

The Balance of Leadership

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Mastering and Guiding the Process of Change

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He who has never learned to obey
cannot be a good commander.

Aristotle

What is leadership? Is it something that can be learned? Is it something that is set in stone? Can a follower be a leader or can a leader follow? Can you force change or do you have to let it just happen? Throughout history there are many examples of individuals who take leadership roles, some that are intentional, and some that are by accident that impact great change. Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and Barack Obama are examples of leaders that are transformational. James MacGregor Burns and Douglas C. North hold a belief in the interdependence of agency and structure, and that there are constraints that impact leadership and its effectiveness. Their biggest difference is how they believe leaders are influenced, and how they impart change.

MacGregor Burns explains that a leader needs to be successful both as a transformational and transactional leader. Leaders he highlights in the book *Transforming Leaders* were able to master these skills. Even leaders who master these skills have limitations, or are constrained by external factors. A leader is not the sole influence on what happens in the community they are trying to lead. MacGregor Burns states "change is caused by a host of forces, personal and interpersonal, rational and emotional, material and psychological" (MacGregor Burns, p. 15). FDR experienced these constraints first hand in his second term of office as president. "FDR had been frustrated by fragmented Congress, a rising Republican opposition, and the ancient checks and balances of the Constitution, notably the vetoes of key New Deal bills by a reactionary Supreme Court" (MacGregor Burns, p. 22). According to MacGregor Burns these initial constraints in his second term were overcome in his third term, where he approached these

roadblocks by being more of a transactional leader, finding the strength to challenge his opponents.

A contemporary example of leadership constraints is Barack Obama's experience in his first nine months in office. "He's got health care, economic recovery, unfinished wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a rising new war camp in Washington (and Israel) that wants to confront Iran. But there is only so much that can be loaded...onto the political calendar in a presidential term (Tyler, 2009)." These issues make it difficult, if not downright impossible to actually focus on domestic issues like health care reform. In addition to these challenges, he also has to manage the formal institution of Republican opposition. This was evident in August of 2009 where the Republicans went on a negative campaign against healthcare reform, which offers a public option. At first President Obama had taken a hands-off approach with this group and the promotion of healthcare reform. He tried to set the bar for change by appealing to followers by empowering them to gain a higher level of maturity, ideals, and concern for the wellbeing of others. Instead, taking this approach allowed the opposition to dictate the direction of the healthcare reform argument. This was short lived once the president took on a more transactional approach by making a direct appeal to the public through a joint session of Congress, which was aired on national television. In an AP/Huffington Post news article it was stated "President Barack Obama has talked a lot about health care lately, but some allies say he has been too vague. Now he's thinking of throwing more details and personal weight into the debate (Babington, 2009)." Indicating that President Obama was clearing the hurdles presented by the Republicans, which will result in a Health Care Bill that will be a great first step.

Whereas Douglas North believes that the constraints of leadership are the institutions that make up society, such as marriage, religious organizations, businesses, or the US Constitution,

and the list goes on. “Institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction. In consequence they structure incentives in human exchange, whether political, social, or economic. Institutional change shapes the way societies evolve through time and hence is the key to understanding historical change (North, p. 3).” The constraints identified by North can be as complex, or simple, but the formal structures in society are so powerful. Looking at the health care reform, this really isn’t President Obama’s idea. In actuality, the health care debate began back in the 1930’s when FDR signed the Medicare Act, which was a watered down version of universal health care coverage. It is amazing how slow the political institution can hold back progress.

When there is a crisis, a leader can have many options, but there are two primary choices that can be made. They can run and hide, or they can attack the situation head-on. Despite the pre-existing constraints and norms, a successful leader will take the initiative to lead the fight against whatever crisis unfolds. Instead of being bogged down in the bureaucracy, a leader, when under pressure, needs to lead. He/she needs to transform their followers, and inspire the opposition. MacGregor focuses on FDR as a prime example of a transformational leader that was able to change his approach from a transactional leader to a transformational one.

Of course being a transformative leader in a crisis shouldn’t imply that a leader has no responsibility as a transactional leader, but there is a need to focus on the goal at hand and to be an inspirational leader. “Inspirational leadership does not depend on personal identification processes. Rather, the mutual goals of leaders and followers are identified and encouraged by the leader. Inspirational leadership stems from the management of meaning and impression management. The inspirational leader builds followers’ expectations by envisioning a mutually describable future and articulating how to attain it. Leaders can use many intellectually

stimulating ways to move followers out of their conceptual rut. Intellectual stimulation, charismatic leadership, and inspirational leadership are major components of transformational leadership, which adds to transactional leadership in generating positive outcomes in the groups and organizations being led (Bass, p. 647-48).”

I believe that there is a fine balance between being a transformative and transactional leader. There are times when it is important to favor one approach over the other. To be successful as a leader you should not lose site of the existence of both approaches to leadership. If you do, you are destined to fail. Bass (p. 619) agreed that transformational and transactional leadership were not at opposite ends of a single dimension but multidimensional.

References

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