

A Day With...



And...



A Shadow of President David Forsell

By Shelbi Burnett

For my shadow study, I chose to go outside the world of education and shadow a professional in a local non-profit: David Forsell - President of Keep Indianapolis Beautiful. Keep Indianapolis Beautiful was originally founded as Indianapolis Clean City in 1976. Changing their name in 1997, KIB works to "unite people to build communities and transform public spaces through aesthetic and environmental improvement." They are funded by donation and volunteer work, in 2011 more than 46,000 volunteers supported clean efforts around the city, coming to just under 143,000 hours of service time.

KIB's main headquarters is on Indianapolis' near East side right around the Fountain Square neighborhood area. The business is in the city's first LEED gold certified building meaning the building scored over 60 points in five categories including: Sustainable Sites, Water Efficiency, Energy and Atmosphere, Materials and Resources, Indoor Environmental Quality, plus additional points for Innovation in Design and points for Regional Priority through its intentional design.

On Tuesday March 13th I arrived at the office at 8:50 on a bright sunny morning. Upon climbing out of my car, I was immediately struck by the building and ground design around KIB. All around were beautiful plants anticipating new growth in





early spring and green structures: three vertical wind turbines flanked a large rain cistern on the southeast side of the permeable parking lot. I was excited to get started with the day!

I met Mr. Forsell (David) and he gave me a few papers detailing some background information I would need to contextualize some of the events for the day. One page was an employee survey which had recently been handed out in a Strategic Planning meeting, and the other page was the detailed results of the Strategic Plan. After skimming through the pages, David and I sat down to discuss the plan for the day in more precision as well as cover background information about KIB, my interest in the Non-Profit, and a little bit of information about the two of us.

Next we moved into the large conference room for the morning staff meeting. The atmosphere was casual and fun as we got started, bagels were passed around in celebration of one employee's birthday, and the meeting began with Kudos. Various employees around the large square conference tables gave nods to the successful efforts of other people in the room or mentioned their own high notes from projects within the past week. David was rather quiet as people shared, but occasionally chimed in with added praise or compliments.

As the time for Kudos came to a close, the meeting took a slightly more serious tone as David stood up and began to address the notes on the white board behind the group which functioned as the agenda for the meeting. The staff then addressed each concern after David introduced the topics. It was interesting to watch as the meeting basically ran itself while David merely provided the schedule to keep the group on task. At one point he did take over the "floor" as he addressed a recent concern that more diligent attention should be given while people are presenting projects and proposals to the group at large. Apparently a presentation was given during which a few people were carrying on independent conversations. As David mentioned this too the group, I could sense his hesitation at reprimanding them, but everyone seemed accepting of this criticism, noting it was a valid point, and vowing to abstain from being rude in the future.

The meeting ended a few moments later as David and I had to quickly transition to an early lunch meeting with Marianne Glick. The Glick Foundation is a prominent supporter of KIB and David had contacted Marianne about a meeting concerning some ideas he was considering for the business-- I was very excited to be meeting Marianne!



We had a perfunctory lunch with her during which David summarized his interest in funding one or two individuals in local communities to maintain the work KIB completed in their neighborhoods. He described these individuals to be those who would be unemployed or underemployed or "down on their luck." Marianne was receptive to the idea, but expressed hesitation mentioning, "this needs to continue to be a "grass-roots" effort-- the individuals need to come from the community, and



be invested in the success of the project or it would never be sustainable”.

After Marianne left for another meeting, David and I had a few moments to discuss his personal philosophy of leadership. He described that he likes to have “flexibility within a framework,” meaning he wants to allow the employees room to move and fill spaces in the company to take initiative and be leaders in their own right, while maintaining the vision and initiatives of KIB (something I instantly connected to how he ran the staff meeting). Upon asking him what his greatest challenges are as a leader, he immediately said not having enough candor. I found this answer to be quite unique, I know many leaders who are very outspoken and have quite a lot of candor! However, David said he often struggles to be straightforward when he encounters a problem with employees and he went on to mention that something he has come to know is “indecision is decision” or that by choosing not to act, you are effectively acting. Transitioning, he

went on to mention he felt hiring was a great culture changer and builder and he has been very purposeful in hiring at KIB instrumenting specific shifts in culture recently. I thought his sentiments reflect those of many other leaders with whom we have talked, in addition to what Tony Hsieh wrote about in Delivering Happiness.



Leaving lunch, we drove back to the office and began staff meetings during which David reviewed with four staff members the results of their recent Strategic plan efforts. The interviews we composed of 4 major questions: Is there any thing you would like to reiterate from the survey, Are we maximizing your talents, What is your personal “blue sky vision” for KIB, and finally What do you think of the diagram of KIB (a drawing/model of the business done by David). Each of these meetings took a little over the intended 30 minute time period as David often connected with each employee and they expanded on a specific topic or question. All of the meetings were professional, but very comfortable. It was clear that each staff member felt they were valued, well utilized, and felt they had even more they wanted to offer the business.

After the completion of the meetings, David moved back to his office to answer emails and I took a tour of the building. I could see how it would be very enjoyable to work for KIB. The office space was filled with natural light and each work space was comfortable and well appointed. Many offices had plants growing in decorated pots and it seemed evident to me that many staff members practiced what they preached.

When the tour was over, David and I moved back to the large conference room for the last meeting of the day with Development Committee comprised of some members of the Board of Directors (BoD) as well as KIB staff members. The meeting lasted about an hour during which the group talked mostly about funding (previous as well as upcoming fundraising events). I noticed the BoD members, one in particular, the co-chair, was a very zealous individual. She guided the meeting and voiced her opinion about most topics. It was interesting to see how the KIB staff, as well as David, addressed her concerns and communicated their intentions to her while trying to maintain their calm demeanor.

It seemed evident that at times their relationship with the BoD could get tenuous something which I asked David about later, and he concurred.

Finally, with the conclusion of the meeting, I caught up again with David. We reviewed some of the days events and quickly chat about what I had experienced. He offered me his "Leadership Lessons Learned"-- a page outlining what he has learned about leadership. He then went on to say he never expected to be in this position at this point in his life.

In divulging more of his personal history, I learned David had attended Northwestern and then transferred to Depauw where he graduated as a journalism major. He worked in Indianapolis as a journalist for a few years before coming to work as a project manager for Indianapolis Clean City on which he had reported. Then after fulfilling a short stint in the seminary, he came back to KIB as the president of the non-profit. When asked about this, he said he offered an interesting perspective in coming back to the company in a different position than when he had started, and felt it benefited him greatly in being a better leader.

Then, moments later, after some closing comments and many thanks (on my part), we parted ways and I headed back home to the south side.

Personally, through our conversations and my observations, I found Mr. Forsell to be an inspiring leader. He seemed reflective and not quite comfortable in his leadership role which although it made him slow to make difficult decisions, he usually was able to find the best solution. Alternatively, he seemed very comfortable in his own shortcomings, he was open to letting other more experienced individuals assume leadership roles. He was also very humble about the accomplishments of KIB which

has been responsible for some of the beautiful fixtures around Indianapolis, and which earned us great notoriety during the Super Bowl. I really appreciated his personal story which lent great insight into why he is such a unique leader.

All in all it was an unbelievably interesting and busy day! I felt very fortunate to have seen and discussed with Mr. Forsell all that I had. From the impromptu lunch with Marianne Glick to the BoD meeting, KIB kept me busy with various ways to observe leadership in action. I think the most important point I will take away from this experience was one of Mr. Forsell's last "Leadership Lessons" point and something reflected in the core values of KIB: Have Joy. It was so clear that each person I interacted with throughout my day had great joy and purpose in what they were doing with KIB. They were following their passions by making and keeping Indianapolis beautiful!

