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Briefing Notes:
Small "L" Leadership Behaviors

In the leadership literature, stories abound about individuals taking heroic actions, often at some risk, to triumph over the business as usual culture. In complex organizations these stories can be de-motivating as they suggest a "dare to be great" image of leadership that is often at variance with most people's experience of their daily work. Particularly in academic medicine, the complexity and opacity of the organization and how it works can make individuals feel helpless (Seligman, 1992) to make a difference beyond their own lab, their clinical work, or their own teaching. Thus people participate ambivalently in institutional work or in formal or ad hoc roles and groups. In this note, we describe small "L" leadership behaviors. They can begin locally in one's role and groups and when sustained they can create "small wins" (Weick, 1984) that can make a significant difference to the climate of a work group or a team. These facts on the ground, in turn, can catalyze others who interact with it.

Meetings

Set norms. Early in a meeting's or group's life, setting norms and enforcing them creates a vitalizing climate for work. Examples are: starting on time, letting the leader know about absences, having a member brief someone who has to be absent to keep the group up to speed, ending on time with clear next steps, etc.

Attend to transitions into meetings. As the leader, where have you just come from? How much time have did you have to collect your thoughts and get centered on what you want to have happen (like surgical scrubbing before an operation)? Where have others come from and how might briefly checking-in be relevant to the work the group has to take up?

Set the pace, tone, and climate. Take a minute to set the tone. Think musically about the flow—take time on important issues, move quickly on less significant issues. Watch the engagement, invite people into the conversation who are hanging back, check if the conversation feels flat. Interrupt a pattern of hub (you as leader) and spokes (each individual members) versus a conversation in the round.

Use silence. Requesting participants take a few moments quietly to jot down their ideas for addressing an issue greatly increases overall thoughtfulness and the diversity of ideas. Making each person do their own thinking helps control counter punchers who specialize in hanging back and then critiquing other's ideas. Silent individual work helps people transition into the meeting from what they were doing before. During the meeting, use silence after posing a key question to pull others into the conversation.

Use subgroups. Especially with large groups (over 12) and even in smaller groups, it helps to invite people to converse informally in smaller groups as part of an overall working session. Then pull themes across the groups (not full reports from each). Straw polling can be a quick way to check if the theme or idea from one group was talked about in other groups.

Invite caucuses of similar people to explore differences. Talking in a homogenous group in a context where you see other perspectives working in parallel often creates more edge in a conversation and sharpens some of the differences before they are engaged and worked through with cross-group conversations. For example, in a working session on translational research, there might be moments when it is useful to have subgroups of clinicians and scientists as well as mixed sessions.

Use straw polling directly with larger groups. Polling the group or a board on various options in play can help uncover a group's need for more conversation. It can also be powerful when people do not know one another, for example, at new faculty orientation, to invite people to indicate some aspects of their background as clinicians, basic scientists, administrators, etc.

Match space and setting to the type of meeting. Pick spaces that fit with the task. Smaller rooms can energize groups. Subgroups working in parallel in a large room can be more energizing than if they are all in their own spaces. Fixed seats and typical boardroom setups can create a more formal dynamic that inhibits easy exchange and leads to more speaking to be heard than to engage.

Facilitate thematically not by listing who wants to talk. When groups take up important issues, often many want to jump into the debate. Leaders too often identify by sequence the next three to four speakers to allocate the scarce airtime. But the effect fragments the group's thinking. The third or fourth person had their thought before listening to the contributors two and three so it undermines any building on each other's ideas. Instead, ask who wants to join and extend the initial idea or position, assuring others that next the group will take up another point of view and the person who was eager to get in can introduce that theme.

Strategic Inquiry

Time travel. Invite people to think about the operative time horizon of an issue, how long before there would be real changes in practices, and how would it be different from the past and what might be similar (Gilmore and Shea, 1997).

Invite skepticism. At the beginning of a working group on an initiative, ask participants to think of the toughest question a skeptical friend might ask them about the work of the task force. Then have them ask their question of a neighbor so the group gets practice in responding to some of the predictable questions that will come to them. The set can be made into a FAQ that can be used on a website or to help brief others who need to understand the aim of the group. This reinforces their obligation to communicate with their back home constituencies.

Imagine how an initiative or change might fail. By inviting your colleagues to think about possible modes of failure and the appropriate prophylaxis sharpens attention on the areas of vulnerability in a plan.

In framing the task, invite people to link relevant experience. Silos in the mind prevent people from accessing relevant data, experience, and analogies to the work.

Infiltrate dead meetings versus incur the cost of adding yet another ad hoc meeting. Many meetings in academia are routine and deadening rather than vitalizing. If you can negotiate access and time on the agenda and can engage the group on a key initiative, it can give you information, new ideas, new allies, and save you the effort of organizing special consultative processes to engage others (Hirschhorn and May, 2000).

Think of issue jujitsu. When you look at your calendar each day, forget for a minute why they want to see you and associate how they might be helpful for your strategic agenda—perhaps linking you with a key supporter, giving you a piece of intelligence on a proposed action, etc. This harvests more value from an investment of your scarce time you have already made in agreeing to see this person.

Actively practice important negotiations or requests with key stakeholders in an important initiative. It's easy to stay abstract and be too wrapped up in any change effort that one is championing. By working with a close colleague to practice the conversation, one can get a sharper sense of the key concerns, what might be the other's key concerns, and how better to make the case (CFAR, 2004).

Organizational work

Sense and test how people see your role. Be explicit about what are and are not your responsibilities, the constraints you have, and help people see the difference between your personal views and what the role may require of you in particular decisions. Educate them about how the issues look from your vantage point.

Develop a shared language/short hand for clarifying roles and responsibilities. Academia puts little stock in job descriptions and, in any case, much of the real work takes place in ad hoc assignments, delegations, etc., that are often communicated quickly. Working to get a shared short hand that indicates if someone is responsible for taking the lead, versus being consulted or informed or having an approval at the end of the process helps people be accountable for the work. Invite others to talk about how they want to be involved in a particular process or decision (Gilmore, 2004, ch. 12).

Distribute the work of worry to get more engagement. When reviewing large documents, such as board books, or strategic plans, assign different members sections of the overall material and tell them they will be expected to take the lead in the discussion of those parts. This gets the entire document well reviewed (instead of only the first part), and distributes leadership, and engages the receiving group rather than only listening to the authors of the sections present.

Use and hold accountable the standing structure. E-mail makes direct communication to all from a leader too easy, bypassing the intermediate structure. Consider transmittal of key documents, strategic plans via the supervisory roles so that each leader has to explicate the implications of the policy or plan for his or her specific unit (Gimore and Krantz, 1991).

Consultation processes

Ask people for summative thoughts at the end of meetings or working sessions. Given how fragmented everyone's attention is, when they have been focusing for an hour or a half-day in rich conversations, it can be a powerful capstone to ask people to take a minute to jot down one or two key priorities from the conversation, and one or two issues that they think was under tended to. This gives the group much more information to guide the next steps.

Encourage inquiry rather than battling assertions. Academic norms hone critical skills more than inquiry. Research on top-team meetings suggest that few ask genuine questions to draw out each others thinking versus advocating their own position. Try answering a question with a question, as the question is often just a polite way of signaling interest in an issue rather than really soliciting an answer. Ask people what is behind their question.

Invite people to give their thinking though the safety of reporting on the views of others. Often people find it easier to give negative information indirectly, for example, a division chief saying that faculty will resist a new policy, when he or she may share those views. By inviting people to share their sense of the views of groups with whom they have contact such as patients, faculty in their divisions, they can both give their views of that group but also can safely surface some of their concerns as if they came from this group.

Invite people to see themselves through others' eyes. After a group has been working, it can be powerful to ask participants how a key stakeholder group, if listening in, would see their blind spots or the strengths of the ideas they have developed. This prevents self-absorption and keeps the group open to the diversity of thinking outside of their membership.

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