

Leadership through difficult times

Talented is the person that can provide leadership to a group of beachside frolickers. Without an obstacle, an unattained goal, there is little occasion for it. But the mere presence of a challenge does not make leadership difficult. Leading a talented and motivated team to success represents an ideal leadership situation, not a difficult one. Similarly, many difficult situations cause people to unite, simplifying rather than complicating the task of leadership.

For leaders, difficult times are characterized by negative attitudes, lack of consensus, and ambiguity. In such situations, leaders need to be able to clarify the issues and change people's minds. Often this involves allowing conflicts to surface in a controlled manner so that they can be understood and resolved at the source by those affected. But leadership is broad and complex; each leader faces a unique situation and must take a unique approach. In discussing leadership through difficult times, I will consider two leaders in very different circumstances, and seek out some interesting lessons from their experiences.

Guliani vs. Gandhi

Throughout the crisis of September 11, 2001 Rudolph Giuliani remained tough and pragmatic. But the crisis drew attention to his compassion, which, till then, had not been on obvious display. His greatest asset during the months that followed was The City of New York, crowded as it is with people of initiative, empathy and ability. He smartly positioned himself as the catalyst that would ignite that talent. He mirrored positive qualities of New Yorkers, who are naturally defiant, abhor pity and demand to be the greatest city on earth. The city's municipal workers, professionals, security officers, neighbors, vendors and other inhabitants did the rest. It was appropriate and effective for Giuliani simply to set the tone and then to facilitate, which he did admirably.

Like all crises, that of September 11 would have passed even without Giuliani's leadership. His triumph lay in leading his constituency to respond positively, resulting in a swift and symbolic recovery.

Gandhi faced a radically different challenge. His life's goal was to bring about a "regenerated" India. His unique approach to causing change – made possible by his combined powers of personal charm, unshakeable resolve and saint-like humility – is well captured in the following exchange:

Mohandas Gandhi: "I've come to tell you that I am going to fight against your government."

General Jan Smuts, Head of the Transvaal government of South Africa: "You mean you have come here to tell me that? Is there anything more you want to say?"

Gandhi: "Yes. I am going to win."

Smuts (laughing): "Well, and how are you going to do that?"

Gandhi: "With your help."¹

Instead of striving for compromise, Gandhi focused on changing people's minds by calling on their humanity; in so doing, he changed the world. He did this by communicating in

¹ Gandhi The Man: The Story of His Transformation p.47, Eknath Easwaran, Nilgiri Press, 1997. Years after this exchange, General Smuts acknowledged that Gandhi had done as he had said.

simple ways that had tremendous impact while requiring little energy. For instance, he made extensive use of symbols suffused with cultural significance, and ultimately became a living symbol himself. He exposed inconsistencies and conflicts in dramatic ways while sharing his vision of how they could be resolved. His most valuable assets were his integrity and character, both of which he cultivated with care. When all else failed, his well-calculated fasts were a poignant and effective means of leveraging those assets.

Gandhi is a giant among men, and a leader of unusual personal power and charisma. It is difficult to say the same of Guliani. However, their successes and failures yield an interesting comparison. Gandhi brought about astounding changes in his adversaries, who had a cohesive, distributed leadership; but he failed to bring about a similar degree of change in his own followers, who had few leaders among them and depended heavily on him as an individual. He could not reconcile the different constituencies in India, or prevent its disintegration into two warring states. On the other hand, Guliani could neither define nor change his adversaries, but he was able to positively influence his constituency because of the depth of leadership that existed within it. The comparison suggests the limitations of individual leadership and the importance of a far-reaching network of leaders in effecting change through any constituency; be it amongst one's charges or adversaries.

Conclusion

In difficult times one of the most important things a leader must do is influence people towards change. To do that, she must convincingly demonstrate empathy with those she seeks to influence, and must be able to propagate her vision through a network of leaders that transcends her and multiplies and safeguards her efforts. Because of this, organizations and communities that nurture leaders and have depth in leadership are most likely to succeed through difficult times.

AUGUST 2003

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Prize winning article for IMD Admission, Switzerland