Elevating Leadership through the Humanities

After a robust search process involving polling members and many meetings and interviews, our very large non-profit (multi-million dollar budget) hired a dynamic, visionary leader to take charge. He succeeded two co-executives who had been around for about 20 years, did not get along, and had become set in their ways and resistant to change. The organization risked atrophy and decline and even, ultimately, demise if we did not reverse course quickly.

The new leader proved to be an excellent choice. He was full of ideas, truly articulate, and very personable. He was a family man whose wife and children became part of our organizational family. He was also interesting and just a bit rough around the edges for a sophisticated Washington cohort including lots of the powerful elite. His wardrobe was very obviously taken from the rack at the Rack or similar, not particularly well put-together, until one Board member took him to J Crew/Banana Republic and suddenly he was Beau Brummel. Every once in a while he would surprise us by "letting loose." At a Halloween celebration he came as a hula dancer a la South Pacific ("There is Nothing Like a Dame") but "at work" he was always wholly professional.

So imagine the surprise of organizational volunteer leaders when he announced that he was gay and would be divorcing his wife of 25 years (though they remain good friends). However, he pledged both privately and publicly that he was committed to being the "leader of the organization who happens to be gay," and not the "gay leader of the organization." It took very little time for volunteer leaders to realize that both his personal liberation as a gay man and his political liberation as a gay advocate were taking precedence over his mission to lead the organization. The ideas that were so exciting and creative were handed over to others to implement. If something didn't go well, he could and did both say he accepted responsibility and make clear that in fact he was not to blame.

Staff tensions ran high, and there were angry words with volunteer leaders who counseled him that he needed to focus on the job.

When Trump was elected President in 2016, he wrote a sharply critical and highly political condemnation of Trump that ran in a gay community publication. He put his name, his title and the name of the organization on the by-line. Although he stated that he was sure no straight member of the organization would ever see the piece, it was of course widely circulated.

Gradually over months he caused a very delicate but unspoken rift in the organization, not over his being gay, but over how to deal with the fact that he was failing to perform at the level the organization required of its leader to sustain its growth and vitality. Some wanted to find a "work-around" to keep him on board because it was so significant that our organization had made a highly publicized commitment to someone who had made such a courageous declaration. Others felt he and we needed to structure a transition to new leadership that would honor his contribution to the organization. Others simply didn't want to deal with the situation at all--hoping it would resolve itself in time. After initially resisting any transition, the leader agreed to talk with a professional counselor and at the same time was assured he would not suffer financially or professionally if he volunteered to move on. It was then that he announced his desire to pursue other opportunities and gave a one-year notice of his resignation. This allowed him to draw his six-figure salary without any assigned duties for the year. Other professionals took over and began to build on his ideas.

The episode was resolved at great expense to the organization, and the loss of about two years of forward progress. Unfortunately one person who left because he could not work with the leader was a well-loved veteran administrator who had a knack for raising millions of dollars to support the organization. It took three development employees to fill his shoes.

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