



Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona's Michael McDonald on Leadership

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Organizational
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Abstract

This paper analyzes Michael McDonald, a leader in the nonprofit sector in Tucson, Ariz., through the lens of leadership effectiveness. The analysis was written after a personal interview with McDonald, during which he answered questions in regard to leadership.

The analysis covers his personal view on leadership and the key roles and responsibilities that he feels are associated with leading. His leadership skills and characteristics are also examined. The analysis discusses McDonald's communication style, conflict style, and personality type. The sources of leader power specific to Michael McDonald in his current professional role are also explored.

[Click here to listen to the full interview.](#)



Michael McDonald, CEO, Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona

Introduction

Michael McDonald is the current President and Chief Executive Officer of the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona in Tucson, Arizona.

Throughout his career, he has held top management roles at several prominent nonprofit organizations in the Tucson area. I chose to interview McDonald for two reasons. First, his career history in high profile positions speaks to his experience in leader roles and exposure to different leadership episodes. Second, as an employee at the Community Food Bank myself, I have been able to observe McDonald as a leader in action and I personally feel that he embodies the characteristics of an effective and positive leader.

In his current role, McDonald leads more than 100 staff members and thousands of volunteers who are each on a mission to address food insecurity in Southern Arizona.

The Community Food Bank serves over 250,000 clients through their services and programs every year. In order to meet this high demand, it's essential for the organization to have clear goals and adequate resources to support the work being done toward achieving those goals. As McDonald stated in his interview, his strength lies in his ability to gather resources, making him an important asset to the Community Food Bank.

To prepare for this interview, I compiled a list of questions designed to illuminate: what McDonald feels are his key responsibilities as a leader; the challenges that he faces, and the experiences that have helped him develop into the leader that he is today. I also aimed to uncover his feelings toward followers, situations and organizational contexts.

I interviewed McDonald in a face-to-face meeting on November 20, 2015.

Leader Background & Development

Prior to working at the Community Food Bank, McDonald was the CEO of Habitat for Humanity Tucson for 10 years, and has held positions including Chief Financial Officer, Director of Development, Executive Director, Director of Operations, and VP of Human Resources at other organizations in the Tucson area.

He holds a Bachelor of Arts in English Education and a Master of International Business Management degree. However, the experiences that helped him to develop his leader skills are not tied to these positions or educational degrees.

McDonald attributes his leader development to three categories:

- First, learning from 'bad' leaders and learn-

ing "from what they have done poorly and what they have done well" (M. McDonald, personal communication, November 20, 2015).

- Second, by observing individuals who have led from an unofficial, or nonlegitimate capacity. McDonald stated that he has seen individuals who weren't in an official leader position, but had an "ability to persuade/influence, connect with other people, and get things done through and with other people."
- Third, McDonald attributes his leader development to having been subject to many different styles of leadership, as a follower, throughout his career.

Leadership Skills

McDonald has often been told by others that he is an inspiring and challenging leader. Even as a child, he was frequently cast in the role of leader in group situations. He feels that he is a good manager, but only very recently in his current role as CEO at the Community Food Bank has he accepted himself as a leader. He feels that being a leader is much more burdensome than being a manager.

As a leader, McDonald believes his key responsibilities are to determine the direction of the group (with the help of others) and articulate that direction to the group in a persuasive manner to achieve collective direction; to gather resources needed to achieve group goals, and to develop other leaders within the organization. Of these responsibilities, developing other leaders within the organization is where the majority of his time is spent. He stated, "This place is too big, too complex, [and] too dynamic for one leader." In this way, McDonald's leader style is shared leadership, or put differently, the empowerment of followers.

Measuring McDonald's leadership effectiveness is more challenging. "Leadership effectiveness concerns how well any group...is able to accomplish

its goals" (Padilla, 2013). Along with the complexity of the Community Food Bank comes the challenge of gauging the accomplishment of its goals. Therefore, McDonald's leadership effectiveness can only be measured by the processes by which the organization operates and by the outcome of smaller, mini-goals within its overarching mission.

An example of one such outcome would be one of the first challenges McDonald faced upon becoming CEO. His goal was to gain the majority vote from the Board of Directors to accept a large financial grant for a new food distribution center, even though the step-by-step process to build the center was not yet clear. Coming into the situation, fewer than half of the board members were in support of the project, requiring a great deal of persuasion on McDonald's part. In the end, he was able to not only gain the majority support of the board, but he was also able to acquire the necessary resources and appropriately direct and align staff to do the work needed to see the project through to completion. This is an example of how many of his leader skills, put into action, resulted in a positive outcome.

Communication Style

As Padilla (2013) states, “communication is the real work of the leadership process.”

In order to be an effective leader, it is important to have strong speaking skills (in both verbal and written communication) to effectively persuade followers to commit to the goals of an organization and to do the work necessary to achieve those goals. As the CEO of such a large and multi-faceted organization, McDonald is often required to be a sense-maker. During the description of his key responsibilities, he explained that he has to be able to discern the direction of the organization (with the help of others) and articulate it to the group in order to get everyone in alignment. The challenge lies within achieving and maintaining that alignment. He compared being a leader to driving a vehicle: a leader has to read the road signs to determine where the organization is going (sense-making) and to get everyone into the vehicle (alignment). McDonald stated, “[It is] the hardest thing ever. You think everyone is on board, and you turn your back, and [then] everyone’s crazy.”

When the goal changes shape, or the target moves (or disappears completely), group focus

needs to be shifted. In this type of situation, McDonald is required to be an adaptive communicator. Adaptive work is a “process that clarifies the distance....between expectations and hopes... and the realities the group faces” (Padilla, 2013). McDonald explained that adaptive work has a different energy than sense-making because it requires more negotiating to get everyone back on track. When this happens, McDonald said, as a leader, you have to decide, “Do you leave, or think of a different way?” In this negotiation process, he further stated that you have to be prepared and “anticipate what you’ll have to speak to.” In this light, the adaptive communication process of the leader then cycles back to sense-making.

In order to be an effective communicator, listening skills are just as essential as persuasive speaking skills. From McDonald’s perspective, listening is the most critical communication skill. He feels that the key to effective communication in both professional and personal relationships is listening: hearing what the other person is saying, and aiming to see the world from their point of view. He stated that the biggest complaint in any organization

is that there is a lack of communication, but feels this is a myth. Instead, he feels that the real issue is that people do not feel heard, and therefore do not feel valued or respected. This is a keen observation, and one that has likely helped McDonald to understand the importance of slowing down and taking the time to listen to others. Though being an attentive listener may come easier to some than others (Padilla, 2013), making an observation such as this

demonstrates that McDonald's listening skills have been learned through many years of experience as a leader. In this manner, he has an egalitarian communication style: "Everyone is entitled to the same respect...and reward of participation in a group" (McLean, 2012).

Conflict Style

Padilla (2013) defines conflict as disagreement or difference of opinion. McDonald feels that the root of conflict comes from a sense of mistrust from one or both parties. Both of these are likely true in most conflict situations. However, in a professional environment, managing conflict can be more challenging as it requires certain behavior restraints that often do not bind us in our personal lives.

In dealing with conflict, most often McDonald aims to be a negotiator, “I win and you win” (Padilla, 2013), to achieve a positive outcome. He described the path to resolution as honesty followed by remorse, forgiveness and the regaining of trust. This is achieved through negotiation so that “everyone gets a little piece of what they want.”

As an example of this conflict management style, McDonald spoke about a situation in which he was summoned to resolve a conflict between the Community Food Bank (before he was officially the CEO) and a community in which the food bank had a presence. In his words, a “peacemaker” was needed to diffuse the situation. McDonald facilitated the conversation by giving both parties the opportunity to speak, asked questions to reflect what he heard and negotiated between the needs of both sides to achieve a positive outcome.

When resolution cannot be reached, McDonald is very conscious of when he needs to be an accommodator, “I lose and you win” (Padilla, 2013).

He described a term he learned in business school: BATNA, which is an acronym for Better Alternative to Negotiated Agreement. He summed this up as: “Know your walkaway point, and be prepared to walk away.” As an example of this type of conflict management, McDonald talked about two different professional positions that he chose to walk away from when conflict resolution could not be reached. He stated that in both situations he was second-in-command and there was a decision that needed to be made by his superior in order to give him permission to execute a project. In both situations, the decision that was made was against his recommendation and (in his eyes) against the best interest of each respective organization. In both situations, he chose to resign his position.

While both of these conflict management styles are applicable in some situations, it’s important to note that not all situations can be resolved through either negotiation or accommodation. As the CEO of a large organization, McDonald will sometimes be required to be more forceful or dominating, such as in an emergency or crisis situation (Padilla, 2013). Furthermore, situations where conflict resolution cannot be reached will not always result in one party or the other walking away. An effective leader has many different approaches to conflict management; the skill is to know which approach is most appropriate for the situation at hand.

Personality Type

Personality is a complex concept that has been approached in many different ways by scholars (Padilla, 2013). For this reason, it would be impossible to define McDonald by a single personality type. Instead, his behavioral characteristics were analyzed through the lens of the Big Five personality factors.

McDonald seems to score high on the openness to experience scale, which is evident through the breadth of nonprofit industries for which he's worked. Additionally, in order to re-energize himself from the sometimes arduous responsibility of being a leader, McDonald likes to write, read and play the piano. This suggests a variety of interests and a creative facet, both characteristics of individuals who score high on openness.

Padilla (2013) states that individuals who score high on the conscientiousness scale "exhibit high self-control ... [and] are characterized by academic and career achievement." With McDonald's educational achievements and impressive career advancement, it's evident he scores high on this scale.

McDonald describes himself as an introvert by nature, suggesting a low score on the extraversion scale. However, in his role as a leader he's required to talk to people often. He said, "It's hard to be an introvert and lead, but it's not impossible." As a natural introvert, he's aware of when he needs to take time for himself, for solitude and space, to re-charge. Though extraversion may not come naturally to him, the ability to behave like an extravert,

but also function well independently suggests that McDonald is best described as an "ambivert" (Padilla, 2013).

As for agreeableness, McDonald seems to score mid-level. He is "tolerant, agreeable, and accepting of others" (Padilla, 2013), but not to the extreme of being fully dependent on others or putting himself completely in the background. Though his personality would not be best described as moving away from the group, he said, "I have always felt like an outsider and a misfit wherever I am asked to lead." This mentality suggests that some elements of his personality are more in alignment with a low score in agreeableness.

According to Padilla (2013), emotional stability is "the ability to interpret events in an optimistic manner and 'read' other people's emotions." Though no one person can be great at this all of the time, McDonald seems to have strong emotional stability. This observation is in alignment with his listening communication style. McDonald has observed throughout his years of leader experience that people need to feel heard in order to bolster their sense of value and feel respected. Consciously making this observation suggests a high score in emotional stability. Further, McDonald has a strong sense of self-awareness, which is directly related to emotional stability. As an example, he stated "you have to put your best self forward, even though sometimes you don't feel like it."

Source of Leader Power

Padilla (2013) defines power as “the capacity to get things done by mobilizing people and resources.” As CEO, McDonald’s most obvious source of leader power is position or legitimate power. It’s important to note that often with position power, a leader also has reward and coercive power, to be used with discretion in certain situations. Second

to legitimate power, McDonald holds expert power as well. Throughout his career, he has developed a strength in gathering resources and describes his job as being a steward of those resources. He stated, “A good steward has to run around and do a bunch of tasks; I like this and I am good at it.”

Conclusion

Michael McDonald has had many experiences that have helped him develop into the leader that he is today. He believes in shared leadership through the empowerment and development of his followers. He believes that listening is not only the key to effective communication, but also the path to conflict resolution. He has a strong sense of self-awareness and aims to be his best self through consistent practice. He is observant and reactive to his surroundings and contexts, and adapts his

leader style to the situation. He is emotionally intelligent and aligns himself with others through listening, hearing, and taking action. McDonald’s universal rule in leadership is authenticity. He stated, “Be yourself, don’t try to channel someone else.”

Though “no one is perfect, and no leadership episode is either” (Padilla, 2013), Michael McDonald is a good leader with many positive outcomes to attest to his overall leadership effectiveness.

References

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