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Open for Change: The Leadership Pivot

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Change is palpable right now – from the world stage, to the national landscape, to our local communities, to our organizational front porch. We see change in large ways in recent headlines marking the passing of American icons like Senator John McCain and Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul. And we see it in everyday life in our own families and communities. And, of course, our seasons are changing far too fast for most of us as we move into the waning summer days that feel more like fall with every gust of wind and change in leaf color. In eulogies and in daily life, in the confessions of great scholars, and in the ramblings at the water cooler, I am in awe of the constancy of change.

Change can be marked by the calendar, like the beginning of school, or in personal milestones. We see both this time of year. In the last few weeks, a cohort of relatively new executive directors graduated from our Executive Leadership program and a new cohort of nonprofit leaders joined the 18th cohort of our Certificate in Nonprofit Management. In the coming and going of these cohorts, we heard the voices of both those who absorb the changes in our environment and those of change agents who are charting new paths. In both, I heard the plea for wanting to understand the changes that were coming so that they could be ready. The reality is that we can never really know what is coming, and we have to be ready anyway. I was further reminded of this when a mentor of mine remarked to me that true leadership is about the ability to pivot – to be adaptable to inevitable change. So, what does that mean – to be “ready for inevitable change?”

Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great* reminds us that as we lead “great” organizations we should understand what is open for change and what should never change. He reminds us that the constant in our life should be our core ideology – our core purpose and core values. These, he says, and I believe, are our DNA – those non-negotiable attributes in a sea of change. It is from the place of what is core that we adapt and respond and bring about change. Given our uncertain economy, our political environment, and the ever-present shift in people on our boards and staff, knowing who we are not just as organizations but as individual humans is not just nice, it is essential.

Our organizational and personal core purpose and core values give us the tools we need to seize new opportunities, to recruit our next team, to adjust our business models and, yes, to know ourselves in the face of adversity and in times of stability. But more than that, our core ideology gives us our moral compass and connects us to something larger than ourselves.

If change is a constant in our lives, then remembering the bigger connections to our work is imperative. Our personal resilience and our mission's ability to serve our communities are far more than just about our own organizational or personal ego. The ability and drive to adapt must come from a deeper, more rooted place in the “greater good.” Senator McCain penned in his final public letter just before he passed away: “our identities and sense of worth were not circumscribed, but are enlarged by serving good causes bigger than ourselves.” If there were ever an antidote to burn-out and despair from our daily lives and the work we face in our sector and within our communities, this might be it.

Indeed, this devotion to greater good is where we come from in our nonprofit work. In the graduation of one cohort and the starting of the next, and listening to nonprofit leaders every day, I hear the voices of individuals who are tired but devoted – who are steadfast but uncertain – who are ready to meet the challenge, but weary of the journey. And through it all, the ones who thrive have a more expansive vision of possibility, a devotion to a higher cause than their singular mission, and a commitment to working with others. A life of consistent change is daunting, but drawing our energy and restoring our faith can come from our connection to service. It can also come from knowing we are not alone and that others around us – in our work and in our sector – are ready to put their heads into the wind and adapt to what comes next.

But even as we put our heads into that wind, we must keep looking up and out. The temptation to hunker down and look inward can mean we miss the larger opportunities. Of course, stabilizing our own organizations in the midst of change is essential. In fact, the ones that are not stable may not survive even the smallest acts of change. But too much “down and in” behavior will mean we may adapt out of context to what is happening and find ourselves isolated.

The challenges we are being asked to solve as a sector are, by the very definition of complexity, unknowable. And such complexity means we must find our way forward together. There is no handbook or tool, there is only our ability to experiment through to the next destination – to listen, to learn, to grow to a new place together. Navigating the unknowable kind of change is not for every leader. Some simply will not choose this path and rather stick to fixing problems with immediate time horizons and clear destinations. We need this, too. Stability in the midst of change creates safe harbors for those in the storm. And know that in that storm are those tackling the larger definitions of change, the ones whose time horizon is longer than their tenure and bigger than any organization. To all of these leaders, you and I among them, we need each other. Together we are stronger than we are apart. Together we can prepare, we can pivot, and our communities will thrive.

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