

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Practical Lessons in Leadership and Communication

Lessons from US Olympic Sailing: The Importance of Adjusting Your Style

As many of you know, the US Olympic Sailing Program is a major part of my life. In addition to my professional life with The Latimer Group, I serve as the chairman for the US Olympic and Paralympic Sailing programs. I was originally appointed through the 2008 Games, but based on some success and momentum, I was asked to come back and serve again through the 2012 Games. Over the last six months, as we have transitioned our plan and our leadership team for the next Games, I have been struck by some of the challenges.

In my office in Wallingford, Connecticut, I am surrounded by reminders of Olympic Games past and future. On one corner of my desk sits a digital picture frame, scrolling through many wonderful images of my experience at the Games last summer. And on the other corner of my desk sits a clock, counting down the days, hours and minutes until the next opening ceremony in July 2012. This contrast of looking back at 2008 while also feeling the never-ending march of time towards 2012 generates a few thoughts on leadership, management and communication.

In this month's issue of *The Beacon*, I write about micro-management. In particular, I share the following: "The leader who applies a 'one-size-fits-all' management style does so at his or her own peril." I'm thinking about this a great deal right now and it's worth sharing with you.

Organizations are living, breathing organisms made up of nearly endless combinations of people, expectations, goals, motivations, challenges and needs. Every organization is different, and every time you change one or two variables you effectively change the organization. Our leadership team at US Olympic Sailing is no longer new, and therefore the pressure in the second term has increased. Our donors, sponsors, athletes and fans all have increased expectations. We have new people on our leadership team, each with his or her own style, who are working hard to meet these needs and expectations, and raise the program to an even higher level. I now realize that some of my experiences from the

last four years have served me well over the past six months. But other experiences are almost irrelevant to me now. Our reality has changed, and I must change with it.

I am constantly and reflexively frustrated when I hear leaders say they have a certain style to which everyone around them must adjust. I, too, have a certain leadership style, without question. But I am constantly re-learning the power of being flexible within the broad parameters of that style.

Here are a few specific thoughts from my recent experiences:

- As organizations mature, the people within them mature as well. They need to be managed differently, allowing for more autonomy. If certain people don't earn that autonomy, they don't belong there. They will hold back the others who are maturing.
- As a team expands, the leader needs to work harder than ever to define roles, responsibilities and expectations for everyone on the team. The larger the organization, the more the leader's role becomes about managing the others on the team. The great leader puts people into a position to succeed.
- Each time you add one new person to your team, you complicate the communication matrix within the team. Each line of communication needs to be considered and nurtured.

As you and your organization evolve and accumulate success, you need to constantly remind the group to be proud of the past but focus on the future. This has never been more true than it is today, given the current economic environment.

Regardless of your company, industry or situation, I strongly encourage you to constantly re-evaluate your own leadership and management styles. If you are able to evolve with the situation around you, your style will stand the test of time. If, instead, you require that everyone and everything adjust to you, you will greatly narrow the situations in which you can succeed.