

A Narrative on Leadership

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I entered leadership consulting by helping corporations and federal agencies become more productive by reducing the unnecessary stresses they faced in the workplace. My Ph.D. research and dissertation studied stress-prone individuals and from it emerged my definition of stress: *“Psychological stress occurs when there is a mismatch between an individual’s coping skills and the demands of the environment.”*

This definition not only enabled me to create the *ABCs of Stress*® but opened the door to the process of matching employee strengths to the workplace setting in order to increase productivity. That connected me to psychologist/researcher Dr. Roger Birkman, founder of Birkman International, Inc. and we have remained co-conspirators in this field of leadership and stress management for about 30 years. This weekend he celebrates his 95th birthday and gives me hope for lasting a few more years!

Our first Birkman client was a “struggling” team led by a man named Tom Landry following a decade of 5 appearances in the Super Bowl. I learned that being “world champions” only twice in five attempts was not considered good enough for the Dallas Cowboys head coach. Nor was the mentoring of two future head coaches, Mike Ditka and Dan Reeves, with whom we worked closely implementing the Birkman Method®.

One of our most productive organizational clients was a massive defense contractor whose HR department was a little surprised to hear me say in an interview that *I didn’t think an organization should pay for something that did not work.*

Following a pilot project that “worked,” that is it resulted in well over 90% of participants experiencing a reduction in stress, with the individual improvement averaging ten percentile points between pre and posttests, we were welcomed into a relationship that continued for next three years.

But we soon learned that reducing stress seemed to come down to three options:

- **Changing Environments** (finding an environment that was a better match for the individual)
- **Changing THE Environment** (attempting to influence change in the current environment that results in a better match)
- **Changing Self** (improving one’s coping skills to gain a better match)

The Birkman Method® [today’s seminar topic] identifies (a) one’s *strengths*, (b) what one *needs* from his/her environment in order to maximize these strengths, (c) one’s *interests* which also provides motivational insight, and finally, (d) predictive *stress* behaviors when these needs are not met, *equipped management and employees to find the most productive setting for success.* The 20th Century emphasis on leadership was dominated by a focus on *traits* of leaders. The “Great Man” theory (with apologies to 20th Century female leaders) that identified high profile military, social and political figures, pointed to icons like Napoleon, Gandhi, and Lincoln.

By the mid-20th Century this emphasis on traits of leaders was challenged by researchers who began to recognize the importance of the situation itself, the culture, setting or environment in which leaders functioned. They pointed out that the setting of leadership could make or break a leader's effectiveness, that it was not so much the "quality" of a leader as the "relationship" between leader and people. They admitted that traits remained important, but were not everything that makes a leader effective.

The best example I have of the importance of the setting or "environment" came from a unique opportunity I was given observe on several occasions the life of a leader residing in The White House.

Jimmy Carter came into the presidency of the United States in 1977 with a distinguished career as a naval officer and governor. He was a talented campaigner and was viewed as a breath of fresh air to a country mired in the aftermath of a military defeat in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal that led to the resignation of Richard Nixon and a presidential pardon by his successor, Gerald Ford.

Jimmy Carter possessed the common traits in leaders Peter Northouse describes as Intelligence, Self-confidence, Determination, Integrity and Sociability. However, there were factors in the environment that made a majority of Americans view his leadership as a failure. President Carter's promise to the American people was that he would never lie to them, and the born-again Baptist, so far as we can determine, never did. But he entered the White House during troubling times at home and abroad.

During this period of my life I had academic, business and personal ties to the White House. I had done graduate research in intergovernmental policy management in health care through a grant at the University of Texas at Arlington's Institute of Urban Affairs. I was CEO of a firm providing mental health services to federal employees in 17 states, and I had a former roommate from college days serving as a speech writer to the president.

From time to time these ties placed me inside The White House where I was able to see firsthand the impact of a troubled nation on its chief executive. On one occasion I was invited to participate in previewing material the president had submitted in preparation for an address to the nation. On another I was invited into a presidential press conference where he was bombarded with questions reflecting the economic unrest of the country.

On still another occasion I was privileged to spend a winter evening at The White House with friends and the First Family following a Christmas concert in the East Room. As this memorable evening wound to a close a handful of us gathered with the president in the North Entrance, just inside the North Portico, to sing Christmas carols. I observed something that left an indelible impression on me. The music was interrupted by an aide drawing the president aside to deliver a private message. As he left the room I looked out over the north lawn as Christmas lights were filling the darkness and wondered what decision would this leader be compelled to make tonight. A cloud of depression had stalled over the nation for over a year as the lives of fifty-two Americans held hostage in Iran hung in the balance. Failed negotiations followed by a disastrous failed rescue mission had cost the lives of eight servicemen and one civilian. I later learned that what the president was most likely hearing that night from his negotiators was that the hostages would not be returned until his successor, Ronald Reagan, took the oath of office in January.

Discussion Questions:

1. What role did President Carter's personality traits play in his failure to secure a second term in as Chief Executive?
2. What impact do you think the national and global circumstances existing during his presidency had on his failure to be reelected?
3. Would it surprise you to learn that the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded Jimmy Carter in 2002 "*for his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development?*"
4. In what way does this affect your view of leadership or what factors are involved in effective leadership?

On leadership:

Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted. Martin Luther King, Jr.

There truly is nothing new under the sun! Nothing that someone hasn't already said somewhere, in some language, at some point in time. Occasionally, someone credits me with a quote that I cannot recall making. But, if it's good, of course I said it!

Here are some I did recall or record, in a speech, interview or journal:

*I cannot walk the path for you . . .
Only with you . . .
And that only for a while.*

*Tomorrow, today will be yesterday.
But, tomorrow's destiny is forged today,
One hour at a time.*

If you do not know your limitations your strengths will kill you!

The path of freedom leads directly through the door of discipline.

*I'd rather fail while trying
Than to fail while wondering
If I would have failed while trying.
What is failing
If not finding a better way to succeed?*

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