

6 leadership quotes for leading social change

Written by Dr. Artika Tyner
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Social change begins with the exercise of leadership. Throughout the passage of history, there have been leaders who have played a key role in promoting justice and leveraging their influence to foster change. They have modeled the way for future generations to achieve a vision of justice and freedom for all. We can learn from their example how to take a stand in the face of injustice and chart a new course for the future. These leaders have shown us how to be courageous despite the obstacles set before us. They remind us that we must lead social change since we are indebted to future generations to leave the world in a better place than when we found it.

These leadership quotes will serve as a resource as you learn and grow as a leader. Leadership is a continuous learning process. It requires reflection on your goals and vision. What do you hope to achieve? How can you build a better tomorrow? Your progress will be measured by your ability to move your leadership vision closer to fruition. These quotes will provide you with direction on how to serve in the global community, initiate strategic social action, and empower others to lead.

A CALL TO SERVICE

Service is the foundation of leadership. It begins by recognizing the need to commit your time and energy to the betterment of humanity. This moral responsibility compels one to first serve and then seek to lead.

"Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

It is tempting for each of us to get lost in the demands of our daily schedules related to our work, family, and personal needs. This is the battle between the "I and me" mentality vs. the vision of "we and us." However, Dr. King reminds us of the importance of prioritizing service in the community since our existence is inter-related. Dr. King stated "whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be." Therefore, we must be committed to a life of service which uplifts and motivates others to reach their full potential.

"Service is the rent we pay to be living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time." Marian Wright Edelman

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Marian Wright Edelman is the founder of the Children's Defense Fund and served as counsel for Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s final campaign, the Poor People's Campaign. Very early on in her career, she made a commitment to lift her voice for the 'least of these'— the poor and children. She leaves us with the daily challenge of paying our rent in full by serving the needs of others and leading policy reform in our communities.

"I was going to do something for the black man of South if it would cost my life." Fannie Lou Hamer

When asked why she persisted in her fight for equal access to voting rights and the democratic process, Mrs. Hamer courageously proclaimed: "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired." She had become "sick" of African Americans being relegated to second class citizenship in the United States. Through not only her words but also her deeds, she demonstrated the leadership quality of courage (moral strength to persevere). Mrs. Hamer was unwavering in her commitment to improve the social, political and economic conditions plaguing the African American community. To this aim, she committed her time, energy, and talent.

A CALL TO ACTION

Taking action focuses on setting in motion the process of social change. This requires raising your voice and channeling your energy towards change. This follows the basic laws of physics: an object in motion tends to stay in motion. The leader sets into motion a process of collective engagement and strategic action.

"You don't make progress by standing on the sidelines." Shirley Chisholm

The message is clearly stated: roll up your sleeves and get to work for social justice. Shirley Chisholm modeled the way by becoming the first black congresswoman in 1968 and serving within this capacity for seven terms. She recognized that life is not a spectator's sport but calls for collective engagement. Today, we each have a critical role to play whether it be to educate, mobilize, or organize others in the community for advancing social change. Chisholm assumed her role as a team leader by advocating for equal access to quality educational and competitive employment opportunities.

"Until you dig a hole, you plant a tree, you water it and make it survive, you haven't done a thing. You are just talking." Wangari Maathai

Dr. Wangari Maathai led a movement in Kenya to empower women to lead change in their communities. They could no longer ignore the devastating impact of the environmental damage on their communities' well-being and viability. Instead, Maathai challenged them to stop talking about change and begin making change happen by planting trees as a symbol of unity and hope. This earned her the honor of being named a 2004 Nobel Peace Prize laureate in recognition of her commitment to "sustainable development, democracy and peace."

"The progress of the world will call for the best that all of us have to give." Mary McLeod Bethune

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Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune embodied the qualities of a servant leader. She served as an advocate for education. She believed a quality education would empower young people to discover their gifts and in turn use those talents to better the world. Her motto for education was: "enter to learn, depart to serve." Her timeless message beckons each of us to go forth and take a stand for justice, equity, and freedom. Take a stand today!

What are the leadership quotes which inspire you to create change in your community? Please post in the comments.