

L.A. native shares rules of the road for effective leadership

From the Petersen car museum to UCLA's business school, Peter Mullin has helped steer dozens of institutions.



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At age 73, Peter Mullin shows no signs of slowing down. Over five decades, he's run dozens of organizations, from for-profit financial services firms and nonprofit arts organizations to universities, museums, vineyards – even a pig farm in Italy.

Mullin, a native Angeleno who lives in Brentwood, holds leadership positions with an astounding 15 Los Angeles-area institutions, including the Art Center

College of Design in Pasadena, the Petersen Automotive Museum, the Music Center Foundation and UCLA's Anderson School of Management.

Despite his busy schedule, Mullin found time to spend an hour with the Los Angeles Register.

Q. What has working across such a broad range of industries and organizations taught you about leadership?

A. The most important is the willingness and



EUGENE GARCIA, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Peter Mullin, who lives in Brentwood and has run dozens of organizations in the Los Angeles area, is currently chairman of the Music Center Foundation.

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ability to share credit. You might be the president of something, but it's a whole bunch of people that actually make it work. Being careful to recognize and celebrate, that is an important part of leadership.

The other thing is to embrace the notion that there's no such thing as being overprepared. What I try to do with any organization I'm involved with is ask ourselves the toughest questions a smart person would ask if we were meeting. If we don't know the answer, we're going to find out before we get asked.

The other thing I've learned as a leader is to recruit to your weaknesses. It's very typical, particularly of entrepreneurial leaders, to attract people that are a lot like you because you like them, they think the same as you and they have a same or similar vision or skills. That's great for social interaction, and it's a bad idea for running businesses.

Q. You are involved with an enormous number of powerful and important institutions in Los Angeles. How do you choose which ones to work with?

A. My predisposition is to work on things I'm passionate about ... so that's one type. The other type is something I'm not wild about but is very essential to be done right. I always smile when people say, "They ought to fix this." Who is the "they" that's supposed to fix this, and why isn't it us? I work on things I think need work for lots of reasons – to make L.A. a better place to live, to address needs that we have in education, to address environmental issues that, if we don't do something about them, are going to do something to us.

Q. Is curiosity an imperative in leadership?

A. Curiosity is imperative in winners. Period. In my whole career, I've insisted on recruiting people with two attributes. One is they're interminably curious about how things work and why it works that way. ... The other is complete self-starters – people who go until told to stop as opposed to people who stop until told to go.

Q. What L.A. project or organization is getting the most attention from you right now and why?

A. The company I'm still chairman of. It isn't L.A.-based. It's M Financial,

L.A. leader

Peter Mullin holds leadership positions within 15 local institutions, including:

- Petersen Automotive Museum (board chairman)
- Mullin Automotive Museum (founder and chairman)
- Music Center Foundation (chairman)
- UCLA Anderson School of Management (board member)

headquartered in Portland. That's the business I've been involved with my whole life.

In L.A., it's a broad variety of things. I'm the new chairman of the Petersen. I spend a lot of time thinking about that because we have big plans in front of us. I'm chairman of the Music Center Foundation, so I think a lot about that.

Q. Have you always known you were a leader?

A. I've always strived to do things well, but I never was a guy who said, "I think I'll run for student body president." ... I think it comes by virtue of keeping your promises and doing things on time and well. I think that's how

leadership happens more than you've got some kind of special leadership gene that you're born with.

Q. How does leading a for-profit operation differ from a nonprofit?

A. If you're the chairman of the board of a not-for-profit institution, you can't lead by dictum because nobody around you is working for the money. They're working on a passion or interest or concern, but they don't have to do anything, so you can't start barking orders. You have to get everyone to agree on a route and then collectively move forward.

When you're the CEO of a for-profit company, at least in my case, I had a big ownership stake. I could decide what we were going to do and people did it.

Good leaders don't lead by dictum, because just telling people what to do doesn't create a lot of loyalty and commitment. Asking people their opinion, collectively making a decision, assigning responsibilities to people and holding them accountable for delivering is a much better way to run an organization.

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