

Lessons from Obama's Campaign Victory

Government and business organizations are different in important ways (for instance, one of them is not a democracy), but a political campaign has some useful lessons for leaders of any organization. While the balance of power in democratic governments can lead to deadlock and painfully slow consensus building (in their steady state), the “simplicity” of elections (competing bodies, a deadline, a vote, a decision) is, in a strange way, closer to the reality of business organizations (at least those in flux and who face choices which cannot be made through pure hierarchical fiat).

Think of political campaigns as mobilization efforts, to build support within a population/organization, for some direction or change. Business leaders face this anytime they push for a new commercial strategy, novel technology, acquisition, or even some change in their organizational culture. This is presumably why topics like change management and leadership are so popular with executives—formal authority sometimes can't cut it in getting things done.

So what can we learn from President Obama's campaign victory?

1. It's not just the “Vision”

In 2008, candidate Barack Obama had a unifying vision and a big mandate (roughly, restore accountability among the “have's” and ignite responsibility and a renewed sense of opportunity among the “have not's”, captured well by the ubiquitous “Yes we can” slogan). In 2012, it wasn't about the vision. It was about reality, trade-offs, and math. former President Clinton's penchant for long speeches served the Obama campaign well, as he went into much needed detail about the reality of the past 10 years, the difficult choices ahead, and why Obama's math was correct (and why the opposition's was not). The lesson is that leaders need to show the details and talk about the trade-offs, they need to offer more than goals, values, and ambitions. Leaders often fail to do this when talking about company strategy. They mistake goals for plans, ambitions for mechanisms and logics.

2. Define the Alternative

Detailing the tradeoffs means defining the alternatives, that is defining the problems and threats of alternative choices and directions, or perhaps just why they are incompatible (not so much “wrong”) with preferred directions. To be fair,

the Obama campaign had a lot of help, and long before the head-to-head campaign began. The Republican nomination process was grueling. Republican candidates did much to paint an unfavorable picture of Mitt Romney, questioning his ability to restore economic prosperity (for all) by tying him closely to the economic elites who were blamed for the 2008 financial collapse in the first place. The Obama campaign was relentless in continuing that process of defining the alternative (mostly by questioning the math). There is an important difference for how this can play out for business leaders. Business leaders can have problems “defining” the alternatives because, sometimes, they don't want to let go of those alternatives (e.g., they want faster innovation and enterprising managers, but they may be extremely tight with resources, timelines, and costs). Defining your strategy may mean relinquishing incompatible alternatives, telling people what you will not do and what the organization (or shareholders) cannot really have (within a timeframe). Too often, leaders want their cake and eat it too and resist talking about the hard choices ahead. I suspect both political campaigns faced this dilemma, but I think it's safe to say one was better at defining the trade-offs and alternatives than the other.

3. Adapt

President Obama's first debate was universally panned (even by his staunchest followers). Mitt Romney came across as confident, tireless, and capable. Obama presumably tried to give the impression that he was above the fray and (supposed) social extremism of his opponent, cranking the volume on “Presidential tone,” but instead appeared aloof, tired, and lost. Romney tacked to the middle easily. But the Obama organization adapted. You didn't have to wait for the second debate to expect a change in tact- you could gauge the new tone when Biden debated Ryan in the

Vice-Presidential debate. Adapting is not easy. It is humbling at best, an admission of a leader's failings. But it may be necessary, and only possible if a leader is genuinely gauging the audience and willing to absorb negative feedback. Leaders can learn from President Obama's self-deprecation in the aftermath of the first debate, but they can learn more from the way he adapted.

4. Consistency Matters

Adapting requires carefully discerning what to change. Changing tact is one thing, changing core beliefs or propositions is another. Change too often and people will be reluctant to follow you. Mitt Romney was widely and frequently criticized for flip-flopping on issues (the "Etch a Sketch" candidate). Integrity (in the sense of consistency) matters. I suspect political candidates, under giant media microscopes, face a lot more questioning on consistency than business leaders. Business leaders are more likely to get away with offering grand visions but not following through with consistent structural actions. But leaders, of any sort, who can build consistency (over core ideals, mechanisms, and time) should be more compelling to followers.

5. A United Coalition

No political body is perfectly monolithic. Similar ideas populate individual minds—even those belonging to the same tribe—to different extents. But it was much easier to see the divides in the GOP, between the conservative mainstream and the Tea Party movement, than the divides amongst Democrats. The message isn't that leaders must stomp out any and all divisions but that "schisms" are debilitating. Organizational leaders need to build coalitions that are (mostly) united and can authentically represent the central message all the way down the line.

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