

YOUR LEADERSHIP

EDGE

LEAD ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

ED O'MALLEY
AMANDA CEBULA

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CHAPTER 14
ENERGIZE OTHERS

Start Where They Are

Start where they are, not where you are.

As you exercise leadership, at some point you will be asking, compelling, cajoling or encouraging others to change. It's critical to know where those individuals and groups (aka factions) are coming from, their history and what they care about related to your leadership challenge. You can't lead others if you don't know where they stand.

Leadership is about mobilizing others. Mobilizing starts with curiosity and questions: What do these people care about? What's their perspective on the proposed change? What do they stand to gain or lose?



"THIS WAY!"

The challenge may appear differently based on where you are in the organization. A tough challenge looks a lot different depending on whether you are CEO, middle manager or on the front line.

It's a lot harder to hear, "I don't care what you have to do this afternoon, this project is important and you will focus on it first," than, "I know this team has a lot on its plate. We're all feeling the crunch of being short-staffed right now. With that said, it looks like we have a short deadline on this new project and we all need to do what we can to get it done by the end of the week."

Obviously, in the second example, the boss addresses feelings and concerns (the adaptive elements) right from the beginning. By acknowledging where they are as a team, the boss makes it more likely that they'll be successful in the long run.

Failing to start where they are leads to rebellion, stagnation and failure. Taking others' feelings and experience into account prepares you to manage the heat (see Diagnose Situation: Take the Temperature) and energy in the room, particularly if people won't like what you have to say.

HERE'S AN EXAMPLE FROM OUR ORGANIZATION.

- ▶ KLC is designed and built to influence and eventually transform the civic culture of our state. But we learned early on that few people wake up in the morning with that lofty idea on their to-do list. While "transforming the civic culture so it's more effective" may be our leadership challenge, it's not "where they (the vast numbers of people we interact with) are." We've learned people come to KLC for help with their leadership challenges, often about issues and dynamics in their organization. Once we understand their leadership challenge and provide resources and experiences that help them make more progress, we notice a willingness — even an excitement — about helping us with our leadership challenge.

HOW DO YOU START WHERE THEY ARE?

- **Ask questions.** What do they care about? What is their perspective? What is their history with this idea?
- **Just listen, not to reply but to understand.**
- **Explore every explanation for what is going on in the situation.**

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF “STARTING WHERE THEY ARE”?

- **We are blinded by our own vision.** Our vision is so obvious for us that we fail to realize others come to the same issue with vastly different history. If you find yourself trying to convince another person of the brilliance of your idea, you are probably not starting where they are.
- **Time and values.** In our rush to solve problems, we don't value engaging others, listening to them and trying to understand them. Even in our results-driven world, if the challenge is adaptive we will see better outcomes when we take others into account from the beginning.
- **We are misguided.** We jump to solving the problem rather than understanding the people involved and the true nature of the problem.
- **Lack of knowledge and empathy.** The less we know about others and their experiences, the less likely we are to understand their point of view.



HERE ARE TWO QUICK WAYS TO DETERMINE WHETHER YOU ARE STARTING WHERE THEY ARE.

- First, as you listen to the group's conversation, is the "main thing" staying the "main thing"? Failure to start where they are typically means groups get distracted by things that are more important to them.
- Second, observe whether all factions are connecting with the discussion rather than becoming defensive or contradictory. You've started where they are if ideas resonate with everyone.

To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.

— ANTHONY ROBBINS



I'm a new vice-president in a midsize company. The company is successful, but I was brought in to help take it to the next level. I hit the ground running with a robust 90-day action plan. My challenge is that my ideas are meeting lots of resistance. How do I gain traction for my ideas?

- TRACTION THANH

Dear Thanh,

Shred your 90-day action plan. Recycle the scraps and replace it with a 90-day plan to engage and listen. You are the new guy. Coming in to implement a package of ideas isn't the way to go.

Your adaptive challenge is to help a group of already successful people reach the next level. Your job would be easier if the company wasn't successful. Then your colleagues might be desperate enough to grab on to any idea you, "the savior," had to offer. Your 90-day action plan is a threat to them. You are trying to get them to change without understanding what that change might mean to them. Engage them. Listen to them. Ask questions. Don't let your mind start developing ideas or solutions. Discern next steps only after you really understand where they are coming from.

Onward!