

“A passion for Leadership”
Lessons on Change and Reform from Fifty Years of public Service
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“Never mistake for malice that which is easily explained by stupidity or incompetence.” Napoleon Bonaparte

Will Rogers could say decades ago, “I don’t make jokes. I just watch the government and report the facts.”

The political Left is too often indifferent to obvious bureaucratic incompetence and failure because it believes that whatever the problem, government is the solution. It’s tough making the case for more government when what we have works so poorly.

I have served on the board of directors of ten companies, where I had ample opportunity to observe the challenges of bureaucratic bloat, turf protection, empire building, and resistance to change facing their CEOs.

In short, politics—both local and national—is a significant obstacle to reform and adaptive change.

Micromanagement masquerading as oversight,

They may have reputations for expertise in a particular function or field but who haven’t got a clue about how to run anything.

When a businessperson appointed to lead a government department falls on her face, it’s often because nothing in her corporate experience has prepared her for the complexities of running an organization with the “help” of the president or governor, Congress or state legislature—much less a raft of lower-ranking political appointees in her organization whose loyalty as often as not is primarily to the political operatives and politicians who got them their jobs and not their day-to-day boss.

In a public environment of exposés, recrimination, faultfinding, and investigations both by officials and by the media, not acting is usually safer than acting—especially if the action involves something new or different.

Even more personally, a supervisor all too often rejects his own employees’ ideas for improvement simply because they were not his ideas.

The strong belief in the “oneness” of those inside and a common defensiveness against those on the outside are both great strengths and great weaknesses.

Jacques Barzun in his book *From Dawn to Decadence*. After spending nearly half a century at Columbia University and the University of Cambridge, he wrote, “Institutional self-reform is rare; the conscience is willing, but the culture is tough.

When I was interviewed to be president of Texas A&M, I told the search committee that if they were looking for someone to maintain the status quo, they had the wrong guy. “I don’t do maintenance,” I told them. My interest, I continued, was taking on the challenge of making a good institution better. I would be “an agent of change” while preserving the core values and traditions of the university.

All such institutions have one thing in common: the need for bold, visionary leaders at all levels who can discern a different and better future for the organization, no matter its size, and who can map a realistic path to attaining that future.

To be successful agents of change—of reform—leaders not only must be able to envision a new way forward but also must be practical, with the skill to build broad support for and implement their vision.

If a single person with these two skills cannot be found, the boss must be the visionary, and she had damn well better have a deputy or chief operating officer who can deliver the practical goods.

Those who would be agents of change must first conceive and articulate where they believe an organization has to go and rally support for that vision.

Before issuing a single directive or making a single decision, a leader should talk to people at every level of her organization, from the front office to the mailroom.

Listening before making decisions on the agenda for change has another significant benefit. It will allow the leader to put early points on the board in the eyes of the employees by sending the important message that their opinions matter, that she values candor, that she doesn't pretend to have all the answers, and that she didn't arrive with her mind completely made up or closed.

She will reinforce the message that candor is truly welcome, has impact, and is career enhancing, not career destroying.

Vision 2020 was a set of aspirations, not a plan. I wanted each college to develop specific objectives looking out one year and five years, with clear milestones and metrics by which we could measure progress.

In just three weeks of listening and of dialogue, we had moved from twelve broad statements of intent in Vision 2020 to a prioritized set of four goals with broad support across campus.

If a leader is not making at least a few enemies along the way, he must not be doing much.

All leaders will have to decide the relative importance of urgent problems versus long-term challenges and, in the process, figure out how to allocate time and effort among them.

The change agent must be an oak, not a daisy. —

The important thing to remember is that in any public or private sector organization, whether it has three million employees or three, having a clearly defined and achievable vision—or set of goals—and getting the priorities right in moving forward are the preconditions for successfully leading change.

On every matter I thought important, small or large, I always took time to devise a specific strategy to achieve my goal and to identify milestones and deadlines to measure progress.

Decide on the sequence in which you will pursue your objectives and the managerial tools and techniques to be used for each. And then carefully choose your lieutenants.

Taking the time and making the effort to prepare various constituencies for change are steps often omitted by new leaders, dismissed as “stagecraft” or “getting warm and fuzzy.”

Gaining the respect and cooperation of the professional cadre—or at least getting them to keep an open mind—should have very high priority on every new leader's to-do list.

Treating them as colleagues and not subordinates, listening and using their ideas, I forged a strong team with them that made historic changes in American intelligence.

But sometimes a leader must decide what is in the best long-term interest of the institution, suck it up, make a tough decision, put his head down, and plunge ahead—even if alone.

Any fool can (and all too often does) dictate change from the top in a public or private sector bureaucracy. Fundamental to success, though, as I think I've made clear by now, is inclusiveness—getting as many people involved as possible.

Sir Barnett Cocks, a former clerk of the British House of Commons, wrote acidly, “A committee is a cul-de-sac down which ideas are lured and then quietly strangled.

But those decisions will be better, and better understood and supported, if transparency, discussion and debate, communication and collaboration precede them.

Amid a whirlwind of change, broad participation in these efforts generated a sense of purpose, stability, and esprit.

As in every other example, the keys to success were the broadest possible inclusiveness, transparency, and open internal debate and dialogue;

And so, despite a professional lifetime spent in an ocean of secrecy, I became an ardent advocate of far greater transparency both internally and externally in organizations I ran.

Ironically, the more information I was willing to share, the more people were inclined to trust me—and support what I was trying to do. I think that is almost always the case in leadership positions. Leaders who exclude others from decision making run a high risk of failure.

The erudite Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban insightfully observed that a consensus means that “everyone agrees to say collectively what no one believes individually.

Differences of opinion must not deter decisions and implementation.

Analysis must not be an excuse for paralysis.

As beneficial as inclusiveness, transparency, and patience are, they cannot turn into an excuse for putting off tough or unpopular decisions.

Sometimes, complaints over insufficient analysis are born of timidity and risk aversion.

Deadlines for implementation are important in every initiative for change in every organization.

Duke Ellington was quoted as saying, “I don't need time. I need a deadline.

Finally, short deadlines demonstrate a leader's seriousness of purpose:

If I were limited to just one suggestion for implementing change in a bureaucracy, it would be to impose short deadlines on virtually every endeavor, deadlines that are enforced.

Implementing reform, a leader must master the available information, make decisions, assign responsibility for action, have a regular reporting mechanism that allows her to monitor progress and performance, and hold people accountable.

“Micro-knowledge” is necessary; micromanagement is not.

Dwelling on typos, format, or some trivial issue in a chart suggests to people that the leader is not just in the weeds but lost in them.

A leader at any level who tries to oversee the daily efforts of his subordinates is doomed to fail.

If a leader doesn't trust his lieutenants to carry out his strategy, he has chosen the wrong people.

The leader cannot hold individuals accountable for driving change if he refuses to let go of the steering wheel.

He must trust his subordinates, replace them if necessary; but he must not micromanage them.

Planning, organizing, and implementing change put a leader, by definition, in uncharted territory.

Great ideas, great internal support, and great decisions are all for naught if the actions she has directed are not implemented.

Outcomes are the only things that ultimately matter.

But I always believed morale there depended, more than anything else, on whether the CIA professionals thought their work was valued.

Such poisonous pills may be smart, charismatic, decisive, and able mostly to get the job done—traits that can get you pretty far in most organizations. But the cost in morale, employee dissatisfaction, and creating a toxic environment is very high.

You can be the toughest, most demanding leader on the planet and still treat people with respect and dignity.

A leader is able to make decisions but then delegate and trust others to make things happen.

Trusting people at the same time you hold them accountable.

Candor is critical to a leader's success. Every boss needs to understand that creating a climate where people feel comfortable in being honest in their opinions is the cheapest possible job insurance for the person in charge.

Samuel Goldwyn, one of the founders of MGM, who allegedly once told his people, "I don't want any yes-men around me. I want everybody to tell me the truth even if it costs them their jobs.

The bottom line: the scarcity of candor afflicts public and business bureaucracies and is an impediment to effectiveness in both.

Every leader must encourage respectful, loyal dissent.

Leaders need candor because none of us are as smart as we think we are.

The only way someone can achieve transformation in a bureaucracy is to empower individuals to complete specific tasks, establish milestones to measure progress, and hold those individuals accountable for success or failure—and then reward or penalize as appropriate and possible.

Performance that might be tolerable in maintaining the status quo won't do in a time of transformative change.

She must treat her employees with respect and dignity, empower them, tell them the truth, trust them, and hold them accountable.

All stakeholders have the potential to be supportive and helpful—but also to wreck a leader's plans.

But no matter how different they may be, the best approach is to treat them with respect, transparency, an open door, an open mind, and a willingness to take time to listen.

The best leaders have their egos under control.

A leader's primary goal should be to get the job done, not personal glorification or self-satisfaction.

In short, the environment created by an egotist is the antithesis of what is required to lead reform successfully. An egotist cannot help being an autocrat, the type of boss who unilaterally decides what changes are needed and implements them by fiat from above—the thunderbolt approach to leading change. It is nearly always guaranteed to fail.

Arrogant egotists also are people who crave power. Like a black hole in space, they draw to themselves all decision-making authority and constantly seek to expand their bureaucratic empires, to continue growing their power. They weaken everyone around them. The power hungry have no sense of limits.

A leader, or those who aspire to that role, regardless of whether in the public or the private sector, must have integrity.

It is not the great crime that undermines integrity but the little things that erode it.

Self-discipline is central to the leadership of institutions and to reforming them.

“Never miss a good chance to shut up; to know when to keep quiet and when to keep your hands off the steering wheel.

Being an effective leader, especially a reform leader, requires a lot of self-control. Silence and restraint are essential, if undervalued, tools of leadership.

Intellectual and professional intimidation, characteristic of those who believe they are the smartest people in the room, is a poor way to solicit good ideas and avoid big mistakes.

Courage is essential for reform.

When a leader is fighting bureaucratic battles for reform, she needs a few senior associates who are trustworthy, share a commitment to her agenda for reform, and are capable of effectively implementing her decisions.

As should be clear by now, I believe a leader must avoid yes-men. Once a decision has been taken, though, those new colleagues should be committed to implementing it.

I had an immediate staff of three. It worked just fine.

In the real world of bureaucratic institutions, you almost never get all you want when you want it. A good leader must compromise, adjust his plans, prioritize, and show flexibility and pragmatism.

One key aspect of successfully reforming institutions, public or private, is taking the work seriously but not yourself. A leader needs to set the example of that principle.

It's one thing to sign up when the trumpet sounds “charge”; it's another to stay the course until the battle is finished.

Cutting jobs and firing people are almost always unfortunate consequences of reduced budgets. How they are done matters.

As with the reform agenda itself, transparency in budget cutting is the only way to build trust in a bureaucracy.

It is important to remember that uncertainty creates anxiety and saps morale.

(I acknowledge that all involved also knew that after their intensive involvement and chance to be heard in the process, I would not have tolerated them undercutting my subsequent decisions.)

The worst of all possible worlds is a black box approach, where a leader and a small group of his staff make budget decisions without broad involvement of others in the organization and then spring decisions on people without warning.

Even on budgets, trust is the coin of the realm. More information equals more trust in any organization.

Salami-slicing budgets—each component gets a thin cut—is a formula for broad institutional mediocrity and is the antithesis of reform and striving for excellence.

A leader needs the intestinal fortitude to make the cuts where they should properly be made, come what may.

Waste, fraud, and abuse are favorite targets of politicians and the media and are usually lumped together as a single category of bureaucratic malfeasance. All three exist in every bureaucracy, but each is quite different from the other, and so is the remedy.

A leader has to keep listening, remain open-minded toward new ideas from others and always be on the hunt for better ways to get the job done.

When it comes to management techniques for improving performance, one familiar slogan is to “measure what you value and value what you measure.”

The leader needs to keep a cold, hard eye on his initiatives and be honest enough with himself—or open to the views of colleagues—to admit something isn’t working and then pull the plug fast.

The agent of change in bureaucracies should regard reform—institutional transformation—as a marathon, not a sprint.

Formal education can make someone a good manager, but it cannot make a leader, because leadership is more about the heart than the head.

Core to leadership is the ability to relate to people—to empathize, understand, inspire, and motivate.

If you fundamentally don’t like or respect most people, or if you think you are superior to others, chances are you won’t be much of a leader—at least in a democracy like ours. Just because you are high on the organizational ladder and can tell people what to do doesn’t make you a leader. Just a boss.

While the media have focused on mismanagement and lawbreaking, far more widespread in business in my view has been a failure of leadership and, too often, a failure of character: arrogance, egotism, obliviousness to the fate of employees, failure to hold people accountable for behavioral or financial misdeeds, belief that high position warrants entitlement, and so much more.

Harry Truman once said, “Every great achievement is the story of a flaming heart.”