

Drawing Inspiration From Dr. Seuss

By KATHLEEN NOVAK

Now Is the Time to Revisit His Lessons on Leadership >>

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Recently, I was invited to visit my local elementary school and read to a classroom of third graders. I was told I could bring my favorite book and talk about my favorite author. It was a difficult choice for me. My favorite childhood book is “The Little Engine

That Could” by Watty Piper, but one of my favorite children’s authors is Dr. Seuss. To avoid making the choice, I asked the teacher if I could read *two* stories.

As I read the books to the group of wide-eyed, curious children, I was struck by a couple of thoughts. One, what a responsibility we have as leaders to make sure that the world these children grow up in is the best we can make it—and what a vital role I play as mayor in helping to create that future. Secondly, I was struck by the important messages that these children’s books hold not just for children, but for us as leaders. Obviously, “The Little Engine That Could” is a story about persistence, attitude, and belief in oneself in order to accomplish our goals. This is an important lesson for us all, particularly in times like these. But the lessons of Dr. Seuss can provide inspiration, and wisdom, at a time when, one could argue, we need it most. If you go beyond “The Cat in the Hat” and “Green Eggs and Ham” to some of the other fifty-plus stories, you will find many lessons that can be helpful to government leaders at this very challenging time.

A Time for Change

We’ve all heard that the only constant is change. Dr. Seuss’s story “What Was I Scared Of?” points out our natural fear of the unknown and resistance to change. What is our role as leaders in an environment where much of the change is beyond our control? Being a leader, according to Ronald Heifetz of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, means having the courage to help those around us face reality, and then to mobilize them for change.

Does this mean that *everything* is open to change? Not at all. Heifetz says our work is to lead the conversations

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about what is essential and open to change and what is not. We must ask not only what is expendable, but what is precious to our communities. What values and operations are so central to our core that if we lose them, we lose ourselves? And what assumptions, investments, and services are subject to radical change? I think this moment in history is the exact moment to be asking these questions and leading these conversations.

In the midst of these conversations regarding change, we will inevitably be led into conflict. Another Dr. Seuss story demonstrates what happens when we engage in positional conflict and fail to work together and collaborate on solutions and moving forward. “The Zax” is a story about a north-going Zax and a south-going Zax who meet in the Prairie of Prax. Both are determined to do what they have always done and go where they have

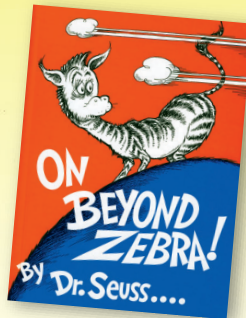
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always gone, thus standing face-to-face at a standstill, while the world goes on around them (and a highway overpass is built around them). Unless we can move beyond positions, and really have candid discussions about what is really at the heart of the issues we face, we, and our communities, like the Zax, will be stuck while the world moves on around us.

We must be the leaders who can help the community through these conflicts and on to the future. Key questions we can ask ourselves include: How can we create a culture that is supportive of compromise and collaboration and direct our energies toward the work, rather than to who owns the road? How can I help the people on my council, and in my city, trade a “heels dug in” position for one of exploring possibilities?

To explore those possibilities, we must be able to think creatively and encourage others to do so. Dr. Seuss's wonderful book "On Beyond Zebra!" talks about what we can accomplish if we think creatively and don't limit ourselves to what has always worked in the past. The main character discusses how he is not limited by the twenty-six letters in our alphabet, and that there are so many more possibilities if you go beyond "Z."

*You can stop, if you want, with the Z.
Because most people stop with the Z.
But not me!!!
In the places I go, there are things that I see
That I never could spell if I stopped with the Z.
I'm telling you this 'cause you're one of my friends.
My alphabet starts where your alphabet ends!
If you stay home with Zebra,
You're stuck in a rut.
But on beyond Zebra,
You're anything but!
When you go beyond Zebra,
Who knows...?
There's no telling
What wonderful things
You might find yourself spelling!
So you see!
There's no end
To the things you might know,
Depending how far beyond Zebra you go!*



Maintaining Commitment

Finally, perhaps the greatest lesson from Dr. Seuss is the value and importance of commitment. One of my favorite stories features that lovable elephant Horton—not in "Horton Hears a Who!" but the story "Horton Hatches the Egg." In the story, the loyal elephant is talked into sitting on an egg by the lazy bird Mayzie. Mayzie claims she just needs a short rest and asks Horton to sit on the nest to protect her egg. Mayzie's short rest turns into an extended vacation, and she leaves Horton sitting on the nest, enduring rain, snow and cold, and wishing she would come back. Horton's loyalty and commitment are Seuss's lessons in this story. Horton never abandons his post; after all, he made a commitment to keep the egg from freezing. His refrain—"I meant what I said and I said what I meant: An elephant's faithful one hundred percent"—is remem-

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What is our role in encouraging creativity in our cities to meet the challenges we face? We must overcome the barriers to creativity. What is our attitude toward new ideas? Are we the ones who constantly shoot them down, not willing to risk achieving anything less than total success? Are we instilling a fear of failure? Are we making assumptions and relying too heavily on logic so that we are eliminating possibilities before we even consider them? Albert Einstein once said, "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it." It will require new ways of thinking to confront and resolve the challenges we face.

bered by generations of readers. In an era of scandals and affairs, in both the private and public sectors, the lesson of being faithful and standing by one's promises is certainly relevant. Are we holding to our commitments to our communities? To our children?

The world around us is changing rapidly. The challenges we face are unlike anything we've seen before. The role of government is changing. The role of leaders is changing. What can we do? Now might be the ideal time to look to the lessons from our childhood and Dr. Seuss. ❁

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