



IDEAS FOR PRAGMATIC LEADERSHIP

In this issue:

**GOING THE DISTANCE:
GETTING THEM ON YOUR SIDE AND
KEEPING THEM ON YOUR SIDE**

Samuel B. Bacharach

ISSUE **1**

broadcast
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If you can't keep people on your side, keep the ball rolling and manage the pitfalls of inertia, then you're no leader. When you get rid of all the drama and all the rhetoric, when you distill all the hoopla down to nuts and bolts, what is leadership all about? It is about getting things done. If you can't get something done, your leadership is, at best, questionable. You can stand on a mountaintop and preach. You can paint the most beautiful visions of the future. If nothing gets done, does it really matter? Leadership is not simply about vision; it's about your capacity to be proactive and your ability to translate your vision into real results. Leadership is not simply about inspiration; it's about your capacity to translate your vision into a concrete agenda. Leadership is not simply about charisma. Leadership is about getting people on your side, sustaining momentum, and keeping them on your side. Leadership is about your ability to be proactive. A visionary who is incapable of being proactive is a dreamer, not a leader.

Proactive versus passive visionaries

In recent years, there's been an almost cultist obsession with the notion of vision, giving leadership a quasi-spiritual dimension, as though leadership were the capacity to see what has not yet been seen by others. In reality, vision implies the use of inspiration and intuition, a sense of calling and a premonition of what needs to be done. Iconic leaders, like Clara Barton, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Earl Graves, were indeed visionaries. But unlike passive "visionaries" they were not only people of vision, but also people of action. Not only were they leaders, they were proactive leaders. These leaders translated their vision into viable organizations that delivered real products and services. They were able to secure the help of others and garner the necessary resources. They had the perseverance, com-

mitment, and the support to implement their ideas, sustained momentum and move their vision ahead.

Although many aspire to be visionary and may even think of themselves as visionary, the reality is that truly successful visionaries are proactive. They take an inspiration and translate it into policies and organizations that can implement their ideas. Failed leaders are often those who come in with the grand ideas but who are incapable of translating those ideas into concrete results.

When organizations seek leaders, they are immediately predisposed to look for seemingly inspirational leaders who have new ideas. Because of this, there is a tendency to think that all you need is a good idea to carry the day. This is simply not the case. In general, individuals in organizations don't change their ways unless some crisis forces them to do so. Because employee interests are often entrenched, risk is often large, and routine well established, hesitation and resistance may be a stronger force than a good idea. So how do you overcome this crippling level of inertia? Attaining both vision and direction alone will do you no good unless you take charge and actively execute. The answer to overcoming inertia is becoming proactive.

If the difference between visionaries and proactive leaders is the capacity to get things done—what turns a visionary into a proactive leader? What are the components of proactive leadership? First, proactive leaders must have the political competence to mobilize people around their idea and get them on their side. Second, they have to have the managerial competence to sustain momentum, keep people on their side, and implement.

Get them on your side: attaining political competence

Political competence is the ability to understand what you can and cannot control, knowing when to

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take action, anticipating who is going to resist your agenda, and determining whom you need on your side to push your agenda forward. Political competence is about knowing how to map the political terrain, getting others on your side, and leading coalitions. In organizations, we talk about everything but rarely do we admit that in order to get things moving, we have to be politically competent.

Politically competent leaders develop a compelling agenda. Few people are going to rally around your ideas just because they like you or because they feel they have to support you. The roots of long-term leadership are grounded in having an idea or agenda that serves a real need in the organization, makes sense, and generates excitement among a solid base of constituents or stakeholders. The strongest agendas raise both the awareness of key challenges or opportunities and lay out an approach to achieving desired results.

Once you have an agenda, you can go about the next important foundational stage: assessing your allies and resisters. In short, this is a process of political analysis. You are identifying the key stakeholders—internal and external to your organization—who have a stake in the outcome of your agenda and who probably have a position or strong opinion about your approach. It is during this stage of the process that you will identify those who are clear allies, those who are likely to be strong resisters, and those who may swing either way. This may seem like a process of simply developing a list and checking it off, but it actually involves a series of detailed discussions with key stakeholders in order to truly understand where they stand in relation to your agenda. You will find, coming out of this process, that there are those who may disagree with what you are trying to accomplish and/or those who disagree with how you propose to achieve those objectives. Either way, you must have all these facts in front of you before moving forward.

With your political homework in hand, you then go through a process of gaining initial support for your agenda and securing key allies. It may also involve doing things that keep your strong resisters at bay or that move potential allies a little closer to your camp. At this stage, you are looking for enough critical mass to take some initial action in pursuit of your agenda. That critical mass may include as few as two people or as many as a division. Critical mass for you, is however many people are needed to get your agenda “off the dime.”

With some support for your agenda, the next critical stage is getting real buy-in. Getting buy-in is the process of converting verbal support or conceptual support into tangible action. It is the not-so-subtle process of shifting some of the weight of your agenda from your shoulders onto the shoulders of others. Getting buy-in is a process of negotiation, of demonstrating your credibility as a leader, and of convincing others that your agenda will result in real benefits to those who are active supporters.

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Politically competent leaders are campaigners. They know how to draw in supporters and get support from constituents. They are great at getting things on the road. They can make you feel that, if you join their coalition, total success is right around the corner. Or at least at a minimum, they make you believe that you have much to gain by joining them and much to lose by ignoring them. To succeed in an organization, this is a skill that all proactive leaders must have.

Once you proceed through this political process, you will have people on your side. You've built a foundation for your vision and agenda. You've established your beachhead, but that's all it is—only a beachhead, only a start. Now you have to implement your idea, sustain momentum, and keep them on your side.

Keep them on your side: managerial competence

A lot of energy is spent on getting people behind an idea. Unfortunately, this is only one part of the story. We've all seen a political candidate start out with great ideas. But how often have you realized that once in office, many of these candidates are incapable of actually making things happen despite the fact that they had great ideas and tons of initial support? The key to managerial competence is your capacity to sustain momentum. Without it, your

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supporters will abandon you and you'll have fewer people on your side. Managerially competent leaders understand that by keeping the momentum going, they'll keep people on their side,

and by keeping people on their side, they'll keep the momentum going.

The key to keeping them on your side is to give them the sense that things are moving along in a positive way, so they don't burn out, become disenchanted and turn against your project. To do this you must make sure that the group has the capacity to move the project ahead. You want to make sure that they aren't caught in unnecessary bureaucratic bottlenecks. You want to make sure they don't choke with the anxiety of indecision.

You want to make sure they don't get sidetracked by other agendas or pulled off target by competing goals. You want to make sure procrastination is minimized and inertia is overcome. Managerial competence implies your capacity to stay focused on the goal while adjusting resources and activities to deal with constantly emerging contingencies. If you're managerially competent, you have both close and distant vision—you have to be able to deal with minutia while looking ahead and being aware of what adjustments need to be made. While political competence is your ability to deal with strategy, managerial competence is your capacity to deal with daily logistics and tactics. Successful proactive leaders must be able to combine both political and managerial competence.

Bottom line: you've got to have balance

Effective proactive leadership is a combination of getting people on your side, sustaining momentum, and keeping them on your side. It is about having the political competence to generate interest and support for your agenda and it is about having the managerial competence to keep people engaged and to deliver results. If you are politically competent and not managerially competent, the results can be all over the map. You can mobilize people around an idea but you won't be able to implement the idea. You'll excite people about where you want to go, but you'll end up burning them out, alienating them, and your initiative will collapse.

Simply put, in order to get things done you must have both. You must achieve a balance between political and managerial competence. Anyone can have a great idea, but unless you can bring more to the table, unless you can get them on your side and keep them on your side, you'll never be able to get things done. You'll never be able to go the distance.