Standing before the filled ballroom, Paul Schmitz asked the audience to think back to the first time they acted as a leader. A few brave souls shared their memories and demonstrated that leaders can emerge at any age and for many different reasons.

In an engaging and inspirational session, Schmitz challenged us to reframe our preconceived notions of leadership and consider that, perhaps, everyone can lead.

“Leadership is a muscle,” he said. “We all have it. We just need to exercise it.”

As CEO of Public Allies, an organization that is changing the face of leadership in communities across the country, Schmitz has been helping diverse, young leaders strengthen their leadership muscle for two decades.

Everyone Can Lead

Schmitz defines leadership in a new way—it is an action anyone can take, not just a position few can hold. It is about taking responsibility to work on common goals. And finally, it is a practice of values. Schmitz asserts than when we shift the definition of leadership from a noun to a verb, we create the opportunity for anyone to be a leader.

Schmitz believes there is a fundamental problem with the “hero-status” we give our leaders and that we are doing ourselves disservice by placing them on pedestals. We automatically associate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with the Civil Rights Movement, and although he deserves much credit, he did not do it alone. Schmitz urged us to remember that, “social change comes from the leadership of the many.” And the actions of the ordinary leaders should not be diminished.

Taking Responsibility

Taking responsibility isn’t just about stepping up or achieving our goals. Our first priority as leaders is to encourage new leaders and create opportunities for them.
schmitz himself was a troubled youth and saw public service as a way to give back to the mentors and institutions that served and inspired him. it is important to recognize the strengths in others and encourage them to share these talents as leaders.

Practicing Values

Schmitz challenged the audience to pursue value-based leadership. He argued that community development must be asset-based. We shouldn’t send people into a community to, “fix it.” This approach is, “arrogant at best and oppressive at worst,” he said. Instead, we should send in leaders who can identify and nurture the strengths of communities. He encouraged teams to view diversity as an action, not an ideal and to build collaborative teams realizing that our differences make us stronger. As leaders, we must value continuous learning. Drawing a big laugh, he informed the audience, “We need to own the things we suck at… everyone else already knows it!” Taking ownership of our flaws allows for transparency and accountability. Finally, he insisted that leaders must serve with integrity, staying true to their values, purpose and convictions.

It is time to encourage new leadership for new times—to attract new leaders and new ideas to make our communities stronger.

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