



The Signature Voice

the quarterly newsletter for clients and friends of Isis Associates

Be A Better Leader Today: Get Out of Your Own Way

Over the past year, many have been examining Barack Obama's path to the U.S. presidency on November 4th, 2008. Over the next four years, we will be scrutinizing how he holds the nation's leadership realm. It is clear that there are many lessons to be learned from this examination. From a leadership perspective, key take-aways emerge. In Barack Obama, we see a distinct leadership presence - - one that is grounded in his own Signature Voice™. It is authentic and it clearly and effectively connects with others. While he reflects multiple leadership behaviors, there is one that I find particularly intriguing - - his ability to get out of his own way.

In his first television interview after November 4th on CBS' 60 Minutes, Obama responded to a question asked about the election night's emotion being fueled in part by the fact that he was the first African-American ever elected. *"I think people felt that it was a sign of the enormous progress that we've made in the core decency and generosity of the American people. Which isn't to say that there were a number of reasons that somebody might not have voted for me. But what was absolutely clear is that whether people voted for me or against me, that they were making the judgment based on is this guy gonna, you know, lead us well? Is this guy gonna be a good president? And that was my assumption walking in. And that's how it turned out. And that felt good."* Since Obama arrived on the scene as the next potential leader of the United States, many expected him to pull the race card or be tripped by it. What folks didn't expect was for him to transcend his own self and not tangle himself up in his own web. Obama's response to the interviewer's question reflects the core mindset that helped him succeed. It is a mindset, in essence, that enabled him to get out of his own way.

Every client who I coach has a "something" that gets in his or her own way. Sometimes it is anger towards others in their organization, impatience, fear of being judged, being the only woman on the executive team, past mistakes, a different professional or personal background and the list goes on. Their inability to transcend this "something" trumps their ability to live up to their full leadership potential. So how does one get out of their own way? There are three rules:

Rule #1: Do not make it all about you.

When Obama was thrown the race question time and time again, he refused to indulge in a blame game or victim mentality. Even in one of the most controversial periods and potential breaking points of his campaign, as ties to his church were fueling noise of racial separation, he effectively rose above the situation and successfully framed the issue in a way that reflected on the nation rather than just about him. Not once was there any indication that Obama gave meaningful weight to the question that the rest of world was collectively wondering: "Is America ready for a president of African descent?". Ultimately, he did not make it about his race (and therefore not about him). I have had executives who in an "a-ha" moment share that once they stopped making whatever situation they were facing all about them, they were able to step up to the plate and be the leader that they could and needed to be.

Rule #2: Give benefit of the doubt to others... even when they doubt you.

When many didn't believe in Obama's possibilities of winning the election because of lack of experience, ethnicity, and otherwise, Obama steadfastly believed in the American people's capacity to embrace a new type of leader. He gave them more benefit of the doubt than they granted him. And as a result, he inspired folks to have higher expectations of them selves and rise to the occasion. Time and time again, I find executives who want more out of their teams yet at the core don't believe the team can do it. Or who think less of themselves when they hit a rough patch and are no longer the rising star of the company. Being able to get past your self and see the possibilities in other's capacity is fundamental in reaching a new vision.

Rule #3: Laser focus on what works and cut out the noise.

Obama had an assumption going into the campaign - - that people would make a decision based on who they thought would be the next best president. While he acknowledged that there were many reasons why others may not vote for him, he did not focus on those. He laser focused on the assumption which he knew would give him the

fortitude and right attitude to carry him through to the end. As executives, it is easy to get caught up in the noise - - one's own internal noise and that being made by the organization. It is imperative to check your assumptions - - the mindset by which you are viewing your leadership role and organization - - and laser focus on the ones that will help you put your best foot forward.

So next time you find yourself in a leadership challenge, check the rules. You may find that part of your success to make it to the end will be based on your ability to get out of your own way.

-Muriel Wilkins

Quarterly Reflection: Getting Out of Your Own Way

"**C**an I even factor, that I've only been an actor
 In this staged interpretation of this day?
 Focused on the shadow, with my back turned to the light
 Too intelligent to see it's me in the way."
 – Lauryn Hill

Getting out of one's own way as a leader starts with recognizing when you **are** in the way. This requires taking a step back, helicoptering up and looking at the situation from the outside. Think of a challenging situation that you face now whether it is interpersonally, trying to move a change initiative along or transitioning into new responsibilities.

Reflection Questions

1. What are you doing to help the situation? What are you doing that either maintains the status quo or negatively impacts the situation?
2. How does your mindset or attitude towards yourself and/or others need to change to get to where you are trying to go?
3. What one step are you willing to take to get out of your way to being a better leader today?

Quarterly Book Selection: Learned Optimism

What dog-eared, highlight-filled books are on our bookshelves that we find ourselves turning to time and time again and frequently recommending to others? Here's our book selection for this quarter:

Learned Optimism
 By Martin E. Seligman

An Isis Associates favorite, "Learned Optimism" highlights the importance and impact of one's own mindset on our behavior, actions, and overall life.

For the past 25 years, Dr. Martin Seligman, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and a past president of the American Psychological Association, has studied the thinking and explanatory styles of people – concluding that "our thoughts are not merely reactions to events, they change what ensues." Seligman offers readers an understanding of thinking patterns more classically "optimistic" versus "pessimistic" and gives a set of pragmatic cognitive skills for working with them. Even the skeptic will appreciate Seligman's details regarding years of psychological research as well as techniques "discovered in labs and clinics by leading psychologists and psychiatrists and then rigorously validated."

The most useful tool in the book is the "ABCDE" method developed by the world's leading cognitive therapists. It suggests humans are capable of becoming conscious and aware of our beliefs and more importantly, we have the capacity to shift or dispute those that do not empower us. As Seligman himself best describes, "*our reflexive explanations are usually distortions. They are mere bad habits of thought produced by unpleasant experiences in the past...challenge them. Don't let them run your emotional life...once you get in the habit of disputing negative beliefs, your daily life will run much better.*"

From the Coach's Corner: Ready, Set, Take a Deep Breath...

From the Client:

"I am a director at a growing technology company. In my role, I have to frequently interact with peers from different functions and the leadership team. Recently, I received feedback that I may be stalled in my current position unless I improve my overall managerial composure and communication skills when interacting with others. While I understand the feedback and have been trying to improve my behavior, I still can not slow myself or calm down when the stakes are high or my work plate is full. What can I do?"

From the Coach's Corner:

Your question is a common one in today's high stress, uncertain work environment. More of our clients have been coming to us with questions of how to manage workloads while also managing their overall leadership presence in front of key stakeholders. Whether it is settling anxiety prior to a major presentation, maintaining composure in the face of your toughest peer, or listening intently to another function's viewpoint, our recommended technique for leaders is the same: learn to use your breathing to your advantage.

B – Belly vs. Chest: As humans, we take our breathing for granted even though it is one of the most powerful tools available for managing stress, increasing energy, and even becoming a more effective communicator! When we are stressed or tense, we tend to breathe in a rapid and shallow manner from the upper chest. This causes us to speak faster, at a higher pitch, and with greater defensiveness than we might otherwise intend. The opposite of shallow breathing is diaphragmatic breathing – also known as “belly breathing” – which not only ensures we take in more breath but also offers us greater control of our movements. Performers, athletes, and those involved in the Eastern Arts have known this for centuries as a critical part of achieving peak performance. Try breathing this way right now – place your hand on your “belly” and feel the rise and fall – like a balloon gently inflating and deflating.

R – Responsive vs. Reactive: Even one deep breath can offer the critical 5-10 seconds needed in a difficult interaction to respond versus react. Clients have shared with us how a simple breath made all the difference between becoming inappropriately defensive versus pausing to consider the question being asked and answering thoughtfully and with confidence. The breath creates a small window of space between a stimulus coming in and our reaction to that stimulus – giving rise to the possibility of choice. It's also easy to use breathing as a “transition” technique to shift gears from working at our computers to heading into a large team meeting.

E – Energized vs. Drained: While shallow breathing has been known to reduce our overall energy levels and ability to manage our emotions, diaphragmatic breathing produces the opposite effect. With no time to take a nap, get in a work out, or take a ½ hour break, sitting at your desk for a few minutes abdominally breathing can offer a quick recharge for the day.

A – Attentive vs. Scattered: Because our breath is part of our physical experience, it is also a powerful way to become more focused and pay greater attention. Excellent communicators are able to stay with the flow of the conversation and can think on their feet quickly. This skill requires staying present to your audience, to the dynamics in the room, and to what's happening in real time. By shifting our attention regularly to our breath, we ensure staying focused on what is at hand (versus splitting our focus with worry, other thoughts, and/or distractions).

T – Trained Mind vs. “Monkey Mind”: Over time, leaders who regularly practice bringing consciousness to their breath (also known as meditation), gain the additional benefits of a more trained, calm, and clear mind. What Zen Buddhists call “monkey mind” begins to ultimately settle.

H – Habit vs. Sporadic: Like anything, a regular practice of breathing can ultimately help you to access the power of your breath when you most need it. We recommend that you set aside up to 15 minute per day to simply sit or lie comfortably “belly” breathing, with your awareness on your belly, and noticing it rise and fall. Each time you feel your mind wander, gently bring your attention back to your belly and breathe. Like an athlete, it's best to practice regularly so that you habituate the mind-body for when it's actual “game time”. Ready, set, take a deep breath!

-Amy Jen Su