

Remarks on Leadership to open Central Texas ASPA Conference

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Anyone presumes a lot to speak on leadership to a group like this in times like these. And the more you study the subject and see what has been written and said about it, the more presumptuous you come to feel. But you must forgive me; I didn't ask to do this. I was inveigled into doing it. (Inveigled is a wonderful word. It means won over by wiles, by enticements. To gain one's way by ingenuity or flattery. Well, that's exactly what they did to me to get me to fill this spot on your program today.)

In Mason, Texas, a hill country town where my mother grew up, there was a Mason County champion cusser. In my mother's girlhood he was reputed to be able to out-cuss anybody within 30 miles. One Saturday back in the 1920's he drove his horse-drawn wagon into Mason with a load of corn for the market. As he pulled up to the courthouse and drew in the reins, he looked back in his wagon just in time to watch the last ear of corn roll out of the tailgate, which had dropped down some time earlier. His corn was strung out up the road for half a mile.

Everybody came running and the women shooed the children away or put their fingers in their ears. The crowd gathered around as the champion cusser stood in his wagon and looked forlornly up the road at his corn. Finally as they grew silent in

anticipation, he looked out over the crowd and said, “I find I am not equal to the occasion.”

But having been inveigled into speaking on leadership to this august body, I must attempt to do my best to be equal to the occasion.

There is a kind of leadership we all practice if we are at all successful in getting things done in the public sector. It is a form of leadership which gets very little recognition and is not even seen by most of us as a form of leadership. I call it subordinate leadership, leadership that comes from below rather than from the top.

What are some of the characteristics of leadership? To develop followership, to make people want to follow you to do what you would like for them to do to promote your cause. Leaders do this in part by studying and knowing their followers. They find out what their followers want and need and long for, and then they satisfy those wants and needs and longings. They fulfill the satisfactions of those they want to become their followers.

Now hold that thought in mind while we look at a related topic.

What is one of the most difficult and frustrating realities of our jobs in public administration? We often know very well what needs to be done in a particular situation, but we also recognize that we don't have the power or authority or clout or influence to get it done ourselves. Or we have forces arrayed against us we know we and our supporters can't overcome. We have the facts and the vision and the foresight to know exactly what action needs to be taken, but we can't get it done on our own.

So we either permit our vision or solution to atrophy or die or we convince someone who does have the clout that he or she needs to get the task done. Usually that

someone is above us with authority, position, or prestige, someone others will listen to and follow. Someone with the hammer to override our opponents.

Now, back to leadership. It is usually thought of as a personal power or resource exercised by those at the top upon those below them. Many think of leadership as coming down hierarchically. But subordinate leadership is different; it is your artful persuasion working upwards from below.

Here's how you do it. You are able to discover what people with power and position above you want and need and long for, what it is that will give them fulfillment and satisfaction. Often it is a small leap to match up your proposal for action in a way that fulfills the personal wants of someone above you whom you have studied. If you can persuade or entice people with authority and power to exercise their accoutrements of office on behalf of your undertakings, you will be leading them. You will have created followership in them to help you achieve your objectives. Of course, the last thing you ever want to do is let them catch on that you are leading them. It is they who are the leaders. In your artful inveigling of them to do your bidding you never want to let them forget that they are the leaders.

One of my mentors when I was young was M. Justin Herman. He was head of the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency. He hired me from Washington to be his assistant. He told me one of my jobs was to go with him when he met with the Mayor and members of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, the city's elected councilmen. He also wanted me to listen to their speeches when they campaigned. He said, "Your job is to help me find out what each of them wants that we can some way put into our

program for our agency. Our job is to make them look good by getting them to help us to do what we want to get done.”

And making some of them look good was an heroic undertaking. Councilman James McSheehy will live with me forever. He said things like, “This has all the earmarks of an eyesore.” Or he said once, “What I want to know is where we are going to find the money to bury the homeless, these poor, indignant dead.” (That’s how I plan to be dead—indignant as hell.) Or he would say, “On this matter I think we should wait and sit on the fence and keep our ear to the ground and our finger in the air.” Once he accused an opponent of “defecation of character.” (He may have been closer to his opponent’s intention than he knew.)

Anyway, Justin Herman showed me for the first time in practice how subordinate leadership could work. He was a master at it.

Sometimes it is a simple thing such as doing solid, completed staff work. You can lead even a hesitant or cautious boss to do what is needed if you can convince him it will make him look good or maybe even courageous.

What you need to do is listen, watch, and read the people with authority whom you work with or near. And use your imagination about what are their probable wants and longings. Then along will come an idea you have, a chance to suggest that one of them do something that will fulfill some want or need or longing that you have surmised he has. And *voilà*: he will help you to do something useful that you can’t get done by yourself.

One quality of politicians that you don’t have to be very imaginative to identify is that they have a need for public recognition, getting credit, receiving public acclaim. As

Jean Monnet, father of the European Union, said, “Men in power are short of new ideas: they lack the time and the information; and they want to do good so long as they get the credit for it.”

Let me give you an example of how I have used subordinate leadership, getting my boss to do the right thing and getting his help. Under the threat of being issued a court order, Texas negotiated a settlement agreement with the federal government to eliminate any remaining vestiges of racial discrimination left over from the days when the races had been legally segregated in colleges and universities. Texas was one of over a dozen states which at one time had separated the races during those decades when a Supreme Court decision permitted the states to do this and while the federal government was making grants to the states to establish separate colleges for black students.

The new Texas plan negotiated with the federal government to increase the integration of the races in the public colleges and universities ran for five years, during which time our agency was the enforcement arm for the state. When the plan ran out we could have waited and hoped that the federal government would go away. Or we could have waited for the feds to order us to develop a second five-year plan under their direction and supervision, which is precisely what the Office of Civil Rights was doing in other states that had completed their first five-year plan.

It seemed reasonable to assume two things that would be pleasing to our Governor. First, we could seize the initiative and do our own new plan and in doing so, try to do it without federal interference – always a popular position in Texas. I knew from watching Governor Clements he loved to stick his finger in the federal government’s eye every chance he got. Second, the Governor could take the high ground

and say that we are going to continue on the road to increasing integration because it is the right thing for the state to do for our minorities – not because the federal government has ordered us to do it. Feeling confident these reasons would resonate with the governor, we were in a position to exercise a little subordinate leadership while advancing the interests of our minorities and the business of our board.

We drafted a letter, along with a suggested press release about the letter, from the Governor to our Chairman, directing us to prepare a new five-year plan and setting forth the Governor's reasoning. He signed the letter unchanged and the press release went out. It was one of the most popular things Governor Clements did in his second term. Even if increasing integration of the races was not the most popular idea with every faction in the state, the idea that Texas could determine its own future without direction from Washington was a universally popular position for the governor to take.

There is one minor drawback to remaining invisible and anonymous as you exercise "subordinate leadership." At a national conference my agency was attacked (with me as the specific target in the audience) for dragging our feet on developing a second state plan for racial integration in the universities. The speaker said, "If Governor Clements had not ordered the Coordinating Board to go on with the desegregation planning, nothing more would have been done until we had gotten the federal government to force them to do it."

This smoked me out. I could not sit there and take this imputation. I was forced to speak. I stood up and said, "Arturo, who do you think wrote that order from the Governor to us? Check it out."

Or to quote Jean Monnet again, “Each time that I personally have been convinced of the need for action, I have proposed it to men in power, leaving them to take the political responsibility and reap the reward.”

And women practice this approach very effectively. In fact, women probably mastered earlier than men this technique of using leaders for their own purposes. Jane Addams at Hull House practiced it – even on John Dewey, whom she taught a thing or two about pragmatism. Women have had to use this approach because despite men’s reluctance and resistance to sharing power with them, women have had many ideas they knew were exactly right for the moment. Subordinate leadership has been one of women’s methods for having their way.

Here is what Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, the first woman to hold a Cabinet-level position, said, “I began to look back over life and see who are the people I have understood, who are the people I have studied, and they are the people who have been my superior officers. And I believe that is what we all do. You study your superior officers; you study the person you are working for; you study them not out of curiosity, but in order to appreciate their mentality, their purpose, the best side of their nature, and their weaknesses, so that you may work with them and accomplish with them and for them the things which they really desire and hope to accomplish.”

One last personal experience in the use of subordinate leadership. When I became Commissioner of Higher Education there were 128 degree proposals pending for review and approval by the board, with over a dozen of those for new doctoral degrees, many of which would make primarily undergraduate colleges into new doctoral granting universities. The board had been stampeded during the previous two years into approving

degree programs far too quickly, and the more they approved, the faster other colleges developed proposals in order not to be left behind in the largess. I discussed my plan with my board chairman. I told him I would like him to direct me, as my first act in office, to try to get the universities to agree to postponing approvals for six months to a year to give us time to develop a more thorough review procedure for such requests. I explained to him that I needed a memo from him telling me to do this since a number of the board members had degrees they were promoting at some of the schools. When he hesitated I told him I had already drafted the memo and would send it to him.

A few of the board members I discussed my plan with told me to go ahead and try to get the schools to agree to a slow down. They sympathetically wished me “lotsa luck.” That should have forewarned me. I then approached the presidents and explained that I could ask my board, as their new commissioner, to support me at my very first meeting and to declare a moratorium on approving new degrees since their new proposals were so numerous. But I said I would prefer not to wear the hero’s white hat alone and appear to put black hats on the presidents as I tried to slow things down. They finally all agreed that a short delay of less than a year would not hurt their programs. Never being at a loss to gain credits and put me in their debt, however, they made clear that they were doing this as a special favor to me in my new position.

Just as I had all the agreements in place and I started to turn to other matters for my first board meeting, I began to receive calls from presidents, then from regents, and finally from my own board members. They were having second thoughts. They asked me for exceptions for particular degree proposals that could not be delayed without serious injury to the faculties and to particular schools. I explained to those calling me

that any exceptions I would agree to at this late point would break my pledges to all the other schools.

Several of my board members then said they could spare me that personal problem. At the board meeting they would merely move that the board override my recommendations and make those exceptions that the members chose to grant. I knew once such a movement began, the board would break ranks, and they would then swap favors with each other and proceed to approve programs without any staff analysis or recommendations of any kind. The burden would shift from the question, “Why can’t this proposed new degree program wait?” to “Why can’t we just go ahead and approve this one right now?” What I had devised as a plan to slow down runaway approvals would turn into a rout. I could see 128 degree programs being approved with no review at all. It would be a disastrous way to begin my administration of the agency. I knew the presidents would feel they had driven a permanent wedge between my board and me. Having tried to be a nice guy, I was facing a debacle.

When I called the chairman and explained what was happening he said, “This is typical of the board, breaking ranks to look after their special interests and their alma maters. They’re on the phones right now with each other, cutting deals and swapping votes to undo everything you’ve gotten the schools to agree to. And wait till the rest of the presidents find out what’s going on. They’ll all be on the phones too. There’s seventeen other members to call. I guess I’ll have to get on the phone and try to get them all back in the corral. But I know it won’t work. It never has before. I don’t know what would help.”

I said I had a proposal. I reminded him that Governor Dolph Briscoe had recently said that higher education costs were growing so fast they would soon bankrupt the state. I suggested that the Governor might like to send a letter to each of our board members, noting his great satisfaction with what he had heard about their good efforts to slow down the runaway growth in higher education. He could commend them highly for standing firm in the face all of the pressures he knows they are getting to approve new degree programs. He could offer to stand firmly behind them in whatever they did to control runaway growth.

My chair said, "That might just work, but he hasn't got anybody over there smart enough to write a letter like that."

I said, "Let me read you a draft."

Within the hour he called back and said Governor Briscoe loved the idea. Send him the letter.

At the next board meeting the presidents could not understand what had put the steel rod up the back of the board and the starch in their speeches.

At the social hour that evening board members were slapping each other on the back and saying they had never had so much fun. "Did you see the look on their faces when we said no?" "Not just no, hell no!" "We need to do more of this." "I'm going to ask the Governor to reappoint me in September. This is the most fun I've ever had on this board." And the chairman did not neglect to say several times, "See what we can do when we all stick together?"

You can appreciate why I have never told this story publicly. It may have worked. But I knew it was a risky game I was in. The full danger of what I had done

came home to me just before the board meeting had started that morning. One board member took me aside and handed me a letter and said, “As our new commissioner you need to know what’s going on behind the scenes. I want you to read this. It’s the first letter the Governor has ever sent me.” As I read my letter I stood there thinking how he and the other board members would react if they knew I had written that letter. Big lesson here: when you play for big stakes learn to keep your mouth shut about how clever you are.

If you practice subordinate leadership assiduously you are likely to rise to the top because you will be able to get so much more done than if you accomplish only what you personally have authority and power to do. Then when you are at the top two things will happen to you. First, you will have a new set of people above you to start trying to inveigle into doing some of your most difficult work for you.

And second, something peculiar will happen to you. Your subordinates and others outside your agency will begin to use you to accomplish the things they can’t get done on their own. You will become a follower of others who have more information and better ideas than you can come up with or have time to devise. Others will plumb your wants and needs and longings and begin to manipulate you. And if you are smart you will hire people who use you in that way. So much more will get done by all of you if you do. And what have you got to lose? Only control over your calendar and who sets your agenda and what meetings you have to go to.

As Frances Perkins said, we all do it. The nation’s very first press secretary, George Parker, who served under Grover Cleveland, commented on the personal rewards of exercising such subordinate artfulness in getting the public good done. George Parker

said, “One often hears of the pride which comes from the exercise of open power. But no one can exaggerate the pleasure that follows at the effect of working entirely behind the scenes when he finds his devotion to a single object thus effectively promoted by men and influences both unseen and unknown.”

And what are our personal rewards for the uses of subordinate leadership? It is only George Parker’s dubious self-satisfaction in fulfilling the public administrator’s highest quality, what Louis Brownlow called a passion for anonymity. But you will also find that by letting others get credit for your ideas you will get so much more done. And you will also soon learn that your personal role in these accomplishments will not go entirely unnoted because so much more will start to get done than you can do alone.

Clark Clifford commented on such as we in his autobiography. In a fitting tribute to public servants, he said, “Honest people who care and don’t need anything are the most precious stones of the Republic.”