

Give an Hour: A Perspective on Leadership

Brendan McNichol 23 January 2018

Every once in a while, you come across a leader who stands out. It's hard to describe what sets them apart. I think it is more like a "gut feeling." You just know it when you see it. They have the ability to connect with people in a way that transcends the intellectual and rational. They inspire us, and we are driven to follow them. I recently had the opportunity of interviewing Dr. Barbara Van Dahlen the founder of Give an Hour, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. After the first few minutes of talking with Dr. Van Dahlen, I immediately started getting that "gut feeling." Her energy, passion, and dedication towards the mission of Give an Hour was contagious. Learning about her story, how she tackles leadership, and her organization's vision for the future was compelling and insightful.

While growing up on the West Coast, Dr. Van Dahlen endured a traumatic childhood. Shortly after Dr. Van Dahlen was born, her mother suffered a psychotic break and received a diagnosis of schizophrenia. For the next several years her father attempted to get her mother help, but in rural California, during the 1960's there was little help for her mother's condition. Eventually, her parents divorced, and her mother left when Dr. Van Dahlen was

eight and she didn't see her again for more than 40 years. While being raised by her father, a WWII veteran, Dr. Van Dahlen experienced the death of a step-sister, the loss of her brother David to a drowning accident, and when she was 15 the loss of her step-brother from a rare illness. In the face of so much pain from these experiences, Dr. Van Dahlen was still able to find the potential for growth and desired to become a psychologist to help others in need. She received her Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Maryland in 1991 and worked as a licensed clinical psychologist in the Washington, D.C., area for more than two decades. Immediately following September 11th, 2001, Dr. Van Dahlen wanted to help with the trauma that would follow this horrific event. It was during this troubling period that the idea of Give an Hour began to take shape. The catalyst to launch Give an Hour came later in 2004 while riding in the car with her daughter. On their way home, they passed a homeless veteran on the street asking for help. Dr. Van Dahlen's nine-year-old daughter turned and asked her mother how they could let something like this happen; he is just like grandpa. It was at that moment a career pivot was about to occur.

Dr. Van Dahlen founded Give an Hour approximately one year later in 2005 when she encouraged mental health professionals to provide free services to U.S. troops, veterans, their loved ones, and their communities. As of today, the network has grown to nearly 7,000 providers, who have collectively given \$22 million worth of services.

One of Give an Hour's greatest contributions to date is their demonstrated scalable philanthropic model that provides a collective impact through volunteering by a network of mental health providers who donate their time and skills. By harnessing the expertise and generosity of these amazing citizens across our nation, Give an Hour provides those in need with help and hope. Looking into the future, Dr. Van Dahlen plans to expand Give an Hour's impact by providing its proven model of services for other needed populations in our society.

Dr. Van Dahlen is simply a rock star. She has participated in discussions at the Pentagon, the White House, and before Congress to help shape a better future. In addition to her selection for the 2012 TIME 100, she also received the American Psychological Association's Presidential Citation and the 2013 Richard Cornuelle Award for Social Entrepreneurship of the Manhattan Institute. Dr. Van Dahlen's success and Give an Hour's impact is possible because of her unique hybrid leadership style that leverages emotional intelligence and a teamwork mentality. It helps to be a psychologist, but she emphatically understands empathy and can read people's needs and desires. She just recognizes how to navigate the human element and bring out the best in individuals and organizations. At the same time, she understands how to build teams and broad coalitions to get a job done. At her core, she is a problem solver, a collaborator, and an innovator who is fortunately at the forefront of nonprofit

leadership providing hope.

There will always be pain and suffering and those in need of help and hope. Our Society could use more leaders like Dr. Van Dahlen to help change the trajectory of their lives for the better.