



## **Principles of Democratic Leadership**

### **Build Relationships on Common Ground**

Too often organizing is viewed as simply a way to get people to do something we want. It should not be surprising why some communities and organizers resist this disrespectful method. To lead, we must first build relationships of trust - and the ability to find common ground is the core of such relationships.

Common ground may be found in a number of ways - shared issues, interests, or values - but discovering that which is shared is essential.

### **Listen**

While this may seem obvious, taking the time and consideration to listen to other folks is a quality of leadership that is often forgotten. Good listening is more than just waiting for your turn to talk; it means that as a leader, you take the time to ask what others think and respond to their answers.

While you might be the person in a position to lead, others may have much to contribute. By genuinely listening to the thoughts and concerns of others, those folks will be more likely to respond to you in the future. But more importantly, they will have a chance to see their ideas in action and develop their own leadership potential.

### **Share Information**

As a leader, it is tempting to keep information about the campaign close to the vest, so that you can maintain your power. However, empowering leadership means intentionally building the power of others.

As a leader, it is important that you share information for a number of reasons - to make volunteers and staff feel like they can see the big picture and understand what they are a part of, to demonstrate trust and accountability, and, practically, to ensure that what you are working to achieve can continue in your absence or after your tenure. The more that volunteers and other folks can see the "big picture" and understand why they are doing what they're doing, the more they will respect your leadership and the cause they are working to achieve.

### **Give Others Responsibility Matched with their Skills**

The next step after sharing information about the campaign is to delegate responsibilities and tasks. An empowering leader always finds an emerging leader to complete tasks that are well matched with their skills and interests, in order to build experience and leadership potential in

others. By giving others responsibility, you communicate that, as a leader, "I know you can get this done." You provide an opportunity to excel.

It is critical to match these responsibilities with someone's interests and skills. It is not appropriate to ask someone with limited mobility to lead a team of canvassers going door-to-door. Equally, it is not appropriate to ask someone who has demonstrated an ability to get things done quickly and a desire to take on more responsibility to continue doing a repetitive or menial task. As a leader, you must assess the skills and interests of others and delegate responsibilities - while maintaining accountability and making sure that it gets done. And of course, giving credit generously when credit is due!

### **Make Yourself Accessible**

Empowering leaders make accessibility and transparency a priority. Whether this means holding regular office hours, having a public presence in a community, or simply regularly returning phone calls and emails, accessibility requires an intention to be available to others. Transparency, too, requires that attention be paid to letting others know when decisions have been made, and why.

Warmth and openness can go a long way, but being an accessible leader requires both an open attitude and strategies for making it known that the door is open. Holding regular office hours means little if those office hours are not widely publicized and people are not actively encouraged to attend.

Another aspect of accessibility is remembering to recognize successes and celebrate victories. A strong leader understands how to offer praise and encouragement when tasks are done well, and constructive feedback about how they could be improved. Remember, an empowering leader intentionally builds the leadership of others - if someone else accomplishes a success, make sure that they enjoy the spotlight, and not you. Praise and encouragement are not only complimentary - they are educational as well. By teaching what was done well, you encourage future good work and success.

### **Communicate Authenticity**

When thinking about how you communicate with others as a leader, think about what defines true authority. Is it a title or position, or credibility within the community?

An empowering leader derives credibility not from merely achieving a position of power but by working in that position to gain the trust and credibility to lead from members of the community.

This is what real authenticity is about. Being able to communicate that authenticity means that you are able to "reflect the reality of people's lives in word and deed," as defined by the Harwood Institute. It means that you can deliver a message with authority because you have been given that authority by a broad and deep group of people from the bottom up, not from the top down.