



A Call for Democratic Leadership

By John Gastil

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines leadership as “guidance or influence with reference to action or opinion.” However, when we speak of leadership, we usually mean something far more specific. “Leadership” frequently invokes images of powerful individuals, wielding a great deal of official or charismatic authority to shape reality according to their visions. With each leader comes a sea of followers, obeying the leader’s directives out of fear or adulation.

Alternative Leadership Styles

But if leadership has a broader meaning, as the dictionary suggests, there must be another kind of leadership. Indeed, there is. We sometimes think of leaders as partners or

colleagues, people like ourselves. These leaders may or may not acquire much authority, but they do earn a measure of honest respect. They assist us, rather than direct us, and help us realize our vision of the future. The followers of such leaders are creative and critical — not always distinguishable from the leaders themselves.

This alternative understanding of leadership has been discussed by a number of writers from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds. Many of these authors have argued for the ethical soundness of “participatory” or “democratic” leadership, which values personal autonomy and the fulfillment of basic human needs. Others have frequently found that, both in the laboratory and in the “real world,” these alternative styles of leadership have a number of practical advantages over more conventional ones. Alternative leadership styles, for example, can often increase productivity, decision quality, group cohesion, and group members’ capabilities, satisfaction, morale, and commitment.¹

Unfortunately, the research on alternative forms of leadership has not been complemented by an equally vigorous effort to design and articulate a general model of leadership that could challenge the more commonplace notion of the “Great Man.” It is the purpose of this essay to present a brief outline of such a model.²

Democratic Leadership

Many authors have contrasted conventional leadership with “democratic” leadership, and this may be the most appropriate name for a general model of alternative leadership. One can speak of “participatory” or “consultative” leaders, but the democratic leader goes a step farther, giving some or all decision-making power to the members of a social group or organization. Democratic leadership is also a useful term, because one can apply the word “democratic” to the full spectrum of social scales.

Democratic leadership serves three general functions. First, democratic leaders seek to give responsibility back to the people. They do not try to do their followers’ work. They know that serious group problems require the membership’s involvement in the problem-defining, problem-solving, and policy implementation processes.

Second, democratic leaders aim to empower other members of the group. They do not prey upon the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of their followers, making them dependent or demanding. Instead, they look for opportunities to challenge followers and teach them to lead themselves. Democratic leaders seek to make themselves replaceable.

Third, democratic leaders assist, rather than direct or reject, the group

decision-making process. Democratic leaders join in group deliberations as regular members of their social group, offering constructive suggestions and their personal views. They also facilitate the deliberative process, following and safeguarding democratic procedures. For instance, they make certain that more reticent individuals or marginalized social groups can participate in the decision-making process as equals. They also aid deliberation by nurturing strong relationships and a healthy emotional atmosphere. For example, they bring up conflicts that must be confronted, and encourage members to treat one another with respect and honesty.

Distributed Leadership and Active Followers

Are these too many responsibilities for a single individual? Most certainly. The democratic leadership model requires a broad base of leadership. Ideal democratic groups might be seen as leaderless, but “such groups are not, in reality, leaderless.” Rather, they are “‘leaderful’ — everyone in the group feels empowered to start or stop things, to challenge others or meet challenges, to move out in front or to fall back.” The result is not a jangle of discord, but the melodic fusion of a skilled jazz ensemble.³

Even in a group full of leaders, at any point in time one may lead and the others “follow.” Democratic

followers, however, are neither mindless lemmings nor soulless bureaucrats. They “follow” by taking on responsibility, doing the work that is theirs. They guard their autonomy and maintain respectful, appreciative, yet critical relationships with leaders. And the ultimate charge of democratic followers is to act as leaders themselves at times, distributing responsibility, empowering others, and aiding deliberation.

Portraits of Democratic Leadership

Imagine a cooperative business, collectively owned and operated by the workers. Each staff member has special responsibilities for a given year, and with regard to this expertise, each receives leeway — but not license — from the others. A

worker might be teaching and empowering another worker one minute, then, seconds later, leader and follower have reversed roles. At weekly business meetings, the staff members make decisions as a group, with a different person facilitating the meeting each week.

Imagine a self-governing nation. The public at large and the various local communities take responsibility for their welfare and regularly deliberate on pressing national issues through organized forums and innumerable informal conversations. The leaders of this nation are legion, including some elected public officials and thousands of community members and activists. To some degree, the entire nation takes part in leadership, as citizens take responsibility, challenge one another to higher levels of political



maturity and sophistication, and deliberate on issues of common concern.

These images of democratic leadership are not, in fact, so imaginary. Many such cooperatives exist across the globe, and larger corporations have experimented with democratic decision-making processes since the days of Kurt Lewin and Gerald Maier in the 1940s and 1950s. As for the nation, the Kettering Foundation's ongoing National Issues Forums and the upcoming National Issues Convention might give us hope that this nation can move toward a more democratic style of leadership.⁴

Promoting Democratic Leadership

Of course, hope alone does not create change. To realize the potential of democratic leadership, we must reexamine our social lives. We must look within our political system, businesses, voluntary associations, and all our social groups. Democratic leadership must take hold in our own social worlds. We cannot be certain that we will be rewarded for casting our lot with democratic leadership, but it appears more promising than other leadership models, both on the short term and for the long haul. The day of the "Great Man" may pass. Perhaps it must, if we are to survive. But if we practice and study a democratic style of leadership, the day of the great public may yet arrive.

Endnotes

¹ On the ethics of participatory and democratic leadership, see Barber, B. (1984). *Strong Democracy*. Berkeley, CA: U.C. Press; Haiman, F. S. (1951). *Group leadership and democratic action*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin; Sashkin, M. (1984). "Participative management is an ethical imperative." *Organizational Dynamics*, 12(4), 5-22. On the effects of such leadership, see Gibb, C. A. (1969). "Leadership." In: Lindzey, G., Aronson, E. (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (pp. 85-99). Iowa City, IA: U. Associates Press; Maier, G. (1952). *Principles of human relations*. NY: John Wiley & Sons; Manz, C. C., & Sims, H. P. (1989). *Superleadership*. NY: Prentice Hall; Miller, K. I., & Monge, P. R. (1986). "Participation, satisfaction, and productivity: A meta-analytic review." *Academy of Management Journal*, 29, 727-753; Stogdill, R. H. (1974). *Handbook of leadership*. NY: Free Press; White, R. K., & Lippitt, R. (1960). *Autocracy and democracy*. NY: Harper & Bros.

² For a more detailed version of the model, see Gastil, J. (1991), *Democratic leadership*. Unpublished report at the Kettering Foundation. Dayton, OH.

³ Starhawk. *Truth or Dare*. NY: Harper & Row. 1987.

⁴ On co-ops in the United States, see Case, J., & Taylor, R. *Co-ops, communes, and collectives*. NY: Pantheon (1979). For a case-study of democratic deliberation in a co-op, see Gastil, J. (1991). *Democratic deliberation: A redefinition of the democratic process and a study of staff meetings at a cooperative workplace*. Unpublished M.A. thesis, U. of Wisconsin-Madison. On alternative styles of leadership in organizations, see Maier (1952) & Manz & Sims (1989). On the National Issues Forums, see McAfee, N., McKenzie, R., & Mathews, D. (1991). *Hard Choices*. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation. On the National Issues Convention, see Winkler, K. J., "U. of Texas Political Scientist Transforms His Theories to Reform Presidential Campaign Into a Nationally Televised Experiment," *Chronicle of Higher Education*. p. A5; Fishkin, J., *Democracy and Deliberation*, due out in November 1991 from Yale U. Press.



Understanding the Public Sphere: A Reply to Martin Gottlieb and Leslie Gelb

by Susan Boettcher

A remarkable tension underlies media response to the Kettering Foundation's first nationally released study, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*, a report concluding that Americans are not apathetic about politics, but frustrated at its usurpation by professional politicians. Americans abstain from politics not because of boredom, says the report, but from a desire to use their energies where a potential for change exists. The report concludes with theoretical agenda items for improving politics and reinvolving the public in specifically political issues.

The report contradicts conven-