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On Leadership



LEGAL SCHOLAR

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THE QUESTION

Leadership Without Meetings?

Being in charge sometimes seems to mean having to attend every meeting, no matter how unimportant or poorly run. What are your personal rules and practices for attending, running or avoiding meetings? Can a leader ever be meeting-free?

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In Praise of Meetings

In large global institutions, like governments and transnational corporations, structuring sequences of disciplined meetings first to decide and then to implement are at the core of leadership.

Leaders of these institutions face a multi-polar, multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional world controlled by diverse cultures and populated by diverse characters.

In making decisions, leaders must define the problem as completely as possible, generate options that approximate reality as closely as possible, debate the choices as candidly (and ferociously) as possible and then decide. The closer the problem, the options and the debates are to reality the better the chances the decision will succeed (but these are "chances" only because hard decisions are always contingent).

To come as close to reality as possible requires diversity of views on facts, assumptions and values, on history and culture, on opportunities and risks.

This requires, in turn, that, at the appropriate time, leaders go eyeball to eyeball with people who represent varied points of view and not decide in the solitude of the corner or Oval Office with papers synthesizing papers synthesizing papers to the point, not of some grand synthesis, but of anesthesia. Bad decisions -- from Vietnam to the subprime mess -- resulted, in important part, from not having the right viewpoints about "reality" represented forcefully in front of leaders by contending teams.

Developing the personal as well as intellectual feel for issues is critical. I worked directly for potent leaders in government and business--Joe Califano and Jack Welch. Both requested sophisticated analysis but both relied heavily on their ability to cross-examine at often-electric meetings -- to illuminate the analysis and understand the contending forces through hard, in-your-face questioning at sequenced in-person presentations. They would abruptly shut down meetings if the right people weren't there or the questions couldn't be answered.

Of course, leaders can demand these meeting sequences occur, but they must delegate their organization to a senior, trusted person, whether a chief-of-staff in the White House or the Pentagon or Chief Financial Officer or general counsel or business leader in corporations. The goals of hearing diversity of views, seeking the best approximation of reality, and not operating on stale assumptions rests in such a person.

So leaders must approve the broad bureaucraties of the process--who coordinates the process, whose viewpoints must be heard in the process, how options will be debated and, most importantly, how meetings can be truly actionable with a real outcome (even if that outcome is to go back and reconsider key issues,) without the usual bureaucratic bickering and dysfunction will occur.

Properly conceived and run, meetings are not air, but action, not a nettlesome diversion but an important instrument. They are also vital after decisions are made. Too often in large organizations, leaders believe that once the decision is announced the seas will part, the troops will march, the deed will be done -- just because they say so. Of course, the process of translating decisions into fine-grained cultural and behavioral change can often go haywire.

A continuous, systematic sequence of meetings of key people with different perspectives--to evaluate, measure, hold accountable, make corrections, remove or promote people--is as important as the decision itself. Leaders need not be at all such meetings, but they better be at key ones, because fixing responsibility and accountability is their job.

Meetings are not, of course, the sum of leadership, but they can surely be one of its critical parts when driven with a paradoxical blend of discipline and openness.

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