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The new leadership equation: five core ingredients

By Ken Dychtwald

After nearly 40 years in the field of aging, I've come to believe there are five key ingredients for becoming and remaining a leader in this arena.

First, you must have a forward-facing vision and mission.

You've got to imagine how you'd like things to be, how to get there and what roles we all need to play to realize that vision. Your ideas must be compelling enough for people to want to take that trip with you. Backward-facing vision may be fascinating and make for an insightful historical perspective, but forward-facing vision is a requirement.

And you must cultivate excellent communication skills. In a less media-engaged era, you might have been able to carry on by teaching a college course or publishing a timely study. That's not enough anymore. Today, you have to be a persuasive multimedia communicator. Some people think effective communication is a natural talent. I disagree: you can learn how to get better, you can improve with practice and there are classes, workshops and coaches that can leapfrog you forward.

When I became involved in trying to spread the word about a new image of aging, I started taking courses in selling. I doubt there's ever been a course at an ASA or a gerontological meeting on how to be a persuasive person, but in the field of life insurance and home realty, they know how to sell. So I signed up for many programs in those sectors to hone my skills as a persuasive communicator in the gerontology field.

Second, your content must be airtight.

When you are vetted by the White House or to speak in front of world leaders, CEOs or people in the field and your facts are wrong—it's over. Aging is a subject that's misunderstood, and people may have a biased or uninformed point of view. You should be more expert in what others think than what you think. Do your homework and know what you're talking about—which includes admitting what you're not sure of.

Years ago, I didn't think I understood the history of aging well enough, so I reached out to Dr. Andy Achenbaum—the country's leading expert—and asked him to tutor me. He graciously agreed. He offered up a vast panorama of big ideas to me—and I've been grateful (and better informed) ever since.

Third, be prepared to course correct.

No matter who you are or what path you're on, you'd probably benefit from good editing. This requires a willingness to learn new things and adjust your orientation.

Around 25 years ago, Monsignor Chuck Fahey and I were sitting on a panel together at a conference; Chuck turned to me and initiated a serious discussion about the importance of the civil

rights movement and the kind of caring values and morals that needed to form the foundation of the field of aging. He made some important points that I hadn't fully considered. At that moment, I was just completing work on my eighth book, *Age Wave*. After the talk with Fahey, my views had shifted and I decided to rewrite the whole book.

Which leads me to my fourth point: have mentors.

I don't know how anybody can become a leader in any field without mentors. And don't be afraid to reach high. The most influential gerontology-related mentors to me were Maggie Kuhn and Bob Butler.

However, many of my mentors are from the worlds of business and politics. I was once asked to give a speech at Georgia Southwest State University and they had no funding for a speaker. The program was sponsored by Rosalyn Carter's Caregiving Institute. I asked if, in lieu of a fee, I could have dinner with the President and Mrs. Carter. President Carter had been called out of town, so I spent a wonderful evening one-on-one with Mrs. Carter. The next day, during my speech about older adults and volunteerism, I turned to the audience and said, "Mrs. Carter, when you speak to your husband, please tell him I've got a job for him because we need to create a global elder corps." Everybody laughed.

But two weeks later, my phone rang and a voice said, "Ken, this is Jimmy Carter. I hear you've got a job for me." We decided to make an exchange. He wanted to write a book about aging—*The Virtues of Aging*—and thought I could help him. In exchange, I asked him to share his spiritual and humanitarian values. I wanted to be influenced by him. Our exchanges had a profound impact on my life.

You don't always get a U.S. president to be your mentor. It could be your work supervisor. It could be your mom. It could be one of your students or clients.

Fifth, and last, you need a strong will and a strong heart.

Because being a leader can sometimes be tough. While there will be moments of affirmation, even acclaim, you will also be disagreed with, and you will be disappointed. Some things that you're hoping will happen, won't. Some days you'll get up and say things that you think are brilliant—and people won't care.

I strongly recommend you surround yourself with people who love you—and who will tell you the truth—because you will get wounded again and again. Being a leader on a complicated topic where you have to fight for the rights of other people is going to be competitive and challenging. Make sure you have support. Whether it's your faith or your community. In my case, it's my wife, my children and my parents.

On the other hand, if you're wonderfully successful and you experience any fame, you may very well start drinking too much of your own Kool-Aid. Either way, be sure there are people who love you, who will be honest with you and who will give you the support you need to go out and change the world! ■

Over the past almost 40 years, Ken Dychtwald has emerged as one of the world's foremost visionaries and original thinkers regarding the lifestyle, marketing, healthcare and workforce implications of the age wave. The founding president and CEO of Age Wave, he's a sought-after consultant, public speaker, entrepreneur, documentary filmmaker and bestselling author of 16 books on aging, health and retirement related issues including Age Wave and A New Purpose: Redefining Money, Family, Work Retirement and Success.

This article is excerpted from Dychtwald's presentation to the inaugural class of ASA's Leadership Academy, held at the 2012 Aging in America Conference.



Photo: Courtesy of Age Wave

Ken Dychtwald with President Jimmy Carter at a Habitat for Humanity project, 1997.