

Mindful Leadership in Troubled Times

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Hate speech and racism; hurricanes and wildfires; mass shootings and threats of nuclear war; in these times planners and policy makers can become overwhelmed by the challenges our communities face. How do we build neighborhoods and cities that are both sustainable and just (Agyeman, Bullard, & Evans, 2012)? The issues planners see in the media can be both distracting and unnerving. How do planners function in this context? How do those that make policy and shape communities continue to make a change? How do agents of change keep their compass or “true north”? While many might suggest planning for uncertainty, a call for scenario planning, backcasting from an ideal utopian future or some planning method, I believe that there may be a more simple answer.

A few years ago I wrote about the path-bending leadership principles that every planning managers should try to embrace (Riggs, 2014). My suggestions included the ideas of confidence, questioning, learning, and service. In speaking of the last factor, service, I wrote about how we can encourage those beginning in the planning and policy fields to keep a service mindset, letting this be the foundation of their careers. I also suggested “Seven Path-Bending Ideas for Planning & Governance” most of which had a service component.

Little did I know how important these ideas would become in the post-truth era of alternative facts—and now more than ever it is important not just for civic leaders not just to serve but to serve something bigger than themselves. Planners and policy makers must adhere to a higher calling. It doesn't matter whether that calling or “true north” are the principles of sustainability, social justice and equity, economic redistribution or economic prosperity and rationality, each of these things can be a centering force.

At the same time, I think my argument from 2014 was a bit naïve and flawed. Given the never-ending and thankless workload of many government jobs and rapid pace of technological change, I think it was too simple to say that service-alone can guide a career. Service in itself can be draining. More aptly it can be exhausting, leaving leave planners hollow and empty. Just how many times can you attend boisterous public meetings

late into the night maintain your buoyancy? How many angry enforcement appeals can a planner sit through before they lose their zeal? How often can great policy development be thwarted by interests groups and mediocre solutions?

In this light, acknowledging the gravity of the issues our communities face, I argue that planners and policy makers must practice mindfulness if they are to sustain their path-bending leadership. What is mindfulness? It can mean many things, from taking time for prayer, reflection or meditation to practicing gratefulness or maintaining consistent sleep and exercise habits. At its simplest, it is taking time to do what makes you, you, and encouraging those around you to do the same—to engage in self-care and do something for yourself that brings you joy. Just like research that shows the simple act of giving hugs can result in an improved mental state (Grewen et al. ,2005; Preston, 2017), research shows that practicing mindfulness can provide buoyancy needed to keep personal and professional lives fresh, creative and vibrant (Dane and Brummel ,2014).

Some might scoff at this and point to the things planners do, back to service and the AICP code of ethics. Service above self, is supposed to bring ultimate joy right? Well, perhaps to an extent, but given the gravity of the issues our world faces, service alone cannot be what provides a center. In this context, I believe practicing mindfulness and gratitude for the small things



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in life are ever more important for professionals. These items can be the reset that planners need to maintain service over careers and lifetimes.

So with these thoughts, I challenge you to move beyond service, beyond thinking about what is your “true north”, and hold tight to what grounds you as a human being—whether that is dancing, music, art, knitting, a run, a bike ride, attending a church service, meditation, or simply giving someone a hug.

I have a quote by Roberto Clemente that reads:

Any time you have an opportunity to make a difference in this world and you don't, then you're wasting your time on this earth.

I find this quote empowering but also believe that to seize on its' power, we who have dedicated our lives to service, must be vigilant in taking care of ourselves—so we can be ready when our families, communities, our nation, and our world call on us. So breath deeply; let us care for ourselves so we can care for others. Let us be the “eyes in a moon of blindness, a river in a time of dryness, a harbor in the tempest (U2 & Bono, 1989).” Let us not just make the difference, let us be the difference.

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