

# Shared Leadership: A Profile on Linda Katz

Rebecca Maltzman and Shara D. Taylor 09 June 2011

Linda Katz, founder and Executive Director of Children's Literacy Initiative (CLI), represents a very interesting model and dynamic of leadership. She possesses a unique set of strengths and weaknesses, as well as personal qualities and interests, that combine to make her leadership extremely effective yet idiosyncratic in many ways.

There is no question that Linda's leadership of CLI is extremely strong. She had the initial vision for the organization and built it with her own hard work and persistence. This institutional history and commitment to the organization's success has garnered her respect and loyalty within the organization. Linda is also unyieldingly passionate about the work that she does and the impact that CLI has on children's education. She insists that her passion and persistence are the two keys to her success. In fact, when questioned about what enabled her success on this or that project or what helped overcome a significant challenge, she often just answers with "my persistence" and offers no further details.

Interestingly, Linda's background wouldn't initially seem a natural fit for CLI; she was never a teacher or involved in

traditional K-to-12 education. She was, however, a librarian when she first graduated from college and before returning to Wharton to pursue her MBA. This combination of business savvy and a love for children's literature is the first interesting dynamic that defines Linda's leadership. She has created an organization that incorporates this same combination: the "soft work" of reading and books in the social sector with the "hard work" of gathering scientific research, creating an enterprise model, calculating returns on investment and constantly refining operations. The organization has come to resemble the unique qualities of its leader.

Linda's uniqueness also extends beyond her interests to the way that she leads and manages the organization. She defines herself as shy, yet she says she has forced herself to push through this challenge and has succeeded in fundraising up to 7 million dollars, almost single-handedly, a year. She is soft-spoken and describes her greatest interest as reading—not just about education but about a wide-range of topics which, according to her, inevitably relate back to her views on education. For example, after reading about the transformation of the medical field, Linda applied that information to her own thinking about education schools, and is eager to talk to anyone and everyone about this insight. Linda claims that what keeps her on "top of her game" is the simple ability to read more and process more than those around her. There is no question that Linda's significant intellectual curiosity is

extremely useful to her effectiveness as the thought-leader of CLI.

At the same time, this mild-mannered woman demands a lot of those around her. She says that she has little patience for staff who do not carry their weight in the organization. She acknowledges that those around her know that they are expected to work very hard at CLI, and suggests that is why many great people seek it out as a place to work. She has tried to decrease her hours over the years but is still, many times, the last to leave the office at the end of the day. Deputy Director Cameron Voss acknowledged that when Linda asks someone else to do something, she expects it to get done. She says that new staff members soon learn that it is inadvisable to say no when Linda says the organization should do something, even if the idea seems far-reaching at the time. For example, Linda first proposed the idea of applying for an Investing in Innovation Fund grant to Cameron via a short scribbled note on a ripped piece of paper left on Cameron's desk. While Cameron thought the idea was implausible she said she went along with it because she trusted Linda and did not want to say no to her; the efforts paid off and CLI received \$22 million in funding. Linda also holds those around her fully accountable for their results and honesty. She said that she makes it clear to her staff that she will not get angry if things do not turn out as planned, but always wants to be the first to know if something is not going well.

Linda is also very honest about her own strengths and weaknesses. She is proud of the product that CLI has created and her persistence in getting the funding necessary to achieve it. At the same time, she acknowledges that she does not prioritize internal management and willingly delegates staff management and staff conflict resolution to Cameron. Interestingly, however, when talking to Linda on a personal level, such as before our interviews, she comes across as very interested in others' personal stories and wants to get to know young people on a personal level. While seemingly contradictory, it is evident, in light of CLI's successes, that this combination has worked for her and for the organization.

**Rebecca Maltzman is a third-year law student and Toll Public Interest Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. She is also Director of Special Projects at Scholar Academies, a Philadelphia-based charter management organization.**

**Shara D. Taylor holds a Master of City Planning degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a Bachelor of Business Administration degree from Howard University. From 2006 until 2010, she served as a founding board member and Assistant Executive Director of The Young Friends Society of African Diasporan Institutions.**