

# Leadership and Chess: A Kind of Genius

**By Otis White**

*Editor's note: We first published this article in 2015. It is still one of our favorites, well worth sharing again with all of our readers.*

What the best public-sector leaders do doesn't sound very exciting. It helps to be great at chess. Twenty-five years ago, as I was growing interested in how cities produce leaders and leaders shape cities, I heard a state business association president define leadership. A leader, he said, "is someone who helps people get where they want to go."

He was speaking to a community leadership class, and I could sense the audience deflate. That's it? Help people go somewhere? Like a bus driver? What about organizing constituencies, offering a vision, and persuading the public? What about standing up for people—or standing up to the powerful? What about holding office?

And, yet, I had to admit he was on to something. Organization and persuasion are skills. Visions can be supplied by others. Standing up to the

powerful and holding office are roles. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that helping people get where they want to go (and, one hopes, need to go) isn't a bad definition of what leaders do. It's just . . . incomplete.

So allow me to complete the definition. A leader is someone who helps people get where they want to go . . . by seeing the opportunity for getting there.

Seeing the opportunity—the narrow, sometimes temporary passage through which change can happen—is the genius of leadership. And herding people through that passage is the practice of leadership. What the genius and the practice require is a sense of how things fit together, a tactical vision, a willingness to learn from experience, and a saintly patience with people—but a patience that's bounded by the resolve to do something meaningful.

If this sounds abstract, trust me; there are examples all around you. Here in Atlanta, I've seen these traits in people who nurtured projects great and small, from the creation of the BeltLine, a circle of parks and trails that's transforming entire



neighborhoods, to the building of a roundabout that fixed an impossible intersection at the gates of Emory University and breathed life into a small retail district. In both cases, the leader was someone who recognized the value of these projects, sized up

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Monday, April 6, 2026, 9:00 am–10:00 am CDT Online  
Main Sponsor(s): US Small Business Administration, Rhode Island District Office  
Contact: Brian Hopkins, 401-528-4575, brian.hopkins@sba.gov  
Fee: Free; registration required

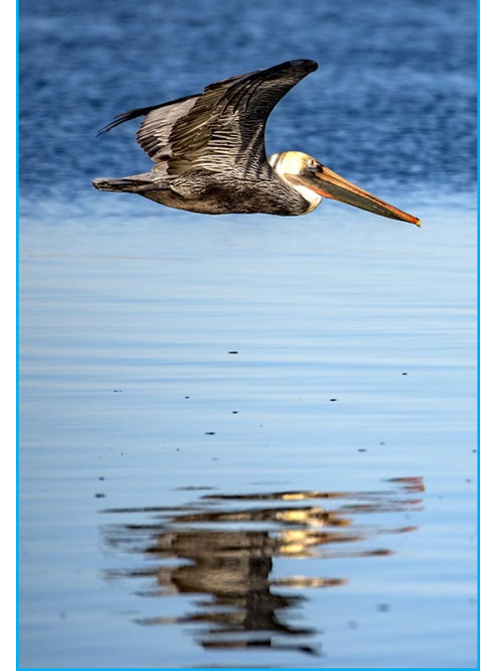
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**Federal Contracting for Small Businesses Webinar**  
Tuesday, April 14, 2026, 11:00 am–12:30 pm CDT Online  
Main Sponsor(s): US Small Business Administration  
Contact: Irene Gonzalez, 208-334-1673, irene.gonzalez@sba.gov  
Fee: Free; registration required

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**Federal Contracting: Woman-Owned Small Business (WOSB) Certification Program Webinar**  
Tuesday, April 21, 2026, 1:00 pm–3:00 pm CDT Online  
Main Sponsor(s): US Small Business Administration  
Contact: Patrice Dozier, patrice.dozier@sba.gov  
Fee: Free; registration required

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