

Leadership and The Courage to Confront Reality

by Charles Dayton

One of the central issues facing municipalities is organizational execution. Good plans are essential but useless if they don't translate into meaningful results. In the post game interviews with our Wyoming Cowboys, how many times do they attribute a loss to failure to execute or a win to the effective implementation of the game plan? For a number of years, I have worked with private and public sector firms to develop their strategic and tactical plans. Bright people put together thoughtful and sometimes visionary plans, but the vision and subsequent results sometimes fail to resemble each other. One corporate client said, *there isn't a 5% difference between our plans and our competitors – the difference is our ability to execute.*

The key difference has always been a combination of good leadership and good management. For a number of years, I have conducted research on the attributes of leaders who execute and those who don't. One of the core leadership attributes is **the ability to confront reality**. In his book, *Good To Great*, Jim Collins describes an interview with Admiral Jim Stockdale. Admiral Stockdale was the highest-ranking military officer in the Hanoi Hilton POW camp from 1965 to 1973. Stockdale endured torture and the difficulties of leading other prisoners during their horrific experience. Jim Collins asked the Admiral, "Who didn't make it out?" Admiral Stockdale replied, "The optimists - they were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart." Jim Collins articulated a concept he referred to as the Stockdale Paradox –

Retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties and at the same time confront the most brutal facts of your current reality.

Confronting reality requires courage and discipline and certain industries seem to require it more than others. How long does it take for a company to go out of business versus how long does it take community to become a ghost town or lose its identity? Generally, organizations most dependent upon external forces are better at confronting reality or they quickly cease to exist.

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY

We like to think that we are realists and that our elected positions are the result of the universal recognition of our good judgment. There are, however, very human characteristics that get in the way of good decision-making and reality-based planning. These characteristics include:

EGO - When we become our ideas and our ideas are challenged by people or new information, how do we tend to respond? There is tremendous danger in screening information through an egotistical perspective. Can you think of a project or initiative that has failed because someone's ego got in the way? Military history is replete with disasters where the warnings were there, but the leader wouldn't listen to information that didn't support their conclusions. On election night 2000, I watched with fascination the media's attempt to make sense of a chaotic situation. About 2:00 AM, when a winner could still not be determined, one of the respected national commentators invited a legal analyst on the program. The analyst looked like he just graduated from college and clearly not prepared to be on national TV. Condescendingly, the commentator asked the analyst what he thought would happen now. The young analyst went on to outline the state and federal legal fights that the nation would soon experience. The commentator visibly sneered at the prediction. The analyst's predictions were correct. Many leadership theorists suggest that **humility** is the first leadership virtue.

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS – One of Cokeville's top priorities is to increase housing. We formed a committee to explore this issue and set a time frame for creating a new development. We had more good intentions than experience. After our milestones and deadlines had passed, we were frustrated with our lack of progress. A professional developer provided some valuable insight in a recent meeting – take your budget and time frame and double them. Using that criterion, we are actually on schedule. Often, a council will set goals for the community without studying the question – does our city have the resources to achieve this goal? Does it conflict with other priorities? Does it have the required support? Charles Coonradt observed, "Nothing is impossible to those who are not responsible for achieving it".

WISHFUL THINKING – This certainly relates to unrealistic expectations. Undisciplined leaders set goals unchecked by reality. We humans tend to make decisions emotionally rather than rationally. We then assemble the data to support our decisions.

DENIAL – The first step towards positive change – personally or as a community – is to acknowledge reality. Recognition might include: I am an alcoholic, my children don't really trust me, fellow council members view me as contentious, our youth don't want to stay in Wyoming, we can only take on 1 significant project a year, we don't have the resources to implement the recommendations from our town assessment. Strategic leadership is responsive leadership. Truth is a necessary starting point for creating plans that address the real issues.

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LACK OF COURAGE - Confronting reality is not the path of least resistance. I find it fascinating to watch the emergency room reality shows. When the doctor enters the family waiting room does she candy-coat her feedback to family and loved-ones? No, she communicates directly, based on her best judgment, so that the family can establish realistic expectations. Confronting reality is often not popular and requires tremendous courage. The military expects its members to communicate with candor in all situations and with all levels. The risks of the alternative are significant.

We can't solve problems we don't understand. We can't solve problems we are unwilling to see. We can solve problems we avoid.

OUR CASE STUDY- Being on the Cokeville city council has provided a forum to test the leadership theories I have studied for the past 15 years. Our leadership challenges are significant. At one time, Cokeville was the wealthiest community, per capita, in Wyoming. That changed dramatically in the last century. A history paper written in the 1950's stated that Cokeville had remained in relatively unchanged state, economically, for the preceding twenty years. Fifty-six years later, little has changed. In spite of a slow economic decline, we have a remarkable community. Our schools, sports programs, ranches, government and religious life are exceptional. We have good hunting, fishing and a great ski resort. A high percentage of our youth graduate, provide international service and excel in college.

Cokeville's primary exports are beef, sheep and leaders. Eighty-five percent of our adult population of employable age work in agriculture, government, education or are retired. People in these sectors typically don't have the disposable income to launch new businesses. Private sector employees commute to Kemmerer, Rock Springs and Africa to provide for their families. People often pay a significant price for the privilege of living in Cokeville.

Our business and entrepreneurial class is very small. Consequently, private capital has not been invested in the community for over half a century. Our leadership challenge is this – how do we confront this reality, develop a shared vision for the future and collaborate to become a place that represents the best attributes of a Wyoming ranching community? Admiral Stockdale's challenge is shared by leaders throughout the state – to retain faith that we will prevail in the end while confronting the brutal facts. Effective leaders have the discipline and courage to confront reality. This confrontation is the starting point to effective execution.

Charles Dayton is a Council Member in the Town of Cokeville and has provided leadership classes to some of the nation's most respected organizations, including Ford Motor Company, General Electric and Federal Express. He has an appreciation for good therapy, but is passionate about practical leadership practices that produce meaningful results. He will present the General Session at the WAM Winter Workshop on Friday, February 24, 2006. For information, including registration, check out our website at www.wyomuni.org under "Events/WAM Winter Workshop."