

COMPETENCIES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP

How to practice effective leadership is an idea with abundant theories, each rooted in its own perspective. Are leaders made or born? Is leadership a personal quality or does it only manifest in a purpose-driven context? Can we compare corporate, political and grassroots leaders in a “unified” theory of leadership or does each setting and operating environment necessitate its own particular set of competencies for effective leadership? As we explore the concepts of leadership for the programs of the Robert and Patricia Switzer Foundation, we find that we have more questions than answers. We can observe and describe trends more than we can state absolutes. We are examining leadership as it is expressed through our programs and the values we hold, the approaches we take, and the outcomes we hope for. The skills or competencies we deem valuable in the 21st century for environmental leaders can be a focus to enhance our programs. This summary is an attempt for us to articulate leadership concepts that capture some of the best scholarly and practical learning that we have found in the field to date and that have particular relevance for Switzer Foundation Programs and beneficiaries.

Switzer Foundation Leadership Development Model

Our values and beliefs:

The Switzer Foundation operates based on the following values:

- **Belief in Individuals.** We believe that talented and committed individuals from varied backgrounds can make a difference in this world and create positive change.
- **Environmental Stewardship.** The Foundation seeks to protect, improve, and sustain our natural environment for the well-being of people and the planet.
- **Sustainability and Systems Thinking.** We value the concept of sustainability, recognizing the urgency of living within our ecological and physical means, and embrace holistic approaches that consider the complexity and interconnectedness of natural and human systems.
- **Interdisciplinary and Innovative Problem-solving.** We have a profound respect for the value of interdisciplinary and innovative environmental problem-solving.
- **Maximizing Impact.** We seek to maximize positive environmental impact through individual and collective activities and leveraged grant resources.
- **Accountability and Results.** The Foundation has an ongoing commitment to evaluation of program investments and impacts in order to promote excellence, increase effectiveness, and facilitate adaptive management.

Our approach:

- Invest in individuals through short-term funding to enhance academic pursuits and build a long-term relationship with career coaching and mentoring, professional development, leadership and skill-building opportunities, peer networking and sustained commitment that fosters continuous learning. A prestigious award will elevate the credibility and standing of recipients and hold them to a high standard.
- Create a vibrant network of environmental leaders and foster a culture of “giving back” to future leaders. “Each one help one”.
- Success will require people working in different sectors with the ability to work across diverse perspectives to solve problems.
- Science and technological knowledge are important; but so is knowledge of political and social change. People need to know HOW to apply their ideas in complex circumstances. Good ideas alone are not enough!

Competencies for Environmental Leadership of Switzer Fellows.

A wide array of skills and competencies can help strengthen your leadership, yet solving today's complex environmental problems requires that we recognize the rapidly changing technological global world we live in, the growing stress on the environment, the social and economic inequities of which environmental concerns are a part, and the diverse and complex political, social and economic realms in which environmental issues manifest. A brief summary of some the capacities we find particularly useful is outlined here. Some of these are concepts that frame our work – like sustainability principles, systems thinking, global awareness, power dynamics, etc. Others are skills or analytic tools we can bring to our day-to-day work and which we can practice. All of these are topics that will be woven into the focus of Switzer Foundation retreats, trainings, and learning opportunities.

Many of these skills and competencies are drawn from various readings on Leadership with particular reference to the enclosed paper, *Leadership in the Twenty-First Century*. In this paper, the idea that leadership for the next century must be “collaborative” rather than “positional” is no longer radical. It suggests that no one person has the definitive answer to a problem, and that instead, collective wisdom must be sought, cultivated, and nourished. This is a perspective we wish to encourage. You may find overlap among these competencies, and that is to be expected. We must draw on a variety of skills when we want to get something done, and to analyze a situation to determine what to do. That these competencies are interrelated is no accident, in fact, it makes sense to think of each competency as a “window” through which you may see the whole experience of learning to lead.

1. Sustainability Principles – We must design our policies, practices and actions to sustain and not degrade environmental health. Doing so in a way that also acknowledges stewardship of human social capital and natural resources for future generations is a key concept. Principles of sustainability may relate to global patterns, as well as organizational and personal ones. We must see the organizations within which we work as systems that must be sustainable – to sustain our motivation as well as sustaining the outcomes we strive for.
2. Systems Thinking – Bringing the knowledge of systems dynamics into practice draws upon the work of not only systems theorists, but organizational behavior experts like Peter Senge and sustainability gurus like Donella Meadows. Systems theory can help us understand the complexity of natural and human systems, provide analytical tools to analyze leverage points, and help us better understand how to affect the system to create the change we want in the world. Finally, the idea of “learning communities” is relevant here in terms of how we design our systems for change so that we have an adaptive learning process that allows us to quickly understand the results or consequences of our actions, so that interventions can come earlier and with less extreme impacts.
3. Network Mindset – The proliferation of social networks, both on-line and real-world, have illustrated not only the power of the many, but the power of distributed and decentralized leadership. It also teaches us that having permeable “membranes” in our organizational and program efforts allows the flow of new ideas and energy to invigorate our efforts. It also teaches that “nodes” of leadership can emerge in unexpected places and that a vibrant web of connections creates a stronger network, much as we see in the web of life in the natural world.

4. Global Citizenship/ Awareness –The extent and depth of the globalization of economic, environmental and social schemes touches all our lives, and inevitably surfaces in even the most local issues. For example, Wal-Mart may be at the center of sprawl debates, but its ability to market low-cost mass-produced goods from abroad is central to its business success. Transfer of capital to China or other developing nations for manufacturing and the associated rapid increase in rate and scale of production, puts workers and the environment at risk, absent international standards, and increases use of coal energy, contributing to global greenhouse warming. Tomorrow’s leaders must have this awareness of interconnectedness not just of natural systems, but of social and economic systems within which decisions are made.
5. Collaboration – Understanding collaborative processes is essential. This capacity consists of a variety of skills and practices – how you communicate, enroll others in your plans, develop coalitions to achieve your goals, working in community, working with other organizational partners, working across sectors, sharing funding, sharing goals, sharing rewards. This concept cuts across issue fields and includes personal and organizational practices. Much has been written about how to accomplish goals through collaboration, and study of others’ experience can be as useful as the theoretical literature.
6. Negotiation – Inevitably, a leader may be faced with a conflict or difference that needs to be resolved. It may be a legal environmental dispute, it may be in an organizational context for salary or standing, it may be with collaborators with whom you are trying to craft agreement about strategy. Particular skills and experience is required to keep a process moving forward, to consider options providing “mutual gain” rather than “zero sum” in which one party gains and the other loses. Many programs offer training in environmental negotiations to learn about how to negotiate when the goals are held to be of differing value to the parties involved, for example – wilderness preservation vs. oil drilling.
7. Democratic Principles/Power Dynamics – Understanding how power is distributed, managed, enrolled, shared or given away is essential for leaders. It may be important to use tools for “power analysis” in a campaign or issue, but it is also relevant in our day-to-day strategies to share power and empowering others to lead. Think of a disadvantaged community affected by pollution from a local power plant. Sustainable success may come not from winning the battle to reduce pollution, but in empowering the community with the information, tools and leadership support to effect change on their own behalf. You may find yourself “engaging stakeholders”, and the process of doing so must entail an understanding of the power you bring, and the power you can give.
8. Crossing boundaries – This refers to the need for leaders to understand difference and diversity. Diversity goes beyond race and class, and that dimension alone is worthy of in-depth focus on the structural racism in our society. When working across sectors, geographic areas, organizational interests, or community groups, there will always be a diversity of views, cultures and practices that create boundaries between us when we try to accomplish our goals. Therefore, we must learn to cross those boundaries, regardless of how or where they surface. We must learn each other’s language and customs before we can communicate, then collaborate to achieve our goals.

9. Communication – Communication must be seen as a two-way experience. What you say and how you say it is important, but so is the filter of your audience. That filter can be vastly different than yours, and so we must think about how we “frame” our communications to reach beyond the familiar supporters, and to find common ground among constituencies in order to expand our impact. In addition, how we use stories to illustrate our work and create meaning for others is a useful communications practice, both personally and for our organizations.

10. Self-reflection and awareness (“know thyself”) – To be aware that we bring our essential nature into everything we do, is a leadership practice that transcends all issues, and is highly individual. Our tendencies and behaviors may help us in one arena, for example, negotiating with a state agency on a regulatory matter; but that same stance may be completely ineffective in the home office of your organization. Understanding yourself – your needs for motivation, renewal, support and creativity, will help you become a better leader. This aspect of leadership reminds that leadership is not only a management practice, it is a personal practice as well. Finally, the idea of “learning communities” is relevant here in terms of how we design our systems for change to foster an adaptive learning process that allows us to quickly understand the results or consequences of our actions, so that interventions can come earlier and with less extreme impacts.