

**REINVENT RHODE ISLAND - A search for new ideas and new leadership
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remedy for the state's economic malaise
PAUL GRIMALDI**

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A gutsy business advocate changed the course of Providence history in 1978 when he embraced an idea that had been rejected time and again for a century - moving the railroad tracks that split downtown, thus opening acres and acres of bleak landscape to development.

The vision Ron Marsella, the executive director of the Providence Foundation, shared with businessman Bruce Sundlun and U.S. Sen. Claiborne Pell, Mayor Vincent A. Cianci Jr. and others set in motion a quarter-century of activity that remade the city's skyline and revitalized its reputation.

Architects, businessmen, preservationists and politicians argued and tussled for years about the details of the Capital Center District. Together, those leaders agreed to move not only tracks, but rivers. They financed a mall's construction and a train station's preservation. They transplanted a historic monument and gave Providence a new heart.

What they didn't do was lay the foundation for a new generation of leaders who could set Rhode Island on its next course.

Today, Rhode Islanders are wondering where the right people are with the remedy for the state's economic malaise.

The commanding Sundlun and the patrician Pell both are dead. Marsella is in private life. The current governor is an embattled independent without a natural constituency.

The public considers the General Assembly untrustworthy finaglers, consumed by special interest. Mayors in cash-strapped cities struggle to provide their residents basic services.

Business people are too busy staying out of the red to dream big.

The one who did dream big - ex-ballplayer and novice businessman Curt Schilling - lacked the necessary focus on the bottom line. The state's investment cost taxpayers millions of dollars. As a result, taxpayers will spend perhaps \$102 million to mop up the financial mess left behind by Schilling's defunct videogame company.

Meanwhile, the Rhode Island unemployment rate has been among the worst in the nation for nearly five years. Today, it stands at 10.8 percent, the second-highest in the nation.

As a result of these and other economic factors, Rhode Islanders grumble about their state's lack of direction.

A large number of them came together at week's end to move Rhode Island toward a better future.

On Friday and Saturday, more than 300 people - corporate executives, nonprofit directors, labor leaders, small-business owners, academics and others - gathered in the Rhode Island Convention Center to brainstorm ways to fix the Rhode Island economy. Out of that conclave perhaps will emerge the leadership Rhode Island lacks.

"We're here because there's a sense of urgency around Rhode Island," said Neil D. Steinberg, of the Rhode Island Foundation. "I believe leaders step up in an emergency."

Leadership in Rhode Island once fell to the families that controlled the state's large businesses and institutions. The influence of those families dissipated in the late 20th century as they splintered and sold off holdings.

Leadership, in the context of 21st century America, is a fuzzy concept.

Interviews and correspondence with more than a dozen academics, businesspeople and theorists around the country elicited some commonalities but no definitive description.

"There are as many definitions of leadership as there are organizations," said Georgianna Bishop, president of the Public Sector Consortium in Cambridge, Mass.

Successful leadership can appear as art, or magic.

"A lot of times it's easier to know it when you see it," said James M. Ludes, executive director at the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at Salve Regina University.

Like paint on a canvas, it's a mixture. Compassion, cooperativeness, experience, inspiration, optimism, perseverance, vision and other qualities combined in the correct quantities at the right point.

"Watching a good leader - it's like watching a good magician - you don't know how they do it," said Rear Adm. Richard Gurnon, president of the Massachusetts Maritime Academy.

Is leadership, then, innate ability or practiced movement?

A whole industry arose with the belief it can be taught, its methods imparted in prescriptive books, speaking tours and academies, both public and private.

Leadership Rhode Island is one form. Founded in 1981, the Providence organization, which tries to provide leaders and emerging leaders with knowledge and access to resources to enable them to improve their communities, was part of a movement that swept across the country during that decade.

Leadership groups aim to enlighten people to serious issues, sometimes specific to a community or region. The topics change with the times, as do the participants. Bankers learn about how welfare works, civil-rights activists see how a business operates.

The more critical role for leadership groups is networking - linking emerging leaders from across a spectrum of community life.

"The economy will always operate on relationships," said Mike Ritz, Leadership Rhode Island's executive director. The theory of that model is that strong communities and healthy economies grow from those relationships.

"If you build a good community, you're going to do better [in business], everybody is going to do better," Ritz said.

The Public Sector Consortium takes a more straightforward approach to leadership development, one aimed at professionalizing the career track.

Founded in 1995, the consortium develops and teaches leadership strategies for the public sector. The goal is to translate the management and leadership practices from the best schools and institutions in the world into tools usable by public-sector leaders.

"There are no basic entry competencies to get into leadership," Bishop said. "There's no profession that would function with this serendipitous approach."

More than one person contacted by The Journal praised the American military for its leadership training - a methodology that emphasizes selflessness and integrity, practice and analysis.

At the Maritime Academy, freshmen memorize numerous bits of information, from the 35 pieces of a lifeboat to the 16 "Traits of a Leader."

After reciting those traits, from "bearing" to "selflessness," Admiral Gurnon asked rhetorically, "Tell me which one of those you're born with?"

"None of them," he said. "You may have a proclivity for [leadership]; you're not born with it."

A person has to practice leadership, just as an artist or magician practices his or her skills, he said. In that regard, the academy has more in common with the Massachusetts College of Art and Design than it does with most any other college.

"We both have a lot of hands-on application of practical skills," he said.

Central to the skill of leadership is listening.

"And business leaders, in particular, need to be heard," said Ludes, of the Pell Center. "Government officials need to hear from them what the barriers to development are, where government can help, and so forth."

Has the nature of leadership changed in modern America?

"The core values are the same," Gurnon said. "It's the duality of caring for your people and caring for the mission equally."

What has changed is that the emphasis on mission over people has lessened.

"In the old days you could be more mission-oriented - you can't do that anymore," Gurnon said. "Now you must be more motivational. It's getting humans to accomplish the task, ideally, voluntarily."

Barbara Kellerman, who lectures on public leadership at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, said those who want to lead have to adapt to the circumstances at hand.

"Leaders need to understand the context in which they're embedded," Kellerman said. "It does call for a new level of collaboration. The command-and-control model is out."

Inspiration, then, is another key.

"Inspiration is often overlooked," said Ritz, of Leadership Rhode Island. "It's the ability to inspire yourself and others to do things beyond their limitations."

Ludes, of the Pell Center, agreed.

Effective leaders "have a very clear vision of where they want to move" and "the ability to inspire others," Ludes said.

And, Ritz said, that can be anyone. Even, he said, a young former Cumberland woman on a computer who petitions a national bank into submission, alluding to Molly Katchpole's successful effort in 2011 to get Bank of America to drop debit-card fees.

So there, perhaps, you have it.

Rhode Islanders will prosper again when a group of concerned people, who've learned how to tell the difference between what's intelligent and what's expedient, who care more about their community than they do about their positions in it, share a vision of the state's future so strongly they inspire the rest of us to greatness.

That's leadership.

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