

Leadership and Chess: A Kind of Genius

By Otis White

Editor's note: We first published this article in 2015. It is still one of our favorites, well worth sharing again with all of our readers.

What the best public-sector leaders do doesn't sound very exciting. It helps to be great at chess. Twenty-five years ago, as I was growing interested in how cities produce leaders and leaders shape cities, I heard a state business association president define leadership. A leader, he said, "is someone who helps people get where they want to go."

He was speaking to a community leadership class, and I could sense the audience deflate. That's it? Help people go somewhere? Like a bus driver? What about organizing constituencies, offering a vision, and persuading the public? What about standing up for people—or standing up to the powerful? What about holding office?

And, yet, I had to admit he was on to something. Organization and persuasion are skills. Visions can be supplied by others. Standing up to the powerful and holding office are roles. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that helping people get where they want to go (and, one hopes, need to go) isn't a bad definition of what leaders do. It's just . . . incomplete.

So allow me to complete the definition. A leader is someone who helps people get where they want to go . . . by seeing the opportunity for getting there.

Seeing the opportunity—the narrow, sometimes temporary passage through which change can happen—is the genius of leadership. And herding people through that passage is the practice of leadership. What the genius and the practice require is a sense of how things fit together, a tactical vision, a willingness to learn from experience, and a saintly patience with people—but a patience that's bounded by the resolve to do something meaningful.

If this sounds abstract, trust me; there are examples all around you. Here in Atlanta, I've seen these traits in people who nurtured projects great and small, from the creation of the BeltLine, a circle of parks and trails that's transforming entire

neighborhoods, to the building of a roundabout that fixed an impossible intersection at the gates of Emory University and breathed life into a small retail district. In both cases, the leader was someone who recognized the value of these projects, sized up



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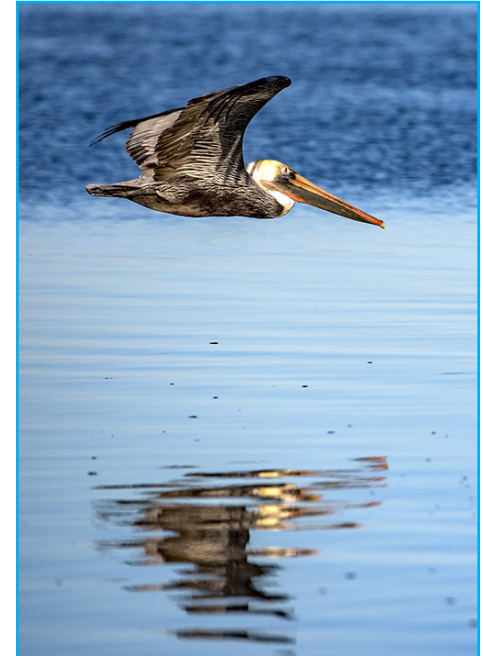
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Main Sponsor(s): US Small Business Administration Contact: Patrice Dozier, patrice.dozier@sba.gov Fee: Free; registration required
SBA is creating a space for Woman-Owned Small Businesses, via WOSB certification! Are you a woman owner of a small business? The federal government's goal is to award at least five percent of all federal contracting dollars to woman-owned small businesses each year. Join us for training on how to register for SBA's Woman-Owned Small Business (WOSB) program, which helps eligible small businesses to qualify for federal contracting opportunities. The monthly sessions include an overview of the self-certification process, and a discussion of the NAICS codes that qualify as WOSB or EDWOSB. Register at <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/woman-owned-small-business-wosb-certification-program-tickets-1123654353419>

8(a) Orientation and SAM Registration Webinar Wednesday, April 16, 2025, 9:30 am–11:00 am CST Online
Main Sponsor(s): US Small Business Administration Contact: SBA Illinois District Office, 312-353-4528, illinois.do@sba.gov Fee: Free; registration required
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Illinois District Office for a virtual workshop providing an overview of the 8(a) Business Development program, eligibility requirements, and program benefits. Also learn how to increase your potential for federal contract opportunities through System for Award Management (SAM) registration, including information that you need for the registration process. SBA presenters will offer additional tips, address FAQs, give directions on where to get further assistance, and answer your other questions. To register for this free webinar, <https://events.gcc.teams.microsoft.com/event/ae4bd15d-ec43-4da3-a0a9-854abf063970@3c89fd8a-7f68-4667-aa15-41ebf2208961>

Selling to the Federal Government Webinar Thursday, April 24, 2025, 12:00 pm–3:00 pm CST Online
Main Sponsor(s): US Small Business Administration Contact: George Tapia, 610-382-3086, george.tapia@sba.gov Fee: Free; registration required
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