

Hampton City Council Retreat Follow-Up

Suzanne, Zin and I marvel at the journey the Hampton City Council, its Mayor, its City Manager, City Clerk and other city officials have taken this past year. It is remarkable. You all have displayed emotional intelligence, team decision-making and leadership that is special.

But we also pointed out that you have added two new members, which means there is a new social system in play.

However, when we gathered more recently here in July we sensed the depth and variety of styles, thinking, feeling and leading that could produce conditions for successes. We were also greatly impressed with the energy and even spirituality that we saw.

We think much of the reason we were impressed was your willingness to continue to “retreat” where you take time to come together to study, discuss and learn how to be an excellent decision-making team. The skills of establishing relationships and processes to do City Council work are much different than the skills and relationships it takes to be a good politician and get elected.

Being a politician who gets elected is mostly about convincing the public you are an individual, who is better than the opponents you ran against in the election. Being on a decision-making team is what the actual job is. It is about working with seven other elected people and professional staff to get the work of the City Charter and numerous city, state and federal laws done.

Retreats are one of the ways this City Council take time to look at itself, its work processes, its vision, and mission and how it uses its time. It is the very tough work of becoming and being a team in today's crazy world. Let's look some at that world and the real-world context that the Hampton City Council faces each day.

We look now, and what do we see? A rate of change and complexity we have never experienced. Maybe it is not unexpected that amidst this environment we see a reaction--a foundational desire to connect to our identity—an anchor in our lives. We can find the complexity and an accelerated pace of change in the disciplines of administration or operational world (think “smart cities, for example). On the other hand, in the political arena we find the challenge of grounding our lives in a seemingly stable, simplistic world that often produces “us and them.” It

comes to a head in the contemporary version of that enduring theme—politics and administration—producing new leadership challenges.

Last year I talked some about the daily paradoxes each of you face as Hampton tries to balance today's political challenges of identity with the often-opposite push-back dynamics of administrative operations. So much today in trying to bridge the gap between the immediacy and emotion of the politics of the moment and the need for professional administration to find lasting solutions and sustainability to city and neighborhood problems.

Bridging the gap is the essential prerequisite to effective governance. Political acceptability focuses on what it is we want to accomplish and the dynamics around building support among competing political initiatives. But, can we do what we want to accomplish, and can we do it over time? An assumption is that this process of connecting politics and administration begins with the political (vision, mission, policy initiative). But, in our experience that is not always the case. Frequently the process of improving a water treatment plant or virtually any other infra-structure investment is initiated by a need—an element of administrative sustainability—and then the question of political will is engaged.

There is nothing new in setting out this dynamic back and forth relationship. We understand that without effective bridges between political

and administrative arenas, little is accomplished, and trust in public servants—both political and professional--erodes and the value of government itself can be questioned. Acknowledging the tension surrounding the need to maintain integrity in political and administrative arenas, something is happening that is making the gap between these two arenas—these two mindsets—more difficult to bridge, fostering new leadership challenges.

To better understand the challenges faced in connecting political acceptability and administrative sustainability, we propose the metaphor of the bridge, stimulating several observations. For example, there is not one bridge; each policy initiative or administrative/operational need may have its own bridge which may or may not be constructed on a sound foundation and connect political and administrative worlds. Some bridges will be longer than others, suggesting a longer time span to make connections. Some will be wider, suggesting more parties on the bridge and maybe more potential for “accidents.” Some bridges will be both long and wide. And some may lead to nowhere!

Traditionally, in council manager government we expect the city manager to work the bridge. This expectation is captured in the familiar graphic of a governing body and administrative staff separated by a city

manager. But as the bridges multiply and become longer and wider and invite more engagement, the work often leads to dead ends. The bridging task becomes more challenging.

Leadership Challenges

The *first challenge* focuses on roles and responsibilities, particularly of department heads or the equivalent. We used to describe the city manager and department heads collectively as a “management team.” We do not hear that concept much anymore. The concept of a “leadership team” has replaced it. The difference is captured in yet another metaphor. Effective leadership team members are “bi-lingual.” They can speak across the bridge, understanding the constellations of political logic and community dynamics as well as the administrative mindset. Some leadership team members will be fluent and effective at translation; others may be just learning which can start with simple understanding. In the process of learning, leadership team members must avoid “political capture,” where they are seen as favoring one political group over another, thus losing credibility with the governing body as a whole. And on the other hand, they must avoid losing the confidence of those in the organization who are bringing a more technical mindset and expectations to the governance process.

And, as the bridging process becomes more challenging—in part because more third parties are involved—community allies to the leadership team and the bridge building process must be acknowledged, sought out, and nurtured. For example, a “smart city” initiative may gain more political acceptability if it is endorsed and led by a third party vendor that has credibility and visibility beyond an individual jurisdiction. Or a traffic engineer consultant who is bi-lingual can become a valued asset when it comes to a controversial traffic control proposal.

The third-party inclusion in the gap metaphor leads to our *second leadership challenge*— the dimensions of the problems local governments face increasingly extend beyond existing political boundaries. This places a premium on cross sector and inter-jurisdictional collaboration. Part of this challenge is that most often the required collaboration presents itself without the benefit of a clear authority structure and with possible tension between goals, objectives and approaches of the parties. And, it is not as if only one interjurisdictional/sectoral challenge exists at a time. Boundary challenging issues like environment, transportation, economic development, health care and so on do not present themselves neatly and sequentially. At least at the start, they are messy, problems without

definition, and with many parties taking initiative to construct bridges (Heifetz, 2003).

Our *third challenge* focuses on citizen engagement. Traditional forms of connecting with citizens have become “artifacts” of a time before social media when people looked to their representatives as “trustees.” Everyone seems to agree that a new, “assertive citizen” has emerged. As a result, new forms of engagement are emerging and combined with the assertive citizen the lines between administrative and political work becomes blurry. For example, is a community budget prioritization project a political or administrative activity? What role do we expect the budget/finance director to play in this kind of exercise?

While more and more avenues exist for citizens to express their views, few forums can be found that require citizens to confront the consequences of those views in a deliberate fashion. In other words, as we see ourselves moving from a trustee model to assertive citizenship and as a representative role for elected officials becomes more common than the trustee role, deliberative engagement becomes essential. Today’s spectrum of engagement seems to range from an “informing” public purpose to an “empowering” purpose.

Each of our three challenges—roles and responsibilities, structures, and engagement processes--invites the question, “What is the profile of 21st century leadership?”

These attributes range from the symphonic skills made famous by Jim Collins in his writings to Harlan Cleveland who wrote about “leading when no one is in charge”. Cleveland said one of the most compelling characteristics of effective leaders is the ability to foster engagement in a continuing search for information that gets to an actual decision. Ultimately, Cleveland thought government processes needed to help create the trust that empowers real leaders to act

People like Ray Gindroz, an urban architect, who has done work for Hampton, and taught at Hampton University, and Daniel Pink say that design is important in every decision. In fact, they often say design will be a determining factor in the final outcome.

One of the compelling characteristics of effective leaders is the ability to foster engagement in a continuing search for information to help decision making. Harlan Cleveland stated that the real value proposition for public sector leaders is “How do you get everyone in on the act and still get action?” Particularly during the Great Recession we observed leaders who engaged stakeholders and searched for information but knew that in the

best case the information would be incomplete and the options varied. However, effective leaders had an intuitive sense of when it was the time to act. Again, we confront the issue of trust which is embedded in our leadership profile. Are you trusted to act? Are you seen as a person who acts in self-interest? Or, are you seen as one who acts for the good of the unit? If self-interest is perceived, it is likely that those working for you will try to protect themselves from your power. If seen as working in the greater good, those working for you are likely to be attracted to your exercise of authority and influence.

The Power of Questions

In contrast to many popular descriptions, leadership in today's world is more about asking the right questions than having the answers. As complexity and change increase, confronting conventional wisdom and asking probative questions is an important leadership dimension of the 21st Century. In fact, Donald Schon (1987) suggests succinctly that the difference between a professional and an amateur is that the amateur runs out of questions faster!

Reflecting upon these leadership characteristics, two observations come to mind.

The first observation is that Leadership Team as an evolving concept is revealed in the number of metaphors we have used to describe the profile— symphonic, design literacy, and architecture of success, for example. Commonly, metaphors are used when a literal description of what we are trying to portray will not suffice. And this is what the “leadership team” concept is. It is a term used to capture, at this changing point in time, the work that is necessary at the upper levels in Hampton government.

Our second observation is that leadership puts a premium on personal qualities and predispositions—what some people call Emotional Intelligence. Emotional Intelligence is the ability to be aware of your own and others’ emotions, given them the capacity to better handle interpersonal work and citizen relationships.

It is true these traits are natural and inborn, but they can also be learned, fostered, developed and honed.

Five qualities stand out.

Emphathy. That is the ability to understand how another person is feeling. Sometimes it is called “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes”. You can practice this by making a concerted effort to visualize yourself in the other person’s position.

Self-awareness is the second quality. Do you know the situations that bring out the best in yourself? What about the worst? Self-awareness is having an understanding of your own feelings and active knowledge of the history you bring to the table.

We all know to be positive, the third quality, though we often let it slip away. It is not just saying you are positive, it is being positive in difficult times. Practice it by being clear how you feel when you are facing difficult decisions. Share the positive aspects that you see or hear.

Consideration is a fourth quality. Caring and consideration can go a long way to creating a cohesive, high-functioning team. Taking the time to acknowledge others, noting their contributions and making sure they're heard can be invaluable in drawing people to you and bring out their best work. Take the time to check in with others, especially when the pressure is off and there's time to talk.

The fifth quality is authenticity. No leader can apply any of the tenants of emotional intelligence without being sincere. Authenticity is critical in leadership---be an open book with your intentions and your agenda. Your integrity is paramount in your reputation as a leader, so only say what you mean and don't make promises you cannot keep. Take every opportunity to practice your emotional intelligence skills- at work, home, in social

settings and community situations. the presence of a fluid distribution of organizational power due to changing environments, and in the absence of guidance from the past, one is very likely to draw upon personal talents and skills and cognitive maps as guides to action. The overriding leadership quality in the present dynamic local government environment is self-awareness. What the leader convinces herself is required for her unit/organization to be successful must not be confused with what the leader needs personally in order to be successful.

In conclusion, organizationally we need to develop better structures that facilitate translating leadership to results and more and more opportunities for upcoming leaders to engage in guided development----- that is focused on the future and questioning whether the execution of today's approaches actually leads to a desired future.

A leadership team exists only if four conditions are met. First, a shared vision must be crafted and embraced by those who can influence implementation. Second, adoption of a set of goals or outcomes designed for collective impact must be evident; third is mutual accountability for the goals and outcomes that have been agreed upon; and fourth is self-awareness and humility.