

Collective Leadership: Moving Beyond the Presidential Election

By Winnie da Silva, Lawrence Epps, Jr. and Harold Strunk
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Our country is finally settling down after a hotly contested election season. As we now prepare to take on the challenges of the next four years, let's spend some time reflecting on the impact of leadership.

Our nation today faces many serious challenges: a weak economy, tremendous national debt and critical yet unsustainable social programs to name a few. Our success will depend on our leaders and the collective leadership of the nation to put partisan politics aside and to work together for the common good. If we are to overcome the current state of gridlock and get our country moving again we will need the power of collective leadership to drive impactful and sustainable results.

Addressing this leadership challenge will require all of us, especially our elected leaders in Washington, to adopt an approach to governing based on mutual accountability. We know this will not be easy. What needs to happen to change the status quo? How can leadership generate positive outcomes for all? To begin, we need to recognize that leadership in its simplest state boils down to behavior. How we work together will ultimately determine how likely we are to realize great outcomes. In the end, the power of the collective is always stronger than any one individual.

Establish Trust

The stewardship of collective leadership requires significant levels of trust. Trust and integrity are essential ingredients to build high performing leadership teams. Unfortunately, in today's political environment there is a huge trust deficit. Currently there is very little trust between both political parties and a loss of trust between the American people and our government. Without trust, the process of making decisions and moving forward is severely inhibited and potentially results in gridlock.

Collective leadership can create an environment that nurtures and builds trust. Creating this environment requires transparency and clarity by maintaining focus on the higher purpose and the outcomes required to achieve it. When leaders are disciplined and consistently use clarity and transparency to communicate intended outcomes through their behavior, a positive enterprise wide climate and culture can take root. When all parties are "at the table" and committed to the common good rather than their personal agendas, trust will grow, team performance will improve, and sustainable high performance results can be realized.

Ignite Possibilities

It is essential for our leaders to identify a higher purpose – a commitment to a goal that transcends financial returns – that galvanizes the President, congressional leadership and the nation in pursuit of something that we all realize we cannot achieve without each other. This higher purpose has to be created together to ensure that all stakeholders have a shared understanding of why our work is so critically important.

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A powerful example of a higher purpose that ignited possibilities was the way President John F. Kennedy rallied the nation around the vision of putting a man on the moon by the end of the 1960's. At first glance, this vision may have appeared to be straightforward and simple. But it had many implications. It had the implicit message of beating the Russians to the moon, which provided a unifying purpose. It was not a financial goal but pursuing it definitely had financial implications. A heightened focus on math, science, technology and innovation impacted many aspects of our economy that paid huge dividends for many years after landing on the moon was achieved.

Leaders at the top of any organization have a unique responsibility that requires them to be accountable for both near-term operational results and for the long-term viability of the enterprise. This responsibility should require them to think and act in ways that will have consequences far beyond their tenure.

Collectively President Obama and the current congressional leadership need to define a higher purpose that will inspire the nation to rise above partisanship and petty differences to fully support the American people. It must be focused on something that will create a sense of pride and possibility in all Americans and inspire us all to be a part of something bigger than ourselves.

Create Alignment

Once a higher purpose is created, this is where the hard work really begins. Leadership must now gain consensus around key outcomes they can achieve together to realize this higher purpose. Our definition of consensus is not that everyone agrees fully with the final outcome, but that everyone can and will support the options chosen as the best for our country.

It is also critical for leadership teams to get aligned around what is to be accomplished before they begin to define how to accomplish the outcomes. Again this is where the behavior of each leader is critical. Collective leadership requires our leaders to be mutually committed and accountable to each other for outcomes and for how they get achieved.

A clear sense of alignment seems to be missing in the way our government operates today. Our politicians are trying to solve a set of problems without having clear agreement on the outcomes and the behaviors necessary to execute them. Yet it is this alignment around outcomes that differentiates a management team from a high performing leadership team that successfully generates sustainable high performance results. Collaborative synergy is never easy to accomplish, but it's vital to be successful in achieving our most critical goals.

Sustain High Performance and Results

Our country is at a turning point. What we do in the next few years is crucial. As mutual investors in this great country, we all stand to benefit from a united people focused on common

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priorities. Now is the time to address the critical issues we face and take on the long term challenges that will set a foundation to allow our country to sustain growth well into the future.

Establishing collective leadership in the public sector will require significant changes. But if our nation's leaders embrace these concepts, the results could bring exponential rewards. Of course it will take compromise, sacrifice and the discarding of old habits to achieve success. But with the power and potential of collective leadership, it can be achieved – with tremendous results.

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