

Essay 11: Leading by Facilitating & 11 1/2: Final Questions

For many people getting to be team leader means obtaining the privilege of imposing one's worldview on others. Of course, "It's more work and responsibility, but I would like to prove that I can handle it." BS! Being the leader is just one more way that an insecure person has of proving the value that they feel others have not recognized in them. In truth, however, the world needs fewer leaders and more facilitators.

Worldviews are ideologies; both are models. Models, necessarily, require a simplification of the real world. Their strength is that they are easier to understand than the real world with all its complexities. The imposition of a worldview is a way of simplifying the world that makes a challenge seem more tractable. If the challenge is student retention, the worldview of a faculty member may cause them to see the problem as one of defects in the admissions system. Students are being admitted who neither can nor want to do the required work. An admissions person, on the other hand, might see the problem as one of degree requirements set by faculty where students are allowed to pick half their courses randomly from lists of electives. An academic advisor may see the problem as affordability, caused by bad financial aid advising.

Most people, however, understand that students drop out for many, and often multiple, reasons. No one model fits. A retention team that tries to focus on a single problem will find that their solution has a negligible impact. A retention team leader who guides a group toward his or her worldview is bound to fail.

The job of a facilitator is to thwart the chair from imposing a worldview and to bring all viewpoints out and onto the table. Each provides an understanding of the problem, however limited. Multi-dimensional problems must be seen from all sides.

All the same, a heap of problems viewed from many directions is hard to deal with. A facilitator knows who on the team has a synthetic mind. "Joe, can you put these problems into categories?" Perhaps Joe will see that some problems are individual challenges, while others are systemic. Getting sick for two weeks in the middle of a semester is an individual challenge, putting the student at risk of dropping out when the work appears impossible. Cafeteria style course requirements may be seen as systemic. Grouped this way, solutions may be categorized to deal with the two types: those that require greater student support, and those that require changes to systems.

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Tasks of a facilitator

- 1) Getting as many viewpoints as possible onto the table.
- 2) Encouraging team members to take process roles, as appropriate, such as analyzer, synthesizer, divergent thinker, convergent thinker, etc.
- 3) Gauging team energy levels and encouraging breaks, as necessary.
- 4) Bringing the ratifier out when discussion gets repetitive.
- 5) Keeping the team aware of the current level of thought in the agenda.
- 6) Encouraging listening, by asking an impetuous speaker to rephrase the last speaker's point.
- 7) Seeming impartial, if not altogether invisible, by never venturing to add to the content of the discussion.
- 8) Getting clarity on how the team will make decisions.
- 9) Helping people see how their culture veils their views of "outsiders."
- 10) Encouraging team members to value the contributions of others.
- 11) Encouraging silent team members to participate or share why they have been hesitant.

As discussed in Essay 2, this is a tremendous load. It can only be undertaken if the person is not running the meeting, that is, not calling on people. Many of these tasks are also shared, as discussed in Essay 2.

Leadership by facilitating is thus not leading, like a shepherd leads sheep, but like a mentor who brings out the best in a student. Leadership by facilitating brings out the best in a team by focusing on the process of the team and encouraging the best performance.

If you wish to be a great leader, practice facilitation. Find someone who can teach you the finer points. Watch a great facilitator in action.

Essay 11 1/2: Final Questions

Here's a set of questions as a summary.

1. Are you hiring people who have demonstrated initiative outside their organizational roles?
2. Are you building teams with diverse thinking styles?
3. Are you encouraging the understanding of cultural reference points and views of "proper" behavior, especially that of the predominant culture and of your own culture?

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4. Are you transferring organizational power from the hierarchy to system teams?
5. Are you building organizational effectiveness, not personal guilt at inadequacy?
6. Are you spreading team effectiveness responsibilities among a set of known team roles?
7. Are you building process facilitation skills among team members?
8. Are you developing team projects through a series of deliberations that go from higher levels of abstraction through to lower levels, ending with process assessment and an audit of assumptions?
9. Are you changing the production metaphor from “assembly line” to “craft,” centering responsibility for student growth on mentors, not collections of offices?
10. Are you focusing meetings on action and development, not reports?
11. Are you setting goals as part of a process, not injunctions to “just try harder”?

I hope these essays have allowed you to reflect on your role in your organizations. Remember the wisdom of Barney: Process is Everything!

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