

The Balance of Leadership

Scott Tierno

Mastering and Guiding the Process of Change

Franklin Pierce University

The Balance of Leadership

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

Aristotle

James MacGregor Burns and Douglas C. North hold a firm belief in the interdependence of agency and structure, and that there are constraints that impact leadership and its effectiveness.

MacGregor Burns describes the influence on leadership as being complex. He blames constraints of leadership on the human environment. 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)." 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 more modern day 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 Republican opposition. This was evident in August of 2009 where the Republicans went on a negative campaign against his healthcare reform, which offers a public

option. At first President Obama had taken a hands-off approach with these individuals and the promotion of healthcare reform. He tried to set the bar for change by appealing to followers empowering them to gain a higher level of maturity, ideals, and concern for the well being 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 direct approach and being transactional with his approach.

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. What comes to mind is the struggle that Al Gore experienced when running for the office of President back in 2000. Even though he won the popular vote, the Supreme Court decided to put George W. Bush into office. This action by the Supreme Court definitely was a constraint against Al Gore.

When there is a crisis, a leader can do one of two things. 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 focused on FDR as a prime example of a transformational leader. Winston Churchill was another. Despite his long honed

political skills, Churchill was a frustrated politician who flourished when two world wars were in play. Charles De Gaulle and Mao Tse-tung were also transforming leaders (MacGregor Burns, p. 25). 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 lead to be inspirational as a 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

Bass, Bernard M. (2008). *The Bass Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, & Managerial Applications*. New York, NY, USA: Free Press.

Burns, James MacGregor. (2003). *Transforming Leadership*. New York, NY, USA: Grove Press.

North, Douglas C. (2009). *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.

Tyler, P. (2009, September 22). Obama's Domestic Constraints. Retrieved October 25, 2009, from The Mideast Peace Pulse Blog:
<http://israelpolicyforum.ngphost.com/blog/obamas-domestic-constraints>.