

From Sidekick to Superhero: How to Lead Without Wearing a Cape

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We ask you to join us in creating a culture that reflects...

Access and Inclusion

and

Civility and Respect

...this week and in all aspects of our organization.

Opening Poll

When you assumed a leadership role in a Disability Resources Office, which thought felt most familiar?

- I need all the answers.
- I need to solve every problem.
- I need to prove myself immediately.
- I need to make everyone happy.
- Something else equally unattainable.



Who this Session is For and Why

- New and emerging disability services leaders- Many are treated like “superheroes” expected to:
 - Swoop in and save everyone
 - Fix every problem immediately
- Purpose of this session:
 - Reframe leadership expectations
 - Offer practical, sustainable leadership strategies



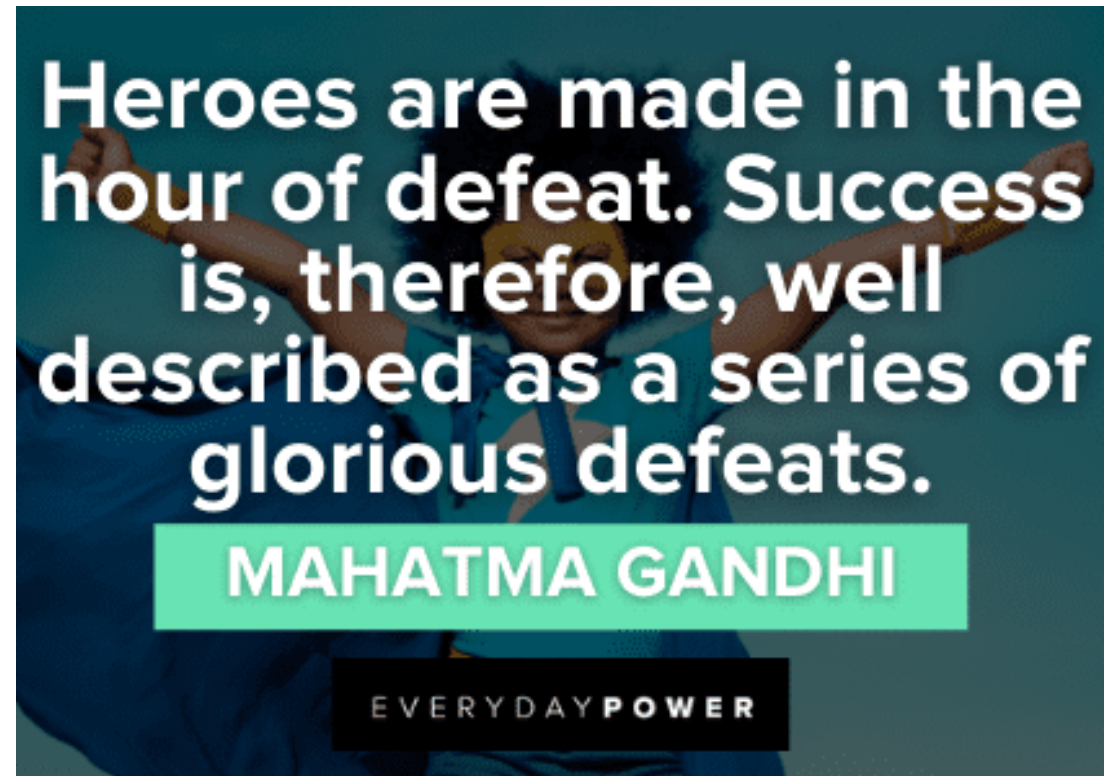
The Superhero Metaphor



- Common perceptions:
 - Invincible, never tired
 - Always the problem-solver
 - “10 feet tall and bulletproof”
- Risks of this narrative:
 - Burnout and isolation
 - Pressure to know everything
 - Unrealistic expectations from campus partners and leadership

Reframing the Superhero Theme

- We are not here to glorify “superhuman” leaders
- Instead, we emphasize:
 - Ordinary, sustainable leadership practices
 - Doing the most with the resources you have
 - Recognizing that feeling “invincible” sometimes is okay—but you aren’t



Leadership Expectations



- Leadership **is not**:
 - Being the expert with all the answers
 - Being everyone's favorite person
 - Solving every "emergency" immediately
- Leadership **is**:
 - Facilitating, guiding, and influencing
 - "Telling truth to power"
 - Serving access, not individual stakeholders

Core Tenets of Leadership



- Building trust:
 - With your team
 - With your administration
- Leading with vulnerability:
 - You do not have to know everything.
 - Having some doubts is healthy.
 - It should feel a little heavy.
- Leading by example:
 - Modeling boundaries
 - Owning mistakes
 - Demonstrating respect and clear communication

**Reflection: Which of these do you already do well?
Where could you improve and how?**

Planting Seeds, Not Performing Miracles

Leadership often looks like:

- “I’m going to plant a seed in hopes of making change.”
- Many seeds, only a few visible wins

Slow results are normal:

- Policy shifts over semesters/years
- Culture change over multiple leadership cycles

Success may be:

- A small policy tweak
- One faculty ally
- One student who sees a path forward

Reflection: What seed are you planting right now?



The Justice League: Leadership as Coalition

- Building Your Justice League: The power of the League does not rest with one person.
- Your coalition might include:
 - VP / Chancellor / Senior Leadership
 - Other directors
 - Faculty leaders and champions
 - Student affairs partners, eLearning, IT
 - Other staff Members
 - Mentors

*****Remember:** Asking for help is not a weakness. Leadership is shared power, not solo heroics



Reflection: Who belongs in your Justice League?

Success in the “Division of Student Success”

- “Student Success” can create pressure to:
 - Guarantee outcomes
 - “Make” students successful
 - “Fix” everything
- Reframing success:
 - We provide opportunities and access
 - We cannot guarantee every outcome
 - Our job: remove barriers, not control results
 - You’re not required to save the world every day.



Reflection: How do you define success in your current role?

We Serve Everyone and No One

- Disability services leaders:
 - Serve students by ensuring access
 - Serve faculty and staff by guiding inclusive practice
 - Serve institutional mission by reducing barriers and ensuring legal compliance

But....your primary client is access, not any single person.

- You are not always the deciding voice or vote—and that's okay



Telling Truth to Power

Superman stories aren't a fantasy about how good it would be to have power. They're a fantasy about what it would be like if someone with power was good.

Leadership Is Not a Popularity Contest

- Effective Leaders
 - Advocate for access
 - Challenge barriers
 - Raise difficult issues
 - Confront bias
 - Focus on mission over comfort

Taking the Hit (Without Self-Destruction)

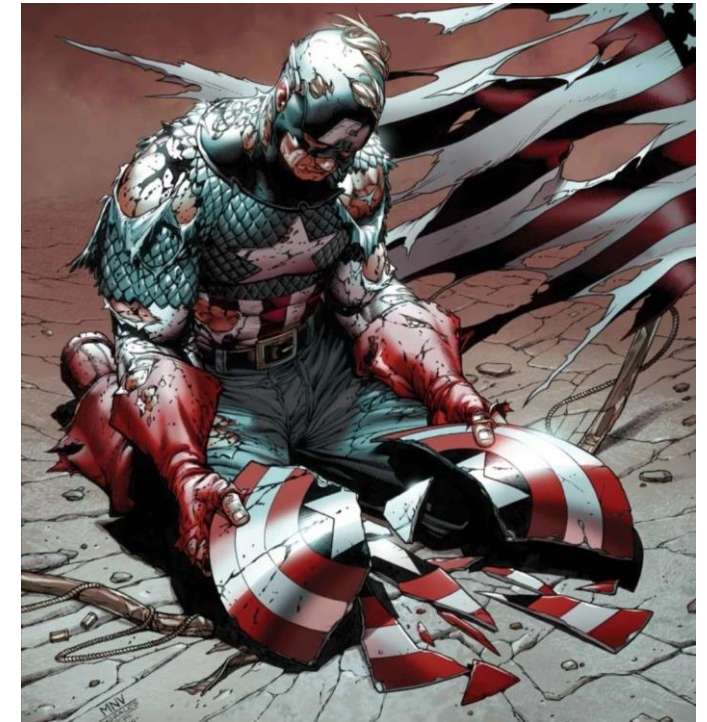
Sometimes leadership means:

- Absorbing frustration from students, staff, or administration
- Advocating for your team
- Protecting staff from unnecessary pressure

Healthy limits:

- Not everything is an “emergency”
- You can say “not now” or “this isn’t our scope”
- You are not required to be invincible

Reflection: How do you handle difficult interactions with those on your campus? What works and what doesn’t work?



The Real Work Happens Without the Cape

Most leadership victories are invisible.

- Quiet relationship building
- Coaching staff
- Having difficult conversations
- Following through
- Reflecting on decisions and outcomes
- Professional Development
- Self-Reflection

Reflection: What is one leadership victory you had this academic year? Which of these do you want to improve this year?



When the Suit Comes Off

Reflection

- Who are you when you're not in "director mode"?
- What is important to you outside of your work?
- How do you care for yourself and your team?



Modeling Leadership Growth

Think:Pair:Share

- Tell us about a time you **didn't** know the answer?
- Tell us about a moment you had to “tell truth to power.”
- Describe a situation where the “win” came much later.



Reflection



- What expectation of yourself do you need to let go of?
- When do you feel the greatest need to be a “superhero” and how will you guard against it?
- What leadership skill do you want to strengthen?
- What is one thing you will do when you get back to your campus to strengthen your leadership?

Key Takeaways

You **Do Not** Have To

- Save everyone
- Know everything
- Work alone
- Be invincible

You **Do** Need To

- Build trust
- Ask for help
- Develop others
- Build coalitions
- Stay mission-focused



Not All Heros Wear Capes



Leadership is not about being extraordinary alone. It is about helping others accomplish extraordinary things together.

Questions?

Session Evaluation

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Thank you for attending!

Your feedback helps shape future programming.

