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Quiet Leadership: How to Create Positive Change Without the Noise and Negativity

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Abstract: Quiet leadership is a leadership approach useful in dealing with organizational change, according to Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr., author of *Leading Quietly: An Unorthodox Guide to Doing the Right Thing*. It relies on the three main virtues of tenacity, modesty, and restraint, as well as rests upon six tenets that define one's actions in dealing with organizational issues. Enacting change through small practical efforts is the hallmark of quiet leadership. Adding this tool to one's leadership arsenal will allow for a more complete approach to solving organizational issues and leading change from a positive place.

Introduction

Dealing with any kind of organizational change can be disconcerting. Most people tend to dislike change, because it deviates from patterns of stability and can breed uncertainty and fear.

How leaders manage change within an organization speaks volumes to how change is accepted by employees, volunteers, or stakeholders. Acknowledging the characteristics of change are vital, however, and it must first be noted that:

- Change is inevitable.
- Change is nonlinear.
- Change must come from the top down and the bottom up as a shared responsibility.
- Change involves important personal dimensions that cannot be overlooked.

Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr., the John Shad Professor of Business Ethics at Harvard Business School, wrote *Leading Quietly: An Unorthodox Guide to Doing the Right Thing*. He describes the factors for successful

organizational change, with ideals rooted in the hopes of providing "a set of useful, practical ideas for people who want to live by their values, take on hard, serious problems, and do so without risking their careers and reputations" (Badaracco, 2002).

Quiet leadership is a leadership approach that people at all levels of an organization can adopt in order to address and deal with change. It entails taking specific actions or inactions, in some instances, to solve issues within organizations. This kind of leadership is characterized by those who "move patiently, carefully, and incrementally" (2002).

Defined by Three Virtues

This approach is defined by three virtues: tenacity, modesty, and restraint. Tenacity suggests using firmness or showing determination when called for. Modesty involves being reserved and practicing humility when appropriate. Restraint implies using self-control, moderation, and self-discipline when the situation requires it.

However, there is no exact science to putting these virtues into practice. Sometimes, knowing which course of action to take is based on instinct or the feeling that it is best to wait to move forward or to take action immediately. Sometimes, one must even consider whether one is the appropriate person to tackle the problem. Quiet leadership, admittedly, can also be misunderstood. It is not about sitting back when action must be taken. It is not about ignoring issues, hoping they will disappear, and quiet leadership is not about taking a passive approach to solving problems.

More specifically, quiet leadership rests upon six tenets that can define one's actions in dealing with organizational issues. These include the following.

1. Don't overestimate how much you understand about a situation or how much you control.
2. Expect your motives to be mixed or even confused.
3. Count your political capital, and spend carefully.
4. Buy time before jumping into action when dealing with uncertain or hazardous situations.
5. Search for ways to bend the rules without breaking them.
6. Drill down into the technical and political aspects of a situation.

While quiet leadership is generally being practiced by those involved in the day-to-day activities of the organization, it is also being put to use by higher-level leaders in between the big decisions and high stakes choices that are made. More importantly, whoever is practicing quiet leadership is doing so by using critical thinking skills to analyze problems and issues, as opposed to taking reactionary measures.

President Abraham Lincoln was a noted practitioner of quiet leadership. Author Doris Kearns Goodwin described in *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* how he was "well known for bringing

political rivals into his cabinet as a way to sooth egos, turn these rivals into allies, and gain their respect and loyalty through his political skill and insight into human behavior" (2006).

An Application to Extension Work

Oftentimes in the work of Extension professionals, the practices of quiet leadership have knowingly or unknowingly been put into play. Counting and spending political capital carefully is especially important when dealing with sensitive issues or relationships. As a pre-tenured faculty member at Rutgers University, for example, I have used careful consideration when requesting support from county officials, whether it be for improvements to our leased fairgrounds or financial support for an event. By seeking out internal support from county departments, such as printing services and small improvement projects, the Camden County 4-H Youth Development Program has benefited from an estimated \$22,500 in facilities improvements and in-kind services. In turn, our organizational staff and volunteers acknowledge this support, continue working to maintain these important relationships, and speak positively of this mutually beneficial relationship.

Additionally, when dealing with sensitive volunteer issues, particularly those that are based on personality conflicts and mixed motives, I seek to "buy time" before jumping to action, as well as "drill down" in an effort to understand the politics of the issue. So often, the issue is secondary to the overarching problem of power and authority conflicts.

Using the tenets of quiet leadership has allowed for the many necessary changes to our local 4-H program to be addressed through calmness and logic. For so many years, "no" answers were taken at face value, and issues were viewed as insolvable. Exploring other avenues by working diligently towards a solution has made a remarkable difference in the strength of the program. In fact, in a recent survey of volunteers, 89% of respondents agree or slightly agree that the Camden County 4-H program is stronger than it was 2 to 3 years ago. Quiet leadership has been one tool employed to effect positive organizational change in this local 4-H program, without the noise and negativity.

Conclusion

Finally, quiet leadership is a way of thinking about people and organizations, and taking effective action on difficult problems. Such problems are typically solved by careful, thoughtful, small, practical efforts. Preparation, caution, care, and attention to detail are usually the best approach to managing and solving these everyday challenges. Quiet leadership doesn't mean losing one's voice; it simply means using it in a different way and working day in and day out to solve the challenges of the organization.

References

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