

Burkhard Gnärig
What kind of leadership is required?

More than 2,000 years ago Lao-Tzu needed less than the 400 words I have been asked for to describe leadership:

"A leader is best when people barely know that he exists, not so good when people obey and acclaim him, worst when they despise him. Fail to honour people, they fail to honour you. But of a good leader, who talks little, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will all say, 'we did this ourselves'."

This is still a state of the art description of optimal leadership. So, what are the key qualities required for leading a civil society organisation (CSO) in the 21st Century?

Good Leadership...

1. is barely visible at times and leads from the front at others

CSOs are especially leadership averse and they lack some of the key systems weak leaders have at their disposal to enforce their lead: generous bonus systems and a ruthless "hire and fire" policy. For both, daily business and long-term strategy the barely visible leader is required. For crisis and emergencies though the ideal CSO leader needs to be capable to lead "from the front".

2. is able to tackle complex leadership challenges with minimal formal authority

As there is minimal "inherent authority" in CSO leadership positions and, as success is a much more complex issue than in business which aims at maximising profits, leading a CSO is one of the most demanding leadership tasks. Given the relatively low salaries of CSO leaders, finding top quality leaders in this sector is a special challenge. Systematic leadership development is therefore one of the key challenges for CSOs.

3. is a serving leadership mobilising the wisdom and the power of "the crowd"

The recent success of Internet based organisations like Wikipedia and others is of special relevance for CSOs. Given the leading CSOs' endeavour to democratically make the world a better place, "crowd sourcing", the basis of Wikipedia's success, will become a key tool for CSOs in the future. And "crowd sourcing" will require even less visible leadership. Concerning Wikipedia there is talk of a "leaderless organisation"; but in reality the organisation's leadership has very successfully applied Lao-Tzu's advice to be barely visible. The ideal leader in this context is a catalyst who triggers people into synchronised action. Being humble and ready to serve are key leadership qualities.

4. strategically balances local, national and global levels for maximum impact

As we slowly move from a world determined by roughly 200 nations to one global entity, those CSOs which work globally will need leaders who are able to make highly decentralised organisations work while securing the benefits of the global whole. Achieving optimal success both at local and global levels requires leaders who are at the same time highly sensitive to local (culture, religion, ethnicity, etc.) differences and able to take not a bird's eye view but a satellite's view on the world as a whole.

Burkhard Gnärig
What kind of governance is required?

More than 2,000 years ago the Tamil poet and Saint Tiruvalluvar identified good governance by its results:

“Generous grants, compassion, righteous rule and succour to the downtrodden are the hallmarks of good governance”.

Good governance is effective governance. Here are the key qualities of effective governance in a 21st Century civil society organisation (CSO):

Good Governance...

1. serves the Mission

The major CSOs have been set up with missions like preserving the environment, fighting poverty, protecting human rights, saving children or intervening in emergencies. Good governance is a crucial step towards these aims: it is one of the means to reach the aims but not the aim in itself. Therefore, the “good” in good governance is very much defined by whether it strengthens the organisation on its path to fulfil its mission or not.

2. involves all key stakeholders

Most of the leading global CSOs still have a governance structure dominated by people from the North. While in itself this might be a perfectly democratic system it can hardly be “good” as it based on the donor side only and mostly excludes the recipient side. In order to achieve optimal results at global level CSOs need to secure an appropriate representation of key stakeholders across the globe.

3. is flexible and open to outside influence

Partly because of legal and tax requirements, partly because of the governing elites’ efforts to retain their power, CSO governance is under the permanent threat of becoming a formalistic and overly bureaucratic exercise. If the established global CSOs want to remain relevant and competitive in the Internet age they will have to opt for a much more light touch governance system which keeps the organisation flexible and open to outside influence.

4. is transparent and secures the organisation’s transparency

While they have successfully challenged governments and business to be more transparent, CSOs themselves often haven’t made much of an effort to secure their own transparency. Full transparency allows the outside world a critical view on the organisations and thus can ensure that they stay relevant and impactful. CSOs’ governing bodies should be the guardians of the organisations’ transparency. In order to play that role they need to be fully transparent themselves.

5. is accountable and holds others accountable

Especially well established successful CSOs tend to live in their own world, insufficiently benchmarking their work and achievements against the outside world’s expectations. Accountability is of utmost importance in order to secure the quality of CSOs’ work. Upward and downward accountability within the CSO and mutual accountability between donors and recipients are indispensable ingredients of good governance.