

YOUR LEADERSHIP

EDGE

LEAD ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

ED O'MALLEY
AMANDA CEBULA

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CHAPTER 2

DIAGNOSE SITUATION

Understand the Process Challenges

Process challenges are people challenges.

Process challenges are issues or barriers among members of a team or organization. They are about how people work (or don't work) together. They exist regardless of the content challenges — the readily solvable nuts-and-bolts decisions and details — facing the group. Process challenges could be thought of as the problems behind the problems, or even the problems behind those.

The right people, with good information, in a healthy process, create authentic, lasting results.

—DAVID CHRISLIP



Good politicians understand this instinctively. The issue isn't how to build the highway but how to create community support for it.

HERE ARE MORE EXAMPLES:

- ▶ A start-up company is developing a new technology to make lives better, but the founders are at odds, each having a different vision for the company.

CONTENT CHALLENGE = developing the new technology.

PROCESS CHALLENGE = reconciling two different visions.

- ▶ The year-end budget report is due by Friday. The boss asked for a new format with additional information to help management make better forecasts but didn't specify what should be in the new format. The budget team is struggling. The report has been the same report for years, since before any current staff were hired. The team members have no good ideas for how it should be different and are stressing about getting it done on time. They are not even sure why senior management want something different.

CONTENT CHALLENGE = new budget report.

PROCESS CHALLENGES = imagining a whole new way of presenting information, working under stress, uncertainty and lack of clarity between management and the budget team.



WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PROCESS CHALLENGES?

Read "Buy-In" by John Kotter.

In “Hoosiers,” the best basketball movie of all time, the main character’s challenges are less about the content of basketball (e.g., which offense to run) than about the process challenges inundating him. He is a newcomer in town and isn’t accepted. The players don’t work together as a team. His experiences at another school affect whether a key individual will trust him. What he knows about the X’s and O’s of basketball is important but not sufficient. Navigating the process challenges is key.

- ▶ A community action group has rallied a neighborhood to speak with one voice about the need to replace the dilapidated school. Parents of young children, the elderly and single people are all in favor. But most school board members have a different perspective than the community group.

CONTENT CHALLENGE = building a new school.

PROCESS CHALLENGE = building bridges between the community group and the majority on the school board.

- ▶ A CEO lays out a new vision for her organization that she believes will keep the company relevant for years to come. The vision includes a new suite of services as well as a public relations effort.

CONTENT CHALLENGE = the stuff in the vision.

PROCESS CHALLENGE = helping staff and stakeholders embrace the vision — better yet, ensuring staff and stakeholders help inform the vision!

*To lead you must understand
the process challenges.*

Why?

*Because it's the process
challenges that derail so many
leadership efforts.*

**What makes it hard to understand
process challenges?**

- ▶ They seem like a sideshow, but they are the main event. It's more fun to refine a new product (content challenge) than to face problems among the co-founders (process challenge).
- ▶ It takes time and discernment to identify the process challenges. Content challenges are usually easier to see. In our quest for a quick fix, we get satisfied by working on the content challenges.
- ▶ Consciously or unconsciously, we don't want to uncover the real problem. It just might be too messy.

Lessons from History

UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS CHALLENGES

During World War II the race was on among the Americans, Germans, Russians and British to develop the atomic bomb. The best scientists in each country were assigned the task and massive amounts of materials were harnessed to conduct the research. The content challenge was to split an atom, unleashing its destructive force. In America, process challenges were abundant while the scientists were busy on that massive and complicated content challenge.

The Army and Navy each had separate research efforts, and it took years before they shared information and learning (PROCESS CHALLENGE). How information is shared is usually an important process challenge. Huge amounts of materials — from steel to chemicals — were needed, but those same materials were needed to produce tanks, ships and planes. Gaining enough influence over the supply chain to divert materials to their project was critical for the research teams (PROCESS CHALLENGE). Simply focusing on the content challenge — the splitting of the atom — wouldn't suffice.

How to understand the process challenges

- ▶ Build relationships with others. This is essential. The more you care about others, the more you share their perspectives.
- ▶ For a specific issue or project, ask this question: “As we are working on _____ (insert name of project), what could really derail us?” The answers will usually be process challenges.
- ▶ For broader process challenges affecting a community or organization, ask this question: “When we think about the future of _____ (insert name of community/company/etc.), what concerns you the most?” Then ask, “What makes progress so difficult on that concern?” The answers to this second question should start to elevate the process challenges.
- ▶ Ask yourself whether the same challenge is affecting two totally different situations. If the answer is yes, you have most likely identified a process challenge.



I'm the secretary of our neighborhood association. Past experiences with this group haven't always been positive. How do I help people let go of the past, including disagreements, and focus on our new vision for the neighborhood?

- NEIGHBORHOOD NANCY

Dear Nancy,

Congratulations! You have identified a key process challenge: Helping “people let go of the past, including disagreements” is all about process.

Most people think the exercise of leadership in this situation is generating attention on the new vision for the neighborhood. But, given your insight, you know leadership requires letting people speak about past experiences. Review Chapter 17 in this book for specific ideas on speaking to loss.

Before you can tackle the content challenge (the new vision) you must put to rest the process challenges. You are thinking the right way.

Onward!