



Looking For a Fresh Start

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Over the last two months, *The Ottawa Citizen* has published a number of stories, editorials and op-ed pieces that have underscored the dysfunctional nature of municipal government in Ottawa. In particular, with the onset of municipal election season, various writers have pointed to few mayoral and councilor candidates with truly leadership quality.

My question is whether anyone has assembled any leadership criteria that could be used to assess candidates to lead Council and the municipal bureaucracy towards the kind of future the citizens of Ottawa think they might like have (leaving aside for the moment a legacy of complete absence of shared vision for the city). What kind of skills or competencies should we expect of these candidates? How will we judge one candidate from another? In any other hiring process we would begin by assessing a candidate's skills and then judging whether the candidate can adjust to the needs of a new organizational context. So why, as Denley suggested November 19th, can't we do the same with our municipal leaders?

If readers will allow, let me make a first attempt. Right off we should, as Gray warned January 6th, avoid those would-be "politicians with simple solutions [who] are charlatans treating the electorate as fools. If solutions were simple, the problems would already be solved."

Equally offensive in my mind are those that claim to have all the answers. Typically these are the big appendage swinging leaders who claim to be "in-charge" and whose leadership style usually consists of some combination of patriarchy, exerting dominance, finding fault but avoiding blame, promoting division and fear, and exacting retribution. On December 23rd, Gray said that

“Council needs compromise, not division.” But coherence in Council will not come by electing a bunch of aspiring Napoleons.

Those Napoleons are the romanticized “white-knight” leaders who we believe will save us from ourselves. When we are unwilling to make hard choices (which is often), then we call upon the white knights to make them for us so we can stay in our perpetual dream-state of entitlement. In reality, however, anyone claiming they can “take charge” of the municipality is either woefully ignorant of the complexity of many local issues or a petty tyrant waiting to prey upon a rather naïve citizenry. If we are truly looking for new leaders, we should see if any candidates in a moment of honesty come forward publicly and say they don’t have all the answers ... but they’d work with people in the community to try and find them and continually report on their progress in doing so.

In my mind, we don’t need “serious leaders”. We need an entirely new kind of leader – a collaborative leader capable of guiding – not directing or managing -- our diverse community through a long list of complex issues. I think Roy Thomas was on the right track when he said on November 30th that “the required leadership at the municipal level is not authoritative or dictatorial but persuasive.” So here is my list of competencies that I would expect from more “persuasive” candidates in the next election.

To begin with they would need to be *effective listeners and learners*. Our most common way of listening is not listening to others at all but listening to our own internal dialogue. We need leaders who in listening are open to what is possible; to what is may be different but true for someone else; to what they and others contribute to a problem; and to that perspective which is whole and common to each. Such leaders can detect reason in all claims in conflict, recognize the particular legitimacy of each, sense where the grounds of concord are, and bring competitors into a shared sense of what is possible. We don’t need to elect more experts. Experts have nothing to learn so their expertise turns into a serious learning disability.

The people we need should be more *stewards* than traditional leaders because they would recognize the distributed nature of the power, knowledge and resources in council, within the municipal bureaucracy and across the community. Stewards support the decision making of others and since most of the major decisions this community faces require some form of willing

cooperation, the quality of stewardship is much more in demand than any ability to dictate or coerce.

These leaders should be *committed democrats* willing to encourage local residents to take ownership and accept responsibility for their own conditions and actions. To paraphrase a popular 60s slogan, “if you’re not part of the problem, then how can you expect to be part of the solution”. Denley suggested (January 5th) the leaders we need should help to restore the public's faith in our own self governance, but to do so they will need to put more information, resources, and decision making in the hands of those closest to an issue or problem. They need to see themselves as agents of the people not their master.

We need to elect *placed-based, collaborative leaders* who have a powerful commitment to Ottawa not to specific causes or problems; not to specific ideologies or political parties; and certainly not to narrow interest groups. They won't be expected to provide us with a readymade vision, but they would be expected to act as amateurs capable of facilitating its collective emergence.

They must be *conveners*. They should be able to use the various forms of their own power (authority, reward, coercive, expert or referent) to bring people together in as many ways as possible, but they should also not be afraid to use the power of others to bring people together as well. This community is made of many people with many talents.

The people we need to elect should be *boundary crossers*, willing to work across traditional organizational boundaries, who are not bound or intimidated by ‘turf’ struggles and whose commitment to end results can be shared with others as a kind of partnership glue. "The leadership that makes other cities work is bigger than the public sector," said Caroline Andrew in a November 16th article. “It is a coalition of the private sector and civil society, which Ottawa doesn't have." We desperately need someone to bridge this gap.

As a consequence, the leaders we elect should also be *coalition builders* able to enunciate a bigger picture and regional possibility, one that has the power to draw in the commitments of others in the pursuit of a different community future. They would also need to be masters of 360 degree accountability up, down and across the community.

We need people who are *integrators and systems thinkers*, who can see the interdependence among the many issues, organizations and sectors of the community. Transportation, economic development, social inequity, cultural vitality are all interdependent phenomena. Our new leaders need to be more than simple, problem solving, fix-it men, taking the knowledge of the past to recreate it in the future. They need to be facilitators and communicators of a community possibility that would allow us all to begin living into it even from today.

There is no doubt that the people we need should be *risk takers, innovators, and entrepreneurs*, willing to apply the same entrepreneurial spirit that we have seen time and again in our native start-up companies but applying it instead to the betterment of Ottawa. They would not be, as Denley suggested on January 5th, the type of risk-averse, careerists who put their own interest above the community. They would, however, embrace partnerships, citizen empowerment and innovative service over patriarchy, dependence and entitlement.

They would also need to be *champions of change*, not it's directors or micro-managers. They should be able promote collaboration among groups of stakeholders through ongoing dialogues and local forums. They would not, as Denley described December 27th, "reduce their colleagues to props" but raise them up as the co-creators of change that they are. Such leaders would not take credit for the efforts of groups, but they would repeatedly benefit from their willingness to give credit where credit is due.

They would be *process designers*, designing cooperative processes without prejudicing their outcomes, because they understand that it only through the authentic ownership by community partners that effective solutions will be invented, implemented and achieved.

The people we need to elect should see themselves as *leaders of cultural change* within the City administration and within the community at large. They need to be able to model in their own behaviour and actions the same kind of cooperation, social learning, attitudes, and conventions that will be needed by citizens and organizations of all stripes in this community.

Lastly, they would have to be *effective educators* because the collaborative capacities and partnership skills we so urgently require are just not in common currency. In our modern condition, we have lost much of our knowledge of how to work together. We have adopted autonomy over community; indulgence over service; entitlement over ownership. We have come to expect our leaders should be more than human and that as citizens it is our God given right to

have something for nothing. We have generally forgotten that as a community it is our mutual commitments that ultimately sustain us, provide us with homes and a future to build towards.

The big questions for the next election remain, as Mohammed Adam noted December 28th, “where are the dynamic new leaders going to come from and, [even] if they emerge, will voters back them?” What’s our level of deserving? Do we as citizens still want the snake-oil messiahs to come and pretend to relieve us of the responsibilities for our lives and community? Or will we accept our own contribution to this city’s dysfunction, its lack of creativity, its indecisiveness, and its mediocrity and choose a group of leaders who will listen to us, work with us, prod us, and even chasten us in order to help find a path out of our mess? My cynical bet is on the former but I’m eager to be proved wrong.

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