest in human capital
 - get their position heard without wasting time on debate
 - cut programs that meet residents' needs but are inefficient
 - create revenue streams through special assessments
- Leadership is about:**
 - managing tasks brilliantly
 - developing plans and allocating resources
 - bringing out the best in people
 - strategizing ways to do more with less
- Effective leaders reinforce and solidify productive behaviors by:**
 - bringing them up in an annual review
 - offering recognition and praise during public events
 - providing financial incentives, such as annual compensation increases
 - looking for them, recognizing their value and praising them as they occur
- Effective feedback is about:**
 - finding people doing things wrong and correcting them
 - helping people identify both strengths and weaknesses
 - offering consistent corrective feedback
 - holding up a mirror to the behavior that hinders ability for the desired result
- If leading is the desired outcome, then:**
 - make sure your voice is heard
 - be passionate about what you believe
 - people must want to follow you
 - understand others' viewpoints
- Relationship management is about the ability to build relationships based on:**
 - trust
 - commitment
 - respect
 - influence
- Which of the following shifts may be needed to achieve collaborative desired outcomes:**
 - shifts in how we communicate
 - shifts in our thinking and acting
 - shifts in the way we evaluate ourselves
 - shifts in what we expect from others
- When considering the attributes of influential leaders, one must recognize the importance of:**
 - being informed, intelligent and well spoken
 - creating a focused, self-improvement process
 - possessing courage and confidence
 - being disciplined and deliberate in one's actions
- A leader's influence will disintegrate if:**
 - the leader doesn't focus on improvement
 - the leader doesn't think about what makes people follow
 - people don't think the leader gets things done
 - people don't trust the leader's words and actions
- Leaders can learn to successfully address challenges by:**
 - knowing what to expect and being proactive
 - eliminating or minimizing risks
 - staying in the "stretch zone" and helping others stretch without panic
 - expending energy to respond creatively to situations