

# LEADING THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

YOUR LEADERS MAY THINK THEY KNOW EVERYTHING THEY NEED TO KNOW ON THEIR OWN. BUT THEIR FATE AS A LEADER MAY DEPEND ON THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS.

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No leader wants to end up the way Donald Rumsfeld did at the Pentagon or Larry Summers did at Harvard. In 2006, both leaders had no choice but to resign, their missions in shambles and their reputations in the gutter. These paraphrased excerpts from *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* say it all:

Lawrence Summers, who made impolitic remarks about women, alienated black professors, and repeatedly clashed with faculty, decided to step down last week after concluding that he could no longer contain the growing conflict being played out publicly while running the university.

The tensions between Mr. Rumsfeld and the military services date back to his arrival at the Pentagon in early 2001. "Rumsfeld has been contemptuous of the views of senior military officers since the day he walked in as secretary of defense," one former general observed. Other critics cited Rumsfeld's imperious manner, saying he clung to views with a stubbornness that defied dissenting opinions and ignored the reality of a war.

The fate of these two leaders, though remarkable, is not exceptional, and those of us charged with developing leaders would do well to take notice.

We all know traditional approaches to leadership no longer work, at least not in most organizations. As Rumsfeld and Summers learned the hard way, people won't stand for it. If their views aren't taken into account, if harsh realities aren't confronted, or if important concerns aren't considered, they will resist; they will fight; and they will make every day a living nightmare.

My research suggests leaders today are struggling—and many are failing—to find an alternative to command and control. Sure, they know they need to motivate the troops, inspire great performance, create flexible structures, keep folks focused on the customer, incent the right behaviors. But what if a leader finds himself at odds with his team, as Rumsfeld and Summers did? Or, what if she hopes to institute a change so fundamental it threatens people's self-interest? Or, what if the competitive going gets so tough people

on the top team start turning on each other? What's a leader to do then?

In an effort to help, most of us in the training and consulting professions focus on developing a leader's capabilities as an individual: on what he or she can do to invite participation, to get buy-in, to discuss difficult topics, to learn from differences, or to manage conflicts constructively. Without a doubt, capabilities like these are critical. But my research suggests they're not enough.

In fact, my observational studies suggest we've been missing an important piece to today's leadership puzzle: how relationships determine the fate of leaders and their teams.

In a world where effective leadership depends more on mutual influence than on unilateral control, relationships are one of the most powerful strategic assets a leader has at his or her disposal. By developing the ability to do the following five things, leaders can learn to strengthen and deploy this asset, allowing them to lead through relationships instead of control.

## Turn Rivals into Allies

History will no doubt fault President George W. Bush for many things. But his decision to assemble a team of like-minded ideologues and to dismiss anyone with a dissenting voice is by far his single biggest error. It is from this first mistake that all others followed. Unconstrained by dissenting views or contradictory data, Bush made a series of strategic and tactical errors that make it unwise for the US to stay in Iraq and unwise for the US to go. Worse, once he made these mistakes, he failed to learn. If anything, he relishes “staying the course” and continues to cast aside anyone who disagrees.

Still, it's not hard to imagine why Bush took the approach he did. Just look at what happens in Congress when basic differences emerge. At best, progress on pressing issues proves illusive; at worst, it grinds to a complete halt. When your only alternative is gridlock, a unified team of like-minded folks starts to look mighty good.

But groupthink and divisiveness aren't the only two alternatives. In *A Team of Rivals*, Doris Kearns Goodwin documents how Abraham Lincoln assembled a cabinet of his most talented, powerful rivals, then set out to build relationships that transformed them into allies. How? As I show in *Divide or Conquer*, Lincoln relied on an identifiable set of relational sensibilities. These sensibilities allowed him to read people closely, to understand what they needed, to empathize with their circumstances while holding them accountable for their actions, and to see and bring out the best in others so they could bring out the best in him. Throughout the war, Lincoln's relationships not only gave him enormous emotional and political strength, they formed the basis of his power and his success as a leader.

## Keep Both the Mission and the Relationship in Mind

At the beginning of World War II, when Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt first came together to form an alliance against Hitler, they were a study in contrasts: Roosevelt was secretive, Churchill transparent; Roosevelt was controlled, Churchill volatile; Roosevelt had an interest in keeping the US out of the war for as long as possible, Churchill had an interest

in bringing the US into the war as quickly as possible; Roosevelt deplored colonialism, Churchill vowed never to dismantle the British empire; Roosevelt believed leaders shouldn't get too far out in front of popular opinion, Churchill believed a leader should shape popular opinion. The two couldn't have been more different in personality, interests, or beliefs.

And yet over the course of the war, they were able to build an “epic friendship,” as Jon Meacham recounts in his critically acclaimed book, *Franklin and Winston*. That friendship allowed them to put their differences to work and to forge an alliance so powerful it ultimately defeated Hitler.

Of the many things they did to build that friendship, Meacham mentions one that's especially critical: “They always kept the mission—and their relationship in mind.” When it came to their mission, they knew their different beliefs, interests, and circumstances would lead them to see things the other missed. So when they differed, they didn't discount each other's views; they sought to understand them. When their political interests clashed, they didn't belittle each other's interests; they sought to address them. When their beliefs collided, they didn't ridicule them; they took them into account. And when they got frustrated by their inability to reach agreement, they didn't blame each other; they understood that statecraft—not one or the other of them—was inherently frustrating.

Similarly, when it came to their relationship, they didn't expect that they would always get along. But they understood their relationship would have a decisive impact on the success or failure of their mission. With that in mind, they gave their relationship the same strategic attention they gave every other aspect of the war, and they made sure they built one strong enough to withstand the pressures of war. As a result: “For all the tensions, and there were many,” Meacham writes, “there was a personal bond at work that, though often tested, held them together.”

## Focus on Relationships, Not Just Individuals

What comes naturally to leaders like Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Churchill doesn't come as naturally to mere mortal leaders. Few leaders possess the intuitive powers that allowed these men to develop and

sustain strong relationships without having to think much about it. Most leaders will have to rely on more analytic means to achieve similar ends, at least initially. That's why, for the past 15 years, I've been developing tools and techniques leaders can use to assess and strengthen strategically critical relationships.

One tool, called the Anatomy Framework, is proving especially useful. This framework, which uncovers the patterns of interaction that define a relationship, puts an end to what I call the Waiting Game. In this game, everyone is convinced the other guy is to blame for any problems they face, leading everyone to wait for someone else to change before changing themselves. Before you know it, no one's making the moves they need to succeed.

The Anatomy Framework disrupts this game by doing two things. First, it helps leaders see what they're each doing to contribute to results no one likes. Second, it reveals what they each must do—and do together—to change the pattern that's creating the results. When leaders apply this framework together, they're able to turn vicious cycles into more virtuous ones—strengthening, and at times even transforming, their most important relationships. What's more, repeated use of this framework seems to cultivate in leaders the same relational sensibilities that came naturally to Lincoln, Churchill, and Roosevelt.

### **Target and Invest Only in Strategically Critical Relationships**

Though every relationship has intrinsic value, when it comes to improving performance, not all relationships deserve the same amount or kind of investment. After all, no leader can afford to invest in every relationship; he or she must make choices. Another tool, called the Investment Matrix, helps leaders make those choices on more than gut instinct alone. To put the logic underlying the matrix most simply: the more important a relationship is, and the more interdependent the people are, the more worthy it is of investment. All other relationships can be handled through more conventional means: managing the impact of the occasional relationship snafu, creating structural separations when needed, or simply ignoring a relationship.

But for those few relationships that do require investment, the goal is always the same: make the relationship strong enough to meet the demands and challenges it will face. This means identifying the demands and challenges a relationship is likely to face, then changing any patterns that might jeopardize people's ability to meet them.

To change patterns as quickly as possible, leaders are best off working together both to change patterns and to develop as leaders. That said, no change of any significance occurs overnight; change always takes longer than anyone likes. To make change palatable and sustainable, it needs to be staged over time and conducted in the context of doing business. My three-stage model of change, for example, specifies what results leaders can expect at the end of each stage. This allows them to assess their progress and to make informed choices about whether to continue. Finally, to invest in change while conducting business, you need some way to keep both the mission and the relationship in mind. Another model, called the FREE Continuum, identifies three strategies leaders can use under different circumstances to make progress on difficult tasks while strengthening their relationships.

### **Take a Relational Perspective**

While these tools all help leaders strengthen their relationships, my studies suggest they're not enough. To do things differently, leaders must see things differently. Most leaders see things from an either/or perspective. From this perspective, people assume that only one or the other of them can be right on the substance, and they blame any relationship problems on the other person, imagining them to be either mad (irrational, distorting reality) or bad (immoral, self-interested).

Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Churchill were able to put all types of conflict to work—consistently, and under pressure—because they saw things from a relational perspective. When they faced a substantive disagreement, they assumed there was some logic or sense to the other's point of view, even if it jarred with their own. And when they grew frustrated with their inability to reach agreement, they assumed they were both doing the best they could under the circumstances and

that they were both contributing to any impasse they faced.

The relational perspective makes it easier for leaders to make something good out of conflict. It inclines them to listen for the sense, rather than nonsense, in what someone says. It leads them to look not only at the other's behavior but also at their own. It makes them think not just about their circumstances but the other's circumstances as well. And it predisposes them not to impugn the other person's motives but to extend the benefit of the doubt.

This way of seeing and doing things makes it easier for leaders to build strong relationships and to resolve any differences along the way. And should differences prove irreconcilable, as they sometimes will, well, leaders are more inclined to do what Winston Churchill did when he reached an impasse with Franklin Roosevelt: reassure him that he held no ill-will. "Amantium irae amoris integratio est," Winston wrote Franklin a week before FDR died. The English translation? "Lovers quarrels always go with true love."

Rumsfeld and Summers are like those canaries sent into a mine to detect deadly gases. Their fate tells us to beware. Building strong relationships is no longer feel-good stuff that's nice to have. They are a strategic asset that leaders squander or destroy at their own risk. The point is, leadership is no longer an individual enterprise, if it ever was. It is, at its core, a relational enterprise. That means we must all turn our attention to helping leaders develop the ability to navigate that seemingly unpredictable and sometimes treacherous terrain called relationships.

#### **About the Author:**

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