

YOUR LEADERSHIP

# EDGE

LEAD ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

ED O'MALLEY  
AMANDA CEBULA

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## CHAPTER 6

## DIAGNOSE SITUATION

# *Test Multiple Interpretations and Points of View*

We've found that too often, people (ourselves included) are satisfied with their first good idea. But exercising leadership requires us to generate numerous ways to understand an issue and multiple paths forward. We need to “try on” different ideas. Our friend and mentor Marty Linsky likes to encourage people to “just rent the idea ... you don't have to buy it ... just rent it.”

Experience tells us that your ability to “rent” as many different ideas about what's going on in your situation will directly affect your ability to exercise leadership in that situation.

This idea of “testing multiple interpretations and points of view” is a key diagnostic activity. Here's a way of thinking of it that may be illustrative.

Imagine your car has been acting weird. It's making funny noises, not always starting, emitting strange fumes, etc. You take it to the mechanic. He opens the hood (point of view 1) and looks around. Next, he puts it on the lift so he can look underneath (point of view 2). Finally, he takes it for a spin (point of view 3). He briefly gives you his initial analysis: “Sir, it looks to me like there



“NEXT!”

are at least three possibilities. First, your timing belt is about to snap (interpretation 1). Or buildup on the engine block is clogging the exhaust manifolds (interpretation 2). Or you've never changed the oil and the car has 119,000 miles on it (interpretation 3).

The mechanic's next step would be to actually "test" those interpretations with specific diagnostic activity.

### **Let's start with the easier of the two: testing points of view.**

Leadership challenges have multiple stakeholders with multiple points of view. How do senior managers see the challenge compared to frontline staff? How does the situation look if you are a newly elected official instead of a seasoned veteran? How about men compared to women? You get the idea.

Testing multiple points of view means taking deliberate steps to learn about their perspectives.

### **HOW DO YOU DO THIS?**

- ▶ IDENTIFY THE FACTIONS INVOLVED.
- ▶ ENGAGE EACH FACTION, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHOSE SUPPORT YOU NEED THE MOST BUT CURRENTLY HAVE THE LEAST. Even engage your opposition. They may never come completely along, but you'll have a better chance of finding common ground if you look at the ground from their perspective.
- ▶ MEET WITH THEM, NOT TO CONVINCe THEM OF ANYTHING, BUT JUST TO LISTEN. Don't listen to reply. Listen to understand.



### Testing interpretations can be trickier.

Let's go back to the mechanic example. There are three interpretations for why the car is acting up. Each requires a different fix. Based on the mechanic's knowledge and experience, all three could be the cause. He must run additional tests to determine which direction to head.

### HERE'S A LEADERSHIP EXAMPLE.

The leadership challenge facing a small-business owner is how to mobilize employees to turn around sales. It's been more than a year since they were doing really well. She starts by considering multiple points of view. First, she looks to her own perspective (point of view 1). Second, she puts herself in the shoes of her sales team (point of view 2). Third, she explores what a customer might think (point of view 3). Finally, to flush out other possible interpretations, she contemplates the perspective of other employees (point of view 4).

Based on the multiple points of view, several interpretations come to mind for the owner. Her sales force just can't cut it (interpretation 1). The market no longer desires her products (interpretation 2). With the new shopping development on the outskirts of town, her location is no longer marquee enough to bring walk-in customers (interpretation 3), and she has been too distracted by a different business venture and hasn't provided the management her employees need (interpretation 4).

## IN ORDER, TESTING THOSE INTERPRETATIONS WOULD LOOK LIKE THIS.

1. Putting herself back in the sales role. Can she sell the product?
2. Researching sales of similar products from other stores. Are their sales down too?
3. Surveying the walk-in traffic she does get and surveying shoppers at the new development. Is this shopping area still attractive?
4. Setting aside her other venture for a few months. Does my staff respond better when I'm more present?

## HOW DO YOU TEST MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIONS?

- ▶ **START BY IMAGINING MULTIPLE EXPLANATIONS (AKA INTERPRETATIONS) FOR THE ISSUE AT HAND.** Review Chapter 3 to make sure you are exploring tough interpretations. Don't stop after your first good idea!
- ▶ **JUST ASK OTHERS ABOUT THEIR THOUGHTS ON THE DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS.** By offering multiple ideas, you'll help them explore new possibilities and enable them to give good feedback.
- ▶ **RUN EXPERIMENTS.** Remember, we experiment to learn, not to solve. Experiment to learn which interpretations seem most relevant. Review Chapter 23 on acting experimentally for more information.



I have volunteered for a large nonprofit organization for many years. Lately, a lot of young people are getting involved just to pad their resumes instead of getting their hands dirty in the work. How do I get them to help out or get out?

- VOLUNTEER VICTOR

Dear Victor,

First, generate a few more interpretations. You have one so far, that they just want to pad their resumes. Start by just asking a few of them. Take them to breakfast and ask what's getting in the way of them being more engaged. Our guess is they will mention things you haven't thought about. Maybe additional interpretations will emerge, such as long-time volunteers spurning their ideas or that available volunteer times conflict too much with activities of their young families.

Next, test those interpretations. Ask people about them. Think about which seems most likely. Hold them all to be possible truths. Develop small interventions to try to make progress on each of them. See the Intervene Skillfully section for more ideas.

Onward!