

# LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES FOR A NONPROFIT

7 skills to become a better leader

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Know Your Mission and Purpose

Invest in Self and Others

Think Strategically

Inspire Others

Share Leadership

Building Strong Community Relationships

Achieve Results

**T**his article was adapted from an education session developed and presented by Past International President Gord MacNair, SR/WA, at the 68th Annual Education Conference. Gord invited Past International President Sharon Slauenwhite, SR/WA, and Region 2 Secretary Marcus Boyd, SR/WA, to join the session and participate in an inclusive discussion on leadership. The points presented in this session and article are based on a book by Karen Ramsey titled “Lead for Good” and deals with the 7 Competencies for Nonprofit Leaders.

There are unique challenges and obstacles that one encounters while serving as a leader of an association. Though there is no one rulebook on how to leap over the hurdles while navigating the course, it’s essential to continue challenging yourself by learning and growing from each experience. In this article, we’ll discuss seven competencies that will help you remember your purpose as well as what your big-picture goals should look like and how you can work as a team to achieve them.



### Competency #1: Know Your Mission and Purpose

What's important to you? What drives you? What makes you passionate? At IRWA, our purpose is "to improve people's quality of life through infrastructure development." One of the most fundamental skills to being a leader is determining the big picture. For instance, you may be an appraiser or a consultant, but what is the higher purpose behind what you do? What fulfills you? Maybe your big-picture purpose is to help people develop and grow as individuals or leaders. Maybe it's bringing that positive perspective to lift up your team on days when it feels impossible to push forward.

When Frank C. Balfour founded this Association in 1934, he had a vision: he wanted to create an organization of people who do right of way work. So he sat down with his colleagues and worked to bring his vision to life. It was passion that pushed him to not only found the Association, but grow it. From the first day, it grew rapidly, so much so that in 1979, it became an international organization. At the annual international conference held in Toronto, it officially became the International Right of Way Association. Since then, IRWA has continued to evolve and grow to include more Chapters and members on a global scale, and it all started with one man — that's what passion and having a vision can do for you.

But passion can also have its drawbacks if you lose sight of what the big picture is. While it can be a tremendous force and a great motivator to accomplishing greater things, it's easy to get lost in it. As a leader, it's vital to know when to step back, remind yourself of what the big picture looks like, and most importantly, recall your purpose. Your purpose is what grounds you, and it will help you take in all sides of the equation when making big decisions. And remember, you are not alone! You are a part of a unique set of people who have rich backgrounds and stories that can help you remember your purpose and realize your place in your community and world.



### Competency #2: Invest in Self and Others

It's essential for organizations to take the time, money and resources to invest in helping people to become better leaders. When you invest in leaders, you actually help the organization become stronger. Examples of investing in your leaders include educating, coaching and training them. But it doesn't stop there: after investing in your leaders, make sure you're also periodically checking for understanding to ensure you're all on the same page and have common goals moving forward.

Practicing self-awareness and emotional intelligence is also a great way to grow your leadership or foster it in others. Apply mindfulness in your daily life and constantly challenge yourself to grow as a leader; for instance, if you are struggling with public speaking, there are resources like Toastmasters that offer accessible training, support and education in communication. Listen and rely on your peers to help foster your growth as a leader. If you're more introverted and softspoken, challenge yourself to step out of your comfort zone every once in a while — your voice deserves to be heard. On the other hand, if you feel natural taking center stage in most conversations, it's also valuable to step back and allow others to share from their experiences — you never know what you might learn!



### Competency #3: Think Strategically

An organization should be clear on why it exists, what difference it wants to make, what it wants to represent and how it wants to support what is going to happen now and in the future. As a leader, it's important to think about what's best for the organization, and not for you as an individual. This, of course, ties into first competency and the idea of "the big picture." Focusing on what you can do for the organization to move it forward, as a whole, is a concept that can help you grow as a leader within the Association and your career.

Strategic thinking really boils down to four key points: know (observe and seek "the big picture"), think (ask the tough questions), speak (be concise and specific) and act (make time for thinking and embrace conflict).

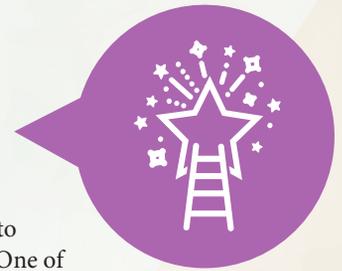
Another challenging factor with strategic thinking is the idea of change. There will be some who embrace it and others who shy from it; nevertheless, and it's vital to stay open to it. An organization can only grow stronger by evolving and considering what opportunities may be presented if a new or different path is chosen.

It's important to be a positive and resilient leader in times of change, hang onto humor as much as you can, practice compassion and of course, accept that change is inevitable.

One small way to introduce change could be switching up a routine. For instance, having your Chapter meeting or get-together at the same restaurant every month might be a comforting tradition, but switching it up every once in a while can be the exact kind of refresh that the group needs. That infectious energy can really set the tone for creative ideas and help people be less fearful of change.

It should be noted that with change also comes patience. Whether it's being patient to the idea of embracing change or exercising patience when it comes to seeing the change you've worked hard for, these things can require time and support from one another.

Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said, "The only constant in life is change." Despite this, not all change is bad, and if you can center yourself by remembering the simple joys in life, like spending quality time with loved ones or deciding to take your dog on the long nature route, it's much easier to stay grounded through it all.



### Competency #4: Inspire Others

Think about how you'd like to present yourself as a leader. One of the key components to being a great leader is to be consistent and dependable. Be someone who people feel comfortable approaching in times of conflict. Moreover, be transparent with conflict as it arises — people will appreciate the honesty.

We all have mentors who have inspired us. The Association, throughout its history, has seen many great leaders who have been an inspiration and mentor to many members. Howard Armstrong, SR/WA, and Dan Beardsley, SR/WA, are examples of exemplary leaders who were also fantastic strategic thinkers. They consistently went out of their way to coach young members to become leaders. When you mentor someone, you'd be surprised how much you'll learn from them and yourself in the process as well—it's a two-way street!

Within IRWA, we are constantly talking about the concept of "servant leadership." People are looking for leaders to be involved, ask questions and listen more. Some examples of great servant leaders throughout history include Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa. We would be remiss to not include the much-deserved 2022 recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award, Georgia Snodgrass, SR/WA, in this list, as her servant leadership has inspired many members across the Association.

Another important leadership concept is "walking the talk." This is imperative when establishing credibility and authenticity with those you are leading. People will not respect and follow your lead if you do not demonstrate that you will do the same. When asking someone to do a task, try walking through it yourself first, or at the very least, offer to help with the task. Another thing to keep in mind is that people may be struggling with other tasks; it's essential to practice empathy. Anyone who steps forward to give you their time is generous, especially as a volunteer leader. They could be anywhere else, but they chose to be there today. If you can show your appreciation to them, you will not only receive it in return, but you will inspire others to be good leaders.

Lastly, remember that people look up to you in a multitude of ways — think about how you want to represent yourself. It's your layers that make you who you are: a parent, a partner, a friend, a colleague, a trailblazer, the list goes on. How you represent yourself matters, and people will not only notice, they will follow where you lead if you inspire them enough with your actions and the standards in which you hold yourself.



## Competency #5: Share Leadership

Learning how to delegate work effectively is not always an easy skill to acquire. It's important to empower your team to get the work done. Sometimes it's tempting to check every detail, but this can create a bottleneck effect in the process, which can actually hinder the work flow and decrease morality across the group. It's important to learn how to trust people to do their work and be a guide for them, rather than a micromanager.

Take the goose story, for example, to visualize interdependent leadership. Geese fly in a V-shaped formation; the pulsating sound of the huge flapping wings excites and energizes the entire formation to cheer the flock along. The geese at the back honk to encourage the ones in front to keep up the speed. And most importantly, when the lead goose gets tired, it lets someone else lead for a while.

Being a great leader also means pushing yourself to learn and grow from others. There's so much you can learn by expanding your network and watching others. Past Right of Way International Education Foundation President Carol Croft, SR/WA, is a tremendous example of a leader who inspires and motivates those around her; there is mutual respect and support. She empowers volunteers to do the work and stay engaged to work toward a common goal.



## Competency #6: Building Strong Community Relationships

Speaking of working together, this competency focuses on community. Our community starts at our local Chapters, but grows to include Regions, International and Foundations — this is our family. We often talk about how IRWA represents family and friendships for life, and that continues to be true. We lean on each other to solve problems and grow as a family and Association. American author Ken Blanchard once said, "None of us is as smart as all of us."

There was a concept that was presented at a past IRWA conference called the spider web analogy. Envision the Association as a spiderweb, and we're all resting on the silk threads. We're all supporting each other as we work in tandem while growing the web together. Challenge yourself to get to know as many people as possible at Chapter events, Region forums, the annual conference and more — you may be surprised to find that there aren't as many differences as you might have thought. We're all on the same web and working together toward a common goal, after all.

Finding people you can rely on and trade stories with is a huge benefit that the Association offers. Sometimes it's easy to forget that you're all connected on the spider web, and it can be isolating without the events that allow us to unite and recharge our batteries. Know that IRWA is not only a place to educate yourself in right of way, it's also where you can share unique, relatable experiences and remind yourself that you are not alone — there are people who have been exactly through what you've been through, and they can not only show you the way forward, but also support you in the process. 



## Competency #7: Achieve Results

Achieving results begins with determining what common goal(s) you're aiming for. You should have your finger on the pulse of what members want and how to best meet their expectations. For IRWA, having a high member value is important to keep the Association growing.

Not only does IRWA have the potential to increase membership, there's also great potential to diversify that growth to include people of all identities and background. Unique experiences provide a rich canvas in which we can all take in and learn from, which ultimately helps enrich member value as a whole.



In his book, "Good to Great," Jim Collins shares the idea of getting the right people on the bus to achieve these results. It's essential to not only ensure that the right people are on the bus, but that the right people are sitting in the key seats that dictate which direction the group should go in. And of course, there will be unexpected speed bumps when driving the bus, so when the vehicle goes pelting around the corner and into the unknown, it is paramount to have an entire bus full of people who can adapt to the changes and perform brilliantly no matter what the unpredictable circumstances may be. To have a great vision, you need great people on the bus who support you.

## Final Thoughts

Part of what makes a great leader is the determination to challenge yourself to grow and develop with any and every opportunity that is given to you. By implementing the seven competencies of leadership, you will become a better servant leader. ✪



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