

## Engaging Leadership

### Knowing When to Disengage

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Over the course of the last two years, this column has focused on connecting leadership with all levels of the organization. It has explored building mutually supportive relationships and models for understanding between hierarchical leadership, unofficial leaders, and the many other roles found in libraries. It has also addressed the roles of shared responsibility among leaders and growing leaders within the organization. This last column explores those instances when a leader may have to deliberately and consciously disengage when presented with an unresolvable situation. The decision to disengage is generally a difficult one for good leaders to make but may be the only rational option open. Some of these situations require acknowledging that one is living the cliché of it “being lonely at the top” or now having gone to the “dark side.” Without an understanding of appropriate disengagement, leaders face an emotional toll that can ultimately lead to burnout. The critical aspect of effectively disengaging is to avoid becoming comfortable with it and finding oneself defaulting to or finding excuses to adopt the role of disengaged leader on a frequent or regular basis. Additionally, one must make intentional efforts to try to minimize the negative organizational impact, which may require focusing energies and resources for more indirect big-picture engagement.

#### EMPLOYEES AS INDIVIDUALS

Doing an internet search on “please everyone” reveals a plethora of quotes by noteworthy figures with a common theme that trying to please everyone all of the time is an exercise in futility. Yet as leaders, even if we recognize this from an abstract perspective we sometimes subconsciously seek this as an emotional goal, no matter how unrealistic and irrational it may be. Part of this is that many individuals seek out and stay in leadership roles because they truly want to make the organization, and in some cases the world as a whole, a better place. But “better” is a subjective term and individuals do not always see it in the same way when they are pushed out of their personal comfort zones or disagree with a change in strategic direction.

Leaders, both titled and grassroots ones, tend to be highly motivated individuals with aspirational goals and the ability to focus and develop. They also tend to make their careers a significant part of their identity. As such, they can find it difficult to understand employees who are less engaged in the workplace big picture and who are basically working to draw a paycheck to pay the bills or subsidize interests outside of the workplace. This does not mean the individual is unhappy or unmotivated, it just means that the individual has not invested as much of their personal energies and identity into their job. They may be more focused on family, social issues, hobbies, or even have plans for a future career change. As a consequence of this lack of investment, they may generally be good but not outstanding performers. They will

persistently be “average” or “satisfactory” performers who make periodic minor mistakes, but never sink to a level where performance is a disciplinary problem. This can represent a persistent headache for highly engaged leaders or those who have a number of outstanding employees or grass roots leaders. These outstanding employees or leaders-in-training often complain about how “management” should be “doing something” about this individual’s performance. In truth, the manager’s toolkit may not have the robust instruments to match the specific situation, and other than holding the employee accountable for documented expectations consistent with the title and level of independent judgment or decision making, there really is not a lot one can do. Trying to persist further in motivating this employee to levels of excellence is an exercise in frustration for everyone, and disengaging on changing the employee’s motivational model may be the appropriate action. But in keeping with the idea of thinking organizationally rather than individually, one’s engagement efforts may need to focus on educating and engaging with leaders so that they understand how the disciplinary processes work and why there may not be anything that can be “done.” This can be difficult because one must also be careful to protect the privacy of the performance evaluation of the mediocre employee. Instead one should cast the engagement and discussions in a case study or scenario model that is sufficiently unrecognizable from the individual perspective but relevant to the situation that it can be a transferable leadership learning and development moment. It also plays a role in succession planning by helping to identify individuals who may be able to make the jump from seeing supervisor and managerial roles as all-powerful to the more accurate picture of limited influence in many situations.

Another aspect of employees as individuals that can make engagement futile is when the employee has reached an absolute positional state on an issue and is unwilling to listen or engage in any degree of openness to different ideas or self-reflection. This scenario is different from one where there is engagement that allows individuals to hear the other’s viewpoint and still choose to disagree while maintaining respect for why each believes the way they do. In the absolute positional state there is no room for scholarly, and often civil, discourse of dialogue and often anyone who “disagrees” is vilified. This seems to be an increasing problem in our highly polarized society that is creeping more and more into the workplace. In these situations, engaged leaders have to accept that no amount of direct one-on-one engagement is going to change how this individual thinks because everything that is said goes through a pre-filtering process on the part of the individual that distorts it to either agree or be hostile to the person’s positional thinking. The outcome is either both parties leaving the room with a totally different “understanding” of what was said and the outcome of the discussion or the open conflict is escalated to an increasing hostile level that can lead to formal allegations or complaints up the organizational hierarchy. In these situations, a leader may have to intentionally step back and disengage from the individual and focus energies on self-protection through documentation of the interactions and compartmentalization. Again, the engagement aspect is less about engaging with the individual and more about engagement across the organization. Depending on how hostile the situation has become, leaders may find themselves challenged in open meetings or the subject of a whisper campaign intended to build sympathy for the individual or discredit the leader. In this situation, open transparency with the community at large in sharing the rational reasons that one believes in a particular position or decision combined with publicly

respecting the employee's right to disagree and not losing control will usually result in the polarized employees losing allies and in some cases even publicly discrediting themselves.

One last, often difficult, aspect of disengagement with individual employees comes about due to issues of poor performance. There are two different disengagement scenarios that can play out with this situation, assuming that the employee is not responsive to normal development efforts of coaching and counseling on expectations and accountability. In the first scenario, one may not actually be able to do anything about the employee's status. This could be due to lack of support at the institutional level or where documentation is insufficient because of a history of non-accountability or where the employee may fall into a protected classification, such as being very close to retirement. Whatever the reason, one may simply have to disengage on trying to get the employee to improve and minimize the impact on the rest of the organization. This may mean an employee gets to coast or perform work at a lower level than would normally be expected. In this case, one should focus on what the individual can accomplish and not worry about a deeper level of engagement.

The other scenario comes into play when one has reached the conclusion that an employee's performance has reached a level that one needs to engage in formal disciplinary procedures and termination may be the best organizational solution. As most libraries are subject to larger civic or institutional rules on hiring and firing, leaders cannot emulate the fictional leaders of literature and film, and simply declare someone abruptly terminated in the classic "clean-out-your-desk- and-get-out-today" fashion. Instead there is usually a process driven by legalities that requires documentation, opportunities for the employee to improve, and justification of the decision. This sometimes requires that one has to step back and actually let something fail within the operational model, and in fact prevent others from "saving" the situation. This level of disengagement can be extremely difficult, particularly in organizations that have actually worked to build a culture of teamwork and peer support for different reasons. One reason is that the team does not want to be seen as taking a black eye because of the lack of performance of the individual and others will do the work for that person, often grumbling and telling the manager to "do something" about the individual. Additionally, taking away someone's employment is a very hard and difficult decision, even as leaders can recognize that it was the individual's choices and actions that led to the result. Many peers or even grass roots leaders have trouble accepting that this can be a result of accountability and do not want the individual to suffer. This is particularly difficult if individuals have bonded at a personal level and the underperforming individual has shared their struggles in a way to build sympathy. But managers must again find a way to establish some distance with the individual underperforming employee but engage with the other employees and refocus their efforts to activities that will provide professional satisfaction. As with the previous example, this can be difficult to do in a way that protects the privacy of the other everyone. One technique is to restructure the organizational or operational model away from a larger team approach for a period of time and delegate responsibilities in a more compartmentalized model. This enhances the manager's ability to track accountability more accurately and lets individuals engage in a way where covering for an underperforming employee becomes more obvious for purposes of documentation. It also allows employees to focus on their own successes and move away from enabling the underperforming employee.

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE LIMITATIONS

A previous column on 'other duties as assigned' talked about the importance of being politically aware of organizational hierarchy and structure when taking on duties outside of one's core responsibilities. In a similar way, this is an issue when it comes to disengagement decisions as well, particularly for individuals in titled leadership roles. Many leaders get where they are by being engaged problem solvers and working outside of the box. They are the ones that serve on cross-disciplinary teams or do not hesitate to go to others to find answers, even if they are in a different part of the organizational structure. In this role, one often builds connections with a large number of individuals across an organization. But these connections can lead to problems when others seek one out to advocate on an issue on their behalf. Often this plays out to a scenario where individuals are confused or unhappy about a decision or perceived inaction on the part of a peer or leader within their unit or elsewhere in the organization. They may not be comfortable addressing the question directly or do not want to risk seeming insubordinate in challenging a leader, so they ask you to engage on their behalf. One has to be careful in handling this situation and usually direct engagement is not the best response as it can be perceived in several different ways. This may need to be handled as more of a leadership development opportunity.

In this situation, senior titled leaders have to consider political elements in their decisions how to engage. It may be possible to encourage grass roots or team/operational leaders to work with their peers across the organization. A senior leader from one unit might engage directly with a subordinate in another organizational unit but it should be done carefully and with the knowledge of that the subordinate's unit leadership. It is critical that the engagement not countermand or undermine the peer leadership. If direct engagement fails to achieve needed results or one discovers factors that seem to be inhibiting success, then one should disengage from working directly with the subordinate or team leader and engage with the peer titled leader of the other unit or route it up and across the organization at a higher level. It may be as one is engaging in this manner, one gains additional insights into the other part of the organizational structure. For example, one may learn that the other titled leader is trying to address some underlying performance or structural issues and is actively coaching for improvements. Stumbling in with expectations can disrupt these efforts and create unintentional problems that impact morale and culture. This is particularly problematic when there is a cross-organizational operational impact into one's actual area of responsibility. One may also learn that the other manager did not realize the impact of the operational issues on one's area, so this offers an opportunity for engagement and education. Worst case scenario is that one learns things about one's titled leadership peers that indicate they are either part of the problem or unable/unwilling to do anything to address it...and no amount of discussion will change the outcome. In this scenario, one may have to simply disengage on the issue and actually change one's expectations until such time as the peer leader is willing to engage. The other option is to move it up the organization hierarchy, recognizing that leaders have to pick and choose their own battles.

## PROTECTING YOUR SANITY

At some point, leaders may have to temporarily disengage from particular situations in order to protect themselves professionally and emotionally. Leaders address a lot of problem-solving situations and deal with many individuals in various states of crisis. Similarly, leadership and decision making are hard work and for engaged leaders burnout can take many different forms. It can lead one to become engagement aversive, which can manifest as a dictatorial leader with no patience for engagement or a disengaged leader who lets employees drift with little or no developmental guidance. Middle managers – a designation which actually describes all library management -- are particularly subject to pressures and expectations from those above them and within their own spheres of responsibility. In some cases, the expectations and negative interactions can become overwhelming and it leads one to become disillusioned or lose hope for positive outcomes or making progress. In this case, one may have to intentionally disengage from some issues and, for a period, focus engagement on areas where there can be some tangible accomplishments to emotionally and mentally refresh.

Along the same line, the day of the self-sacrificing Type A library leaders who lived and breathed their leadership role 24/7, never takes a vacation, and makes the library the most important thing aspect of their identities is a product of the previous generations and is not an effective leadership model for the future. This is a fact, in spite of the realization that libraries have become significantly more complex with greater levels of intensity. In truth, most events that take place in libraries are not part of the life or death world of irreversible decisions. Most issues with deadlines are negotiable and the few that are not can often be dealt with through effective delegation. It is often not enough to just go on a vacation as technology can allow one to stay too connected. Disengagement must often be deliberate and intentional and can actually be difficult. One should consider selecting a destination or vacation that forces one to disconnect and put the devices away. These disengagement activities will generally be very personal, for some it might be a beach or national park for others it will be a big city environment. But once one reaches the disengaged state, it allows one to engage more effectively on non-library activities. The result is to put the library and its myriad of issues in perspective so that one has the energies and insights to effectively reengage.

## IN CONCLUSION

Even as desirable as it is to stay engaged with one's employees, peers, and leaders, there may be times when it is appropriate to intentionally disengage or to refocus one's engagement energies in a more productive manner. The key is to understand why one is choosing to disengage and to intentionally assess whether it is the correct action to take in the particular situation. One should also assess whether there would be unintended larger organizational impacts, and mitigate these as much as possible. As one makes the decision to let go of an issue, one should have a plan or strategy that relates to re-engagement. Is the decision to disengage with one individual or group of stakeholders balanced by an intentionally deeper engagement with others? What is the possible organizational impact of disengaging on a particular situation and can this be mitigated? What strategy is one going to use to re-engage after a disengaged vacation?

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