SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE MODERNIZATION OF CONGRESS

Leadership Strategies for Congressional Leaders

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OBJECTIVE

Introduce leadership practices that will empower rank-and-file members of Congress and enable them to do the work they were elected to do, feel greater productivity and fulfillment. Members can employ these practices in committee, in caucuses, in "Dear Colleague" efforts, and in task forces or informal member groups. In taking the lead on issues, members empower themselves to do the work they were elected to do.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Leadership: The best leaders optimize the intelligence and capability of their teams. They use their intelligence in a way that provokes intelligence and capability in others. They don't lead with formal authority or threat of repercussions; they lead through influence and create an environment where people voluntarily contribute their best thinking and hold themselves accountable for doing their best work.

Contributorship: People want to contribute their full capability and do work that makes a meaningful impact. People want to be difference makers not position holders.

High-contribution environments: People tend to do their best work in a climate that is both comfortable and intense. A leader's job is to create equal measures of safety and stretch. Safety, both psychological and intellectual, invites people to do their best thinking, while stretch pulls people out of their comfort zone and normal patterns of thinking and behavior and demands people's best efforts.

PART ONE: BEST PRACTICES FOR PEER-BASED LEADERSHIP

The following are proven best practices from the corporate world that are used in complex organizations where managers and professionals must lead and achieve desired outcomes without formal authority. Members who seek to take the lead on a particular issue or cause can incorporate these practices into their game plan for action.

1. Delegate leadership and ownership

Often leaders encourage team members to "take ownership" for the group's success; however, when ownership is fuzzy, team members tend to over-rely on the team leader for decisions and action and momentum stalls and/or participants disengage. People perform best when they are given ownership for and held accountable for their work.

The best leaders do more than just let the team know what is expected of them; they give team members clearly defined portions of the work and full accountability for their domain. It is generally more effective to give majority vote in a smaller domain of responsibility than vague ownership in a larger domain.

A best practice for building ownership in a committee setting is for a chair to put committee members in charge of a particular portion of the work by giving that person the majority vote. Instead of delegating tasks, a leader can let the committee member know that they (not the leader) are in charge and accountable, and that, in that particular domain, they have 51% of the vote but 100% of the accountability. Be sure they understand what 51% (or more) means: You are in charge (hence, I am not). If we disagree, you make the call. I expect you to be the one to move things forward (I will participate but will follow your lead).

To maximize ownership and accountability, leaders should encourage individuals to volunteer to lead the portions of the work they are most interested in. This is especially important when committee members have become disengaged, dispirited and disempowered.

When building a team, look for individuals who are willing to take ownership and who can articulate the portion of the work they volunteer to lead. In addition to looking for people willing to step up and lead, look for individuals who are just as capable and willing to follow their colleagues as those colleagues take the lead on other aspects of the committee's work.

2. Encourage members to set and achieve stretch challenges

Often leaders encourage team members to tackle challenges by giving them directives or assigning work within their current capabilities. However, when leaders provide directives, people tend to fall into usual patterns of thinking and behavior that limits collaboration and vision and produces average work. People are most deeply engaged when they are given a challenge that requires them to learn, find answers, and extend their current capability.

The best leaders ask hard questions and lay out bold challenges that push people not only to think but to rethink. To answer these questions, the organization must learn. Enabled by these big questions, a vacuum is created in the space between what people know and what they need to know, and also between what they can currently do and what they need to be able to do. This vacuum creates tension and raises a need to reduce that tension.

A best practice is for leaders to shift their role from giving directives to asking questions. Leaders who want others to take ownership and tackle stretch challenges should listen more than they talk in team or committee meetings and should use their talk time to ask questions that get people thinking about possibilities and looking for solutions.

A best practice for establishing stretch challenges is to create a "mission impossible" challenge—a hard, concrete challenge with multiple variables. The best challenges are intriguing puzzles that need creative solutions. These types of puzzles have constraints such as, "How do we accomplish X by Y date, with only Z resources available to us?" In the business world such a challenge might be: How can we change an Electric Vehicle battery in five minutes and also ensure the process is user friendly, location independent, car independent and low cost? When applied to members who are taking the lead on a policy issue within a committee or caucus, an example challenge might be: *How do we get this issue on* *the agenda within the next 12 months? Or, what would we need to do to get leadership to consider this initiative during the current session? How can we get a floor vote on this issue by the end of this session?*

When leaders offer a challenge and then create a culture of belief, people step up and contribute beyond what they thought possible.

3. Create a tough but healthy debate

Rigorous debate can speed collective action and unify a team. However, leaders and teams typically rush to debate when they have strong opinions on heated topics or attempt to debate topics or philosophies rather than well-framed questions or options. This type of debate engenders divisiveness, drives further entrenchment, and avoids the real issues. People will do their best thinking during debate if the issues are framed well and defined, the questions of the debate are clear, and participants have time to gather the right information.

The best leaders use debate selectively, for the highest stakes issues that require diverse perspectives. It is conducted like surgery: used for very specific problems, has clear objectives, isolates issues, entails specific prep and post-op work, and is time bound.

Leaders can use these practices to help a team prepare for a healthy debate:

1. *Frame the boundaries of the issue*. This includes: A) The Question: What is the decision to be made? What are we choosing between? B) The Why: Why is this an important question to answer? Why does the decision warrant collective input and debate? What happens if it is not addressed? C) The Who: Who will be involved in making the decision? Who will give input? D) The How: How will the final decision be made? Will it be made by majority rule? Consensus? Or will you (or someone else) make the final decision after others provide input and recommendations?
2. *Set expectations*. Establish the rules of engagement so people feel equal parts safety (to speak up) and stretch (to ensure a rigorous debate). Give participants time to prepare and ask them to come ready with A) a point of view and B) evidence.
3. *Invite observers*. This encourages those involved in the debate to work collaboratively and transparently. Further, it teaches good debate practice to the observers.

Leaders should use simple and light procedures to ensure the debate is rigorous but not divisive, informative, and fun. Instead of following complicated and formal debate practices, a leader can lead debate with these “four asks”:

1. *Ask the Hard Question.* Ask the question that will get at the core of the issue and confront underlying assumptions. Pose the question to your team and then stop. Instead of following up with your views, ask for theirs.
2. *Ask for Evidence.* When someone offers an opinion, don’t let it rest on anecdote. Ask for the evidence. Look for more than one data point. Ask them to identify a cluster of data or a trend. Make it a norm, so people come into debates armed with data.

3. *Ask Everyone.* Reach beyond the dominant voices to gather and hear all views and all data. You might find that the softer voices belong to the analytical minds who are often most familiar with and objective about the data. You may not need to literally ask everyone, but be sure to ask enough people to invite diverse thinking.
4. *Ask People to Switch Positions*. When consensus or camps begin to form, ask participants to argue the issue from another point of view or from the opposite position. This switch of perspectives reduces personal attachment and increases collective ownership.

While more formal procedures might be used on the floor, this form of debate could be utilized by teams of colleagues who are trying to move an issue forward or within a committee or caucus. I understand that the Modernization Committee has also recommended Oxford Style Debates on the House floor. These practices can be used by the debate leaders and teams as they prepare to take their debate to the floor.

4. Utilize each colleague's unique strength

While it's natural to assign work based on someone's official job responsibilities, past experience, or skill, the best leaders engage people's strengths because they understand that people operate at their best when their unique talents and skills are seen, utilized and genuinely appreciated by their leaders and colleagues. Specifically, the best leaders see and engage the native genius of others.

A native genius is something that people do, not only exceptionally well, but absolutely naturally. It is something people typically do easily and freely. What people do easily, they do better than anything else they do, but they don't need to apply extraordinary effort to the task. They get results that are head-and-shoulders above others', but they do it without exhaustion. What people do freely, they do without condition. They don't need to be paid or rewarded to do it and often don't need to be asked. It is something that gives them inherent satisfaction, and they offer their capability voluntarily, even ardently.

Leaders can use the following practices to find and utilize the native genius of team members.

1. Find someone's native genius by carefully observing the person in action, looking for spikes of authentic enthusiasm and a natural flow of energy. Ask: What does this person do…better than anything else they do? … better than people around them? … without effort? …without being asked? …readily without pay? …in all aspects of their life, including both work and home?
2. Talk with the individual and agree on a short name that describes their native genius (e.g., "synthesizing complex ideas" or "building bridges" or "identifying root causes").
3. Identify roles or tasks that will utilize and extend this person's genius. In conversation with the individual, allow them to identify the best ways to utilize their genius.
4. Meet as a team or committee to discuss each person's native genius. Focus on one person at a time, inviting everyone to share their observation of that individual's native genius. Agree on a name that describes their gift (these names can be fun!) Discuss ways the team can utilize (and further develop) each person's native genius.

5. Build swift trust among unlikely allies

A number of innovative organizations use a vision exercise to establish shared purpose at the outset of a cross-functional collaboration. In this exercise, the team writes a mock press release (or newspaper or magazine article). The mock press release announces the outcome of the collaboration, including a statement of the problem, the work the team did to solve the problem, and the transformative effect of the solution. The mock press release typically includes aspirational (and at this point fictitious) quotes from key constituents. The group then uses the statement as both an aspiration and check point for their joint work.

Additionally, having a new team begin their work by identifying the native genius of each team member helps build an environment of respect and trust.

This is an exercise that members could engage in as a team, with staff assigned the task of capturing the discussion and memorializing it into a mock press release or statement.

PART TWO: IMPLEMENTATION PRACTICES

The following are several methods commonly used in the private sector that can be utilized to introduce and reinforce new leadership practices among rank-and-file members of Congress.

Training/Orientation: Introduce a leadership training module into the freshman orientation. The program could focus on "Leading Among Equals: Principles of Effective Peer-Based Leadership" and include a number of the leadership practices mentioned above.

Case Studies: Identify Representatives who have demonstrated effective bi-partisan and peer-based leadership and then create video-based case studies to share with existing members and use during the orientation process. Continue to create additional case studies to help others aspire to lead in similar ways. Allow members to share these videos with their constituents on their websites. An example might be Reps. Upton and DeGette discussing their joint bipartisan leadership on the 21st Century Cures Act, which the committee highlighted at its July 20, 2021 hearing.

Mentors and Reverse Mentors: Establish a mentoring program that matches incoming representatives with current (or former) representatives who have demonstrated the right leadership practices. In addition to having senior representatives offer insights to incoming representatives, introduce reverse mentoring in which the less experienced members mentor the more experienced members. Newer representatives can teach new approaches and technologies and provide insights that reflect latest trends.

Awards: Encourage committee leaders or members to spotlight desired partnering and leadership behavior by creating awards that can be given out "on-the-spot" without seeking prior approval. Awards could be purely symbolic (a lapel pin or sign on the door). For example, awards could include themes such as:

> *Full House Award:* Peer recognition given across party to those members who display bi-partisan collaboration

The Assist: Recognition from a committee leader for individuals who help other committee members and set up others for success.

Transparency: Encourage students to attend open committee meetings (e.g., middle school field trips). Incorporate teaching moments in which the representatives share the challenges and opportunities of leading among peers. Enable students to become active observers of civic and congressional leadership in action by providing students the criteria for good leadership. For example, provide students with a list (or bingo card) of the desired leadership and collaborative behavior to note the presence or absence of behavior and then discuss as a class.

Seating Configuration: Create greater collaboration opportunities (and send strong symbolic messages) by establishing an alphabetical seating arrangement rather than the current seating configuration in which each party sits across the aisle from the other.