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PERSUASION: A LEADER'S EDGE

LEADERSHIP

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HAVING IT YOUR WAY.

For many people the term, "persuasion," is synonymous with influencing or, even worse, selling. Often, especially for those of us in the military or government, the very thought is anathema to our concept of leadership and authority. Nevertheless, today's leaders should realize the need for persuasion. In one manner or another, leaders depend on persuasive rhetoric to convince, encourage, and energize superiors, peers, and subordinates.

Persuasive argument' is a vital aspect of strategic leadership. Any leader faced with the inherent complexities of leading his or her organization through transformational change must be capable of persuading. It has an important role in rallying others to support difficult or potentially controversial decisions. Persuasion is one of many leadership tools that most senior leaders use successfully although perhaps unknowingly. Leaders must use persuasive arguments, which as Majone expresses, "may be more or less technical, more or less sophisticated, but they must persuade if they are to be taken seriously in the forum of public deliberation." (p. 7).

This paper addresses this connection between persuasion and leadership in its first section. Also discussed in this section are persuasion's three cornerstone activities. The latter section, using the example of two different Army Chief of Staffs, discusses how persuasive argument supported or might have supported their efforts as transformational leaders.

PERSUASION: LEADERSHIP'S CLOSE RELATIVE.

Bass (1981) states that "persuasion is seen as one form of leadership" (p1), and it must be agreed that it is a powerful tool for forming both the expectations and beliefs in others. Leadership, often described in terms of influencing people or groups toward goal setting and goal achievement, seems dependent on the leader's ability to persuade in one form or the other

(Haass, 1999), Koontz and O'Donnell (in Bass, 1981, p.11) support this point of view and state that leadership is "the activity of persuading people to cooperate in the achievement of a common objective." Copeland, also quoted in Bass (1981), describes leadership as "the art of influencing a body of people by persuasion or example to follow a line of action. It must never be confused with drivership ... which is the art of compelling a body of people by intimidation or force to follow a line of action." (p.11).

Persuasion, then, is about communication. It often takes form in discussion or discourse between advisors, concerned groups, and even opponents. In free debate, it is a two-way discourse in which participants not only "promote their own views and interests, but are encouraged to adjust their views of reality and even to change their values as a result of the process." (Majone, p.8). A leader's ability to appeal to key groups and constituencies, in order to gain their support is often vital to his success.

Other times, usually with larger groups or audiences where there is no opportunity for real debate, persuasive efforts may take the form of the bully pulpit. However, "the bully pulpit works, but it only works if it's focused and if it has a clear message and a clear event and a clear direction..." (Leon Panetta in Felzenberg, p.44). In authoritarian-based organizations such as the military, this point of view may not always be uppermost since when the 'commander speaks, others listen'. Richard Neustadt's premise that, "command is but a method of persuasion, not a substitute, and not a method for every day employment" (Haass, 1999, p.101) counters this idea and indicates that persuasive argument is integral even in an orders driven environment.

Three Cornerstones of Persuasion

Other than the already discussed role of communication in persuasion, its successful use requires three cornerstone activities. These activities, aimed toward the persuaded person(s),

include: building credibility, identifying shared ground, and developing compelling positions ² (Pascarella, 1998).

Building Credibility. The first cornerstone is building credibility with the target audience. Certainly, individual expertise is an integral element. For those having status based upon their position in a hierarchical organization such as the government or military, the assumption is that they have attained a certain level of institutional and personal expertise in their field. Another measure of credibility is the leader's ability to minimize resistance and get 'buy-in' to an idea or issue. Being credible is a byproduct of character in many ways. In Pascarella's opinion, it serves to enhance a leader's capacity to persuade. Persuasion, he continues, is "a far more effective approach to leadership than 'control, trickery or manipulation."

Shared Ground. Shared ground refers to the leader having not just something in common with whomever he is trying to persuade but having' an important, shared purpose. The key need is to discover or create common, shared values and beliefs between the involved parties. In simple terms, it puts everyone on the same sheet of music so that the dance can begin.

In the professional world, leaders are normally responsible for the identification of the vision, mission, and goals that strike a common bond with the people they lead. Industry, government, and the military spend a great deal of time, effort, and money to identify these core values and attitudes. Smart organizations create what many consider a symbolic framework to reflect their commonly held values in order to codify them. Jacobs notes that such a "symbolic frame is actually more an awareness of how one communicates than what one communicates" (p.70).

Develop Compelling Position. When it comes to persuading, Dragnet TV detective Sgt. Jack Webb's famous line, "Just the facts, Ma'am", need not apply. How you present the facts and how the audience perceives them is as important as the facts themselves and, in some instances, even

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more so (Ury, 1993). A leader must have valid facts and a compelling rationale for his advocacy of a specific plan of action. Beyond that, he must influence the perception of those facts. By persuading (communication), the leader shapes expectations and beliefs. In many instances, the leader's ability to connect with people emotionally and convince them of the 'correctness' of the idea is what guarantees success of the endeavor.

THE TALE OF TWO GENERALS

General Eric Shinseki is current, CSA, responsible for overseeing a proposed transformational change to a more mobile army, one less dependent on heavy vehicles, and with a smaller logistical tail. General Gordon Sullivan served as CSA from 1991-1995 and led the Army through a period of mission focus change and a massive downsizing of the US Army after the Persian Gulf War. People generally consider General Sullivan's efforts as highly successful and praise the manner in which he led. Meanwhile, the jury is still undecided on whether General Shinseki's efforts will be considered successful or not.

General Shinseki: Two Persuasion Failures

The Beret Bombshell. General Shinseki's announcement in October of 2000 mandating the adoption of black berets for every soldier apparently caught a majority of senior leaders by surprise. Obviously an effort to improve esprit de corps and rally the Army behind future transformation, Shinseki made what appeared to be a unilateral decision without any accompanying use of persuasive argument or strategy to reduce antagonism for, the decision (Anonymous, 2002, May 4).

The move still generates a great deal of head shaking and questions throughout the Army. Controversy surrounded the decision. Every choice, whether color, source of supplier, or required Soldier's test for earning the privilege to wear it became a contentious issue. Many still

vociferously oppose the beret and openly wonder whether its use will continue once Gen.

Shinseki retires as CSA.

Stryk(er)ing Out. Gen. Shinseki's other controversial decision concerns the move away from

Heavy Forces (tanks) to a more mobile, easy transportable force structure (Stryker Brigades) ³.

The Armor community, a powerful lobby within the Army, was scathing in its initial, lack of

support for the proposal. Gen. Shinseki, in an attempt to position the Army to be a more

adaptive, responsive capability, one in line with Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's

transformational vision, failed to gain buy-in from subordinates, peers, and, to a certain degree,

superiors (Baumgardner, 1999 and 2001)..

What We Have Here is a Failure to Communicate.... Gen. Shinseki, it is safe to say, has

credibility based on his-position and military portfolio. Additionally, as an Armor officer, he

should have had commonalities with the armor community⁴. But Gen. Shinseki's failure to win

wide spread support for either announcement - black beret or Stryker Brigade - may reflect his ,

inability to adequately persuade and a lack of a compelling position. As Jacob states, leaders

must be able to convince others, using reason and compelling information and facts, that their

thoughts and ideas represent the best decision. This is especially true when it pertains to vital,

consequential decisions concerning an organization's future path. (p. 80)

Judging from press reports, Gen. Shinseki did not appeal to stake holders before making his

announcements. While he had great credibility, he didn't leverage it or use it to minimize

resistance to the decisions by presenting not just facts but compelling reasons for adapting his

plans. The argument here is not that the decisions were wrong but that he neglected the

importance of shaping future expectations before trying to persuade others of their being the best

solutions. Jacobs emphasizes this point by stating, "... the necessary leadership skill is

persuading members that the change will benefit in the long run - not necessarily an easy task, in that many of the organizational members who need to 'buy in' ... and thus may have a harder time seeing the long-term benefits of change." (p.47).

General Sullivan's Successes. After the victory in the Persian Gulf, Gen. Sullivan led the Army through a period of downsizing by 600,000 people and a re-defined doctrine. Both were potentially traumatizing events that might have torn the Army apart. His credibility, much like Gen Shinseki's, is unquestionable based on experience and position. What appears to be different is how he developed shared ground and compelling positions for both issues.

In the latter instance, re-defining doctrine by developing what eventually became Force XXI Operations began by minimizing resistance at the senior level. Gen Sullivan, in his book Hope is not a Method, explains how senior Army generals gathered to develop a united concept. By framing the problem so that everyone first agreed to the need for some change based on the current circumstances (shared ground), he was then able to develop the compelling positions to influence the degree of change^s. As he notes, 'buy-in' became a necessary pre-condition to success.

Although there was some initial reluctance, Gen Sullivan was able to persuade the other leaders of the need for major changes in how the Army operates. His success, in part, reflects an atmosphere of teamwork and willingness to listen to other ideas on how best to accomplish the task. As Jacob opines, while a leader is attempting to persuade others as to the appropriateness of his concepts, he must remain "open to the persuasion of others that a different set of ideas might be better." p 80.

In the former instance, the Army's massive downsizing, Gen. Sullivan's approach epitomized a leader's positive use of persuasion and rhetoric, the ancient art and craft of persuasive

discourse (Majone, 1989) in appealing to his audience. He built on his credibility and relationship with soldiers at all levels by personal involvement via speeches, video taped messages, and personal visits. He identified shared values and concerns with the entire Army family using both intellectual reason and emotional appeals to connect with soldiers (Sullivan, p. 60). Recognizing both the difficulty and the need for downsizing, he helped shape the expectation and belief that it would happen in as fair and equitable manner as possible.

AN UNFAIR COMPARISON?

In fairness to Gen. Shinseki, some mitigating circumstances may have hindered his persuasive ability. What some view as a drastic change to the force structure may have been predicated on the SecDef's call for transformation. There were also inherent difficulties associated with creating the necessary cultural change within the Armor community, a critical ingredient for gaining acceptance of the Stryker Brigade. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Gen. Shinseki's should have been able to rally support for his proposals in order to gain acceptance. Unlike Gen. Sullivan, he has been unable to provide two of the cornerstone elements, shared ground or compelling arguments, necessary for persuasion. This may ultimately explain his unsuccessful use of persuasive leadership in advocating the Stryker. Now if we could just figure out this beret thing.

This paper uses persuasion and persuasive argument synonymously throughout.

² Jay Conger in Winning 'em Over: A New Model for Management in the Age of Persuasion lists four components of persuasion. I consider the fourth, connecting emotionally, to be intertwined with 'compelling argument' and address it accordingly.

³ A number of sources are available to provide in-depth details concerning the new force structure proposals. Therefore, this paper will not address those aspects and leave it to the interested reader.

⁴ Note: The beret fiasco reflects what many consider a lack of shared ground with an important sub-community, Ranger and Airborne soldiers, within the Army. Gen. Shinseki is both Ranger and Airborne qualified.

⁵ Note: General Sullivan credits General Fred Franks with championing this effort. However, no one doubts Sullivan's influence in the process.

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