

‘Passing the baton’ of leadership



James D. Henry

There is an abundance of symbolism in the phrase “passing the baton.” Passing the baton connotes a change in leadership. Just as in a relay race, a fumble in this passing may trigger the demise of the team. Shared leadership between the one passing the baton and the one receiving the baton instills confidence.

In a larger sense, the baton exchange reflects the passing forward of a legacy or tradition. In sports, the legacy may relate to bringing home a trophy; in religion, to sustaining a belief system from generation to generation.

In our great union—the NALC—it is realized through identifying, cultivating and mentoring future leaders in a sustained effort to aid and enable the continued existence of the USPS. Leaders are present at all levels of our organization—from the shop stewards on the workroom floor and the executive board members of the state associations, to the resident officers at NALC Headquarters. It is a historical fact that the NALC has a rich tradition of producing leaders who have been mentored to undertake the worthy cause of representation of city letter carriers.

Our union is the caretaker of a quality of work that should be passed to the next generation of letter carriers in good working order. Like every baton pass, it requires two-part cooperation, a willingness to give and a willingness to receive. Therein lies the obligation of shared leadership and one’s obligation to teach and assist future leaders, and also to be receptive and maintain the knowledge being shared.

NALC is most successful in its mission in representing letter carriers when quality leadership exists and is passed on at the local, state and national levels. Each level includes important components of the NALC. No one level or individual is more important than the other. The shared goal of continuity of success is more likely when “each one teaches one,” and our duty to the membership is placed first.

I firmly believe that it is the obligation of each individual to do their part to ensure the baton is passed, and that the NALC and USPS continue to keep moving

forward through the strength of our experience, knowledge and efforts. I think another very important passing of the baton happens every day for every one of us. Peer-to-peer sharing also must be present for our long-term success. You don’t have to hold an official title to be viewed as a leader. Respect is accorded to senior letter carriers, which prompts new hires and junior carriers to depend on their guidance to navigate conflict with management, and to fulfill expectations by the customers. They learn from veterans how to simplify, and do their job more efficiently and effectively. The senior carriers become de facto leaders on the workroom floor. After all, it is universally recognized that there is no substitute for experience.

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Whether or not you are privileged to hold an official position of leadership in the NALC, some other organization, the community, or are viewed by your peers due simply to your stature, there will come a time when we must effectuate the hand off. Ideally, the passing of the baton will be seamless, effective and produce the desired progress.

We all must prepare to pass and/or receive the baton. Assume your position and embrace your responsibility. You don’t have to be a star, just star in your role. Ultimately, in the end, we all will be remembered by how well we ran our own leg of the race and how we helped those who take up the running after us.