Leadership Essay
(BVE)

“The foundation for marshaling a coalition to support a proposed policy change is laid by visionary leadership.”
~ Barbara Crosby and James Bryson, Leadership for the Common Good p. 134

Leadership is a quality that has been widespread in Washington State politics for the past half century and beyond. There are many outstanding examples of extraordinary leadership in Washington State during this time, with many different applications of this skill, but for the purposes of this paper I will focus on coalition building as a skill of leadership in this region. Discussion of several leaders skills, most prominently Governor Dan Evans, will follow an explanation of the importance of coalition building.

Coalition building is the ability of leaders to gather a diverse group of people around a specific policy change. It is the ability to bring diverse interests together to figure out an acceptable solution to a problem for all involved. Coalitions are important because they, if done correctly, allow various stakeholders to express concerns in a neutral area and work together towards a solution. As Barbara Crosby and James Bryson correctly point out, coalitions need a visionary leader to start the process. Expressing a shared vision towards a common, uniting goal can help those involved look towards the big picture goal, past their agency or personal biases. A good coalition keeps members involved throughout the policy formation process and strives to address all concerns to create a policy that is at least acceptable to each party.

Governor Dan Evans has been an amazing leader in the State of Washington and an excellent coalition builder. His public leadership began in the State House of Representatives and was followed by three terms as Governor. After his left the
governors office he became President of The Evergreen State College and was later selected to serve out Scoop Jackson’s United States Senate term. Governor Evans has been an inspirational public figure in the state for almost 50 years. Part of the reason Governor Evans has had such a large impact on the state is that he was extremely talented at building coalitions and forging partnerships across party lines and across the mountains. Washington State has historically (through the present) had a rather sharp divide between the Eastern and Western half of the state. This presents continuous challenges to the governor. Governor Evans’ Alternatives for Washington Project worked to ensure that both sides of the state had input.

The Alternatives for Washington Project was a statewide process that Governor Evans began during his final term in office. The idea behind the project was to talk to citizen groups and leaders about where they saw the state going and what they wanted to see. The project started with a ‘snowball sample,’ that is leaders from organizations and groups were asked to nominate someone or select someone to be a part of the process. Care was taken to try to ensure balance in the final group of people. This initial group was about one hundred and fifty people that began talking about where they saw the state going in the future and problems that needed to be addressed. Eleven futures (possible alternatives to current practice and steps that could be taken) were consolidated from all of the suggestions that were put forth and these concepts were ‘taken on the road’ across the state. Workshops across the state attempted to involve more citizens in the process, refine the goals and address local/regional concerns. When the workshops had fleshed out the ideas more and gained support across the state, a segment on each alternative was broadcast on television across the state. This was done so that residents who were unable
to participate in the workshops directly could still learn about the process and participate in the formulation of the ideas. Mail and phone surveys and newspaper mail-in surveys were sent out after the television broadcasts to solicit more input and comments. Over forty thousand surveys were received before the governor left office and the process ground to a halt. This project was an extraordinary act of leadership and visionary thinking spearheaded by Governor Evans. The process allowed people from vary disparate viewpoints to come together and talk about the future of their state and form coalitions around certain issues. This example is just one of many that could showcase Governor Evans’ skill at building and maintaining lasting coalitions.

A current example of coalition building and leadership can be seen in Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels’ Climate Protection Agreement. Mayor Nickels has taken the leadership in asking the mayors of the nation to agree to meet or beat the Kyoto Accord’s greenhouse gas emissions standards. The Kyoto Accord was ratified internationally when Russia signed the agreement and will go into effect this year. However the United States did not sign the agreement. In response to the ratification Mayor Nickels called the nations mayors to comply with Kyoto despite the national government’s resistance. To this end he and nine other mayors crafted the Climate Protection Agreement that would challenge individual cities to meet Kyoto Accord standards and was unanimously endorsed by the US Conference of Mayors. As of December 6, 2005 194 mayors have agreed to work towards Kyoto compliance. Mayor Nickels, who continues to be the spokesman for the agreement and Kyoto compliance, initiated the entire process and was able to build a coalition of other mayors who were interested in the same issue. How well the coalition achieves its goals is yet to be seen, but the momentum and enthusiasm are
fantastic. This is another example of excellent coalition building in the State of Washington.

Coalition building is a key skill in effective leadership. Our region has been extremely lucky to have a plethora of highly skilled leaders that are very good coalition builders. Governor Dan Evans has been a coalition builder throughout his tenure as a public servant and Mayor Greg Nickels is a current example of a local coalition builder. Our state has been blessed in having excellent leaders.