

Daniel J. Cohen: A model of great leadership

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Abstract

Various definitions and theories of great leadership have been proposed and studied. Leadership is an important part of a non-profit organizations becoming great particularly in our changing and evolving modern society. Daniel J. Cohen demonstrates principles of great leadership by disrupting existing expectations and taking risks. He is a model of shared leadership and trust, and dedicates himself to the shared vision of the organization. Cohen exhibits a unique blend of strong practical skills and personal characteristics. Cohen's academic and professional accomplishments are examined and used as evidence to illustrate how he is a model of great leadership. Cohen's abilities to put the organization's purpose ahead of his own self-interest and work together as a team to accomplish the mission of the organization are essential characteristics of great leaders.

The academic study of leadership is a multidisciplinary field that attempts to provide definitions and theories to explain and codify the influence a person can have within an organization and throughout society. Over time various definitions and theories have been proposed. Individuals and organizations have examined in an effort to understand what leadership means to the past, what impact it has on the present, and how it will adapt to the changes to come in the future. Leadership permeates all types of organizations and social settings. Understanding what it means to be an effective leader grows in significance as change and complexity increases among 21st century society (Higgs, 2003, p. 274). In this climate of change a new leadership model emerges where effective leaders are a mix of strong skills and personal characteristics (Higgs, 2003, p. 277). To define a "language of greatness" among social sector organizations, Collins (2005) identifies high-quality leadership as an essential component for non-profit organizations to be considered *great* (p. 2-3). Throughout his career Daniel J. Cohen has demonstrated principles of great leadership. Cohen exemplifies great leadership by disrupting existing expectations and taking risks. He is a model of shared leadership and trust and dedicates himself to the shared vision of the organization.

Cohen received degrees from Princeton, Harvard, and Yale and taught as a Professor of History at George Mason University. While at George Mason University he was the Director of the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media. He has co-authored multiple books and published numerous articles exploring "the impact of new media and technology on all aspects of knowledge, from the nature of digitized resources to twenty-first century research techniques and software tools to the changing landscape of communication and publication" (Cohen, 2007). He has received various awards and recognition for his contributions to the digital humanities. He is

currently the Founding Executive Director of the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA), an online portal and platform to make materials from libraries, archives, and museums across the United States freely available to the world ("Digital Public Library of America", 2011).

Disrupting existing expectations and taking risks is a practice of an effective leader that Grandy (2013) described as "unsettling the status quo" (p. 625). Cohen has "unsettled the status quo" by pioneering the use of new digital technologies to "positively impact libraries and information technology" ("Frederick G. Kilgour Award Recipient", 2011). His work has explored the intersection of computer technologies with the liberal arts. He led the development of various free and open-source software to manage, share, and publish research sources and material. This development has digitally eschewed traditional methods of scholarly research and publishing. Cohen also directed various archival projects using the world wide web to collect and preserve events of humanity's past. For example he helped create the September 11 Digital Archive "to collect, preserve, and present the history of September 11, 2001 and its aftermath" (September 11 Digital Archive, 2013). This archive creates a permanent online record of the events of September 11, 2001 using new media in innovative ways. Cohen is known for his personal blog where he proactively shares his knowledge and understanding of digital humanities and maintains a Twitter account with more than 12,000 followers (Cohen, ca. 2014). Instead of resisting new digital technologies and fearing the impact they may have on traditional workflows, Cohen takes the initiative by actively seeking how to push forward scholastic fields of study through the use of new digital media (Parry, 2012).

"For [effective] leaders to lead they need a united and harmonious environment characterized by mutual trust" (M. Fairholm, & G. Fairholm, 2000, p. 102). In organizations

where leadership "relies more upon persuasion, political currency, and shared interests to create the conditions for the right decisions to happen" (Collins, 2005, p. 11) trust between leader and the follower is key to achieving the shared goals of the organization. In this way leadership becomes "an interactive relationship between a leader and followers jointly engaged" (Fairholm, 2000, p. 108). Cohen is a model of this "shared leadership" (Grandy, 2013) and trust. Cohen has directed projects with "a core belief that large-scale initiatives involving technology are actually *social* projects. That is, successful digital projects mainly involve getting diverse people working together towards an ideal" (Enis, 2013). Cohen exhibits great leadership by a spirit of cooperation and trust in the work and groups he leads.

Great leaders possess "an ability to develop people and create a shared vision" within an organization (Grandy, 2013, p. 620). They excel at what they do because "they are ambitious first and foremost for the cause, the movement, the mission, the work—*not themselves*—and they have the will to do whatever it takes... to make good on that ambition" (Collins, 2005). Cohen has devoted himself to the shared vision "'to democratize access' to our common cultural heritage, and to make digital collections available in ways that can transform the way we research and learn" (Enis, 2013). The DPLA, where Cohen is currently director, "aims to expand this crucial realm of openly available materials, and make those riches more easily discovered and more widely usable and used" (DPLA FAQ, 2013). Cohen's work has consistently been about making the deep knowledge resources of humanity easier to find and discover by the public. He and the organizations he has led have "always endeavored to create digital resources that are not only robust but useful and used. [Their] sites and services are used by millions of people every year, and [they] make sure to design with ease of use in mind" (Enis, 2013).

Throughout Cohen's professional career he has demonstrated valiant leadership abilities. The work and projects he has created are a testament to his great leadership abilities to push for discovering new ways and approaches for doing things that "unsettle the status quo" (Grandy, 2013). He builds environments of trust where leader and follower work together in accomplishing the goals of the organization and he is fiercely focused to the shared vision and beliefs of the organizations he leads. Cohen's leadership exemplifies this new emerging leadership model where great leaders are a mix of "personal humility and professional will" (Collins, 2005, p. 11). Cohen's traits as a great leader exemplify "practitioner leadership" who works "across traditional organisational and hierarchical boundaries, to tussle with and arrive as 'best solutions' to these inherent professional dilemmas" (Penlington, & Homstrom, 2013, p. 40). In today's world where organizations consistently face the challenge to embrace change and innovation there is increasing need for great leaders to be "excellent practitioners" who challenge past notions by embracing new technologies. In this environment great leaders must possess "the ability to engage with and influence others" in accomplishing the work of the organization (Penlington, 2013). These characteristics of a great leader are established when the leader embraces the organization's vision ahead of self-interest and achievement and does everything they can in their power to accomplish the mission of the organization. Daniel J. Cohen stands as powerful model of great leadership in the 21st century.

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