Leadership at its Best
By Mark A. Jamison, Ph.D.

Recently a utility CEO said something that made me step back and appreciate wisdom. Asked for an important lesson in leadership, he observed, “Leadership isn’t about me. It’s about the team.” He went on to explain that leadership isn’t about being in charge, but rather about ensuring that the team has the conversations and makes the decisions that are needed to move forward.

This CEO’s perspective has a lot in common with that of Liu Xiaobo. Mr. Xiaobo’s life and his words have stimulated a worldwide discussion about what it means for people to make progress, the nature of progress, and its price.

“I have no enemies, and no hatred. None of the police who have monitored, arrested and interrogated me, the prosecutors who prosecuted me, or the judges who sentence me, are my enemies. . . .

“For hatred is corrosive of a person's wisdom and conscience; the mentality of enmity can poison a nation's spirit, instigate brutal life and death struggles, destroy a society's tolerance and humanity, and block a nation's progress to freedom and democracy. I hope therefore to be able to transcend my personal vicissitudes . . . to counter the hostility of the regime with the best of intentions, and defuse hate with love. . . .”

Liu Xiaobo, the 2010 Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, from his final statement before going to prison.

I think most of us would agree that Mr. Xiaobo is practicing leadership. However, notice that his leadership stands in stark contrast to the common notion that leadership is about directing others. The people that Mr. Xiaobo is impacting would not consider themselves to be his followers: His words have caused you, me, and a world of others to pause and think about our aspirations, to compare the way we live to how he lives, and to reflect on partisanship and other divisions in today’s world. He is not directing us; rather he is causing us to engage in conversations and make decisions that are needed for our countries to move forward.

The CEO and Mr. Xiaobo tell us something else about leadership at its best, namely that it opens our minds. Divisive comments resonate when they highlight the good in “us” or condemn the evil in “them.” Such partisanship rallies our hearts towards a shared cause, perhaps even a good one, but it ultimately poisons our spirit and imprisons our minds, preventing us from having the dialogues we need for progress.

What can you do with these leadership insights? If you are in charge of a group, look for examples of leadership within your group, and give those practices the energy and protection they need. Also look for ways to develop leadership skills within your group, namely the skills needed to provide leadership without being in charge. If you find yourself within a group, look
for situations where the group is not recognizing difficult realities, is holding onto traditions that hold it back, is resisting open discussions, or is failing to learn from novel experiences. Finding these, engage allies to mobilize the group into serious consideration of your observations, all the while recognizing that your ideas are, at best, only partially right and that, with proper leadership, the group’s insights are likely to be better than your own.

Finally, remember the words of Lao Tzu, “A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: We did it ourselves.”