

## WRITING SAMPLE: GREATER KNOXVILLE BUSINESS JOURNAL

This article was ghostwritten for Danny Pressley of BPV Capital Management.

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### The Community Leader: Hero or Servant?

As current treasurer, active board member and a 2001 alum of Leadership Knoxville, I'm fond of the organization's vision: "Every leader—a servant leader." That, I guess, outs me on the hero-or-servant question. Let's hope, however, that this thought-exercise adds some color and nuance to my preconceptions about community leadership—both as a service position and as a high-pressure "man in the arena" type of role.

The ancient Greek image of the leader as military-hero has never struck me as realistic. Emanuel Leutze's 1851 painting "Washington Crossing the Delaware"—the one with General George Washington cutting a stoic figure at the bow of a little wave-battered boat—has become a visual cliché for leadership in this classical, adventuring, military mode. Leaders covet this kind of image, of course, and who can blame them? Grace under pressure is an unquestionable virtue in leadership. But I can't help asking, isn't there more going on here?

Let's take a closer look. To the contemporary viewer, Leutze's Washington is romantic—almost painfully so. But realism makes an appearance too. Setting aside the familiarity of the image for a second, I'm struck by how noisy it is. Except for Washington's resolve and the misty back-lighting, literally everything in the painting is in a state of unrest. So while Washington's courage is certainly the subject of the painting, it is chaos that makes the painting.

To me, all that chaos and movement is an allegory for the lived history that stands behind every leadership success story—the spotty, inelegant history of a community in formation. I see years of goodwill and consensus-building driving Washington's fleet forward, one oar heave at a time. The general's confident, shoreward gaze may resound with the worthiness of his cause, but it relies entirely on the fiber of his bond with his crew.

But I'm reaching. I think we owe it to the servant leader to find a less lofty metaphor. Moving a group efficiently toward a collaborative goal, learning to recognize and utilize the unique talents of group members, making room for individuals to aspire and grow; these things don't conjure the finalities of the battlefield, but the earlier stuff of the schoolyard.

Remember follow the leader? Some children leap at the chance to invent movements for others to watch and repeat, while some relish the more private joys of pantomime. But what happens when the child who assumes the leader-role charts a course that only she can complete? What if, for instance, the leader chooses to do cartwheels, when no one else can do cartwheels? One after another, the joy falls away and the game ends. Kids scatter. The spell is broken. *Show off.*

**Leadership**

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The Community Leader: Hero or Servant? (Cont.)

But what if the same leader takes time to train and inspire his peers in the art of the cartwheel? Then you have something more than play—you have growth.

As it turns out, I don't think the hero and the servant are competing leadership models after all—they're snapshots of the same leader at different moments in time.

During my career in the financial services industry, I have been humbled by the complexity and sensitivity of the issues I've been asked to address, and those pressures sometimes tempt me to lose my sense of humor, set my jaw and strike the hero pose.

But the better leader is the one who has taken time to reflect on his role in the game, who has found his place within the particulars of his community, who has learned to appreciate more of that local life that's buzzing all around him even as he plants his foot on the bow and turns to face the very-important decisions that are, for a time, his to make.

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