

To: Senior Leadership Position Holders

From: Noelle Serino

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Re: Navigating and Leveraging Opposition from Powerful Forces

1. Introduction

One of the myriad problems that plague leadership both in theory and practice is navigating opposition and hostility from powerful forces – namely, private interests. This pressing leadership concern affects all sectors and causes a host of challenges including garnering support and challenging the opposition’s resources and influence, determining how to effectively move forward in the face of strong opposition, maintaining optimism and perseverance within the team, and finding common ground and opportunities for collaboration. Thus, the following research question is posed: Does opposition and hostility from powerful forces threaten successful and effective leadership? If so, how can opposition be successfully navigated? In order to answer the aforementioned question, this memo will explore opposition in leadership, review case studies and leadership approaches to guide leaders in the face of opposition, and conclude with a policy solution to help teams navigate these challenges.

2. Conflict Management and Leadership

At the heart of navigating opposition is conquering power conflict; power conflict ensues when each party attempts to exert and maintain influence over the other. Such situations require effective conflict management practices. Conflict is a prerequisite to building meaningful relationships and the ability to implement successful conflict management skills enables leaders to overcome challenges and foster a productive work environment.¹ Conflict management is not only a useful skill in resolving interpersonal difficulties but also larger instances of conflict.

¹ Smiley, F. (2018). Leadership guide to conflict and conflict management. *Leadership in Healthcare and Public Health*. (Huber, T., Breitenstine, L., Schreiber, L., Budzik, K., Moffitt, T., & Persol, J., Eds.). Retrieved from <https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/pubhhmp6615/chapter/leadership-guide-to-conflict-and-conflict-management/>

3. Case Studies and Lessons Learned from Public Health

The public health sector provides a wealth of case studies surrounding navigating powerful oppositional forces. With its interests of maintaining the health and well-being of communities, their goals run counter to those of private interests such as the tobacco, food, and agricultural industries. The exploration of these entities contextualizes the severity and implications of opposition from powerful forces as well as sets the stage for later discussion of strategies to overcome associated challenges.

Beginning with the tobacco industry, prior to the release of the landmark Surgeon General's 64th Report – which outlined for the first time the dangerous health effects of tobacco – tobacco advertising was largely unrestricted and smoking was recommended by medical professionals. Since the time of its emergence, the tobacco industry has operated with the goal of minimizing the dangers of tobacco for the sake of profit. Big Tobacco was treated as a stakeholder and often given opportunities by the government to provide recommendations to Congressional committee members that sought to explore tobacco usage and its harmful effects. Through actions such as hiring researchers to produce scientific evidence or discredit existing research to paint an unclear picture of the effects of tobacco on human health, the tobacco industry successfully evaded regulation and continued to produce knowingly harmful products.²

The efforts of the food industry in evading regulation tell a similar story of the dangers and power of private interests. American academic Marion Nestle argued that “Dietary guidelines are political compromises between what science tells us about nutrition and health and what is good for the food industry.” At the core of her argument was that the American public was not the only constituency that the federal government served. In Nestle's seminal piece *Food*

² Murthy, Vivek. Chapter 2: Fifty Years of Change 1964–2014. The health consequences of smoking--50 years of progress: A report of the surgeon general. (2014). (pp. 17-35). Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Office of the Surgeon General.

Politics, she reviewed the complex history between the government and food industry, citing that private interests have historically pressured federal agencies into ensuring their seat at the table in determining how they would be regulated.³ Both the tobacco and food industries are two of many examples of private interests posing a multitude of leadership challenges. The previous review of these private interests in shaping a portion of contemporary American politics provides essential background for examining the associated challenges of navigating opposition from powerful forces and the effects said challenges have.

4. Associated Leadership Challenges

Garnering support against powerful forces and challenging their resources and influence

When presented with powerful oppositional forces such as Big Tobacco and the food industry, those in positions of power on the other side of the aisle often struggle to find ways to garner requisite support to advance their cause(s). Private interests often maintain extensive power, money, and influence; using the example of public health – a sector that is not as lucrative as others – there is often a lack of resources in comparison, posing the challenge of identifying ways to counter messaging. Determining strategies to effectively move forward in the face of opposition is also pivotal. This requires leaders to identify creative and persuasive strategies to compensate for a likely lack of power, money, and consequent influence.

Maintaining optimism and perseverance within the team

When facing seemingly insurmountable odds, it is likely that a team will struggle to remain optimistic and persevere. This lack of hope can weaken a team's ability to identify ways to successfully overcome opposition and maintain resiliency and a willingness to persist.

Finding common ground and opportunities for collaboration with opposition

³ Nestle, M. (2002). Part One: Undermining Dietary Advice. In *Food politics: How the food industry influences nutrition and health*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Perhaps the most daunting leadership challenge is finding common ground with opposition and identifying collaborative strategies. In the case of the previously discussed examples, public health professionals prioritize regulating private interests for the sake of protecting health and well-being while private interests prioritize evading regulation for financial gain. At face value in such situations, it appears nearly impossible to find common ground.

5. Addressing the Problem: Leadership Theories and Approaches

Transformational and adaptive leadership provide a series of strategies that serve leaders well in navigating opposition and hostility from powerful forces. Transformational leadership incorporates a moral dimension in which leaders empower and elevate their followers to achieve success.⁴ By maintaining an awareness of the aspirations and needs of followers, leaders cultivate a relationship that prioritizes individualized consideration, the good of the group, intellectual stimulation, and meeting employees' emotional needs.⁵ Transformational leadership offers essential lessons in navigating opposition; namely, that a vested relationship within teams aids in maintaining optimism, creativity, and innovation in the face of hostility.

Adaptive leadership focuses on mobilizing teams to face difficult situations and thrive in the process. By viewing leadership as an activity, this form of leadership requires orchestrating conflicts among and within parties as community and company interests are likely to overlap and clash. In order to overcome this obstacle, the inclusion of competing value perspectives, guiding values, and trial and error are essential.⁶ The core practices of adaptive leadership include learning from the past, experimenting, and operating in a state of uncertainty by observing,

⁴ Burns, James MacGregor. (1978). *What is Leadership?*. New York: Harper & Row.

⁵ Bass, Bernard, M. (1990). From transactional to transformational Leadership: Learning to share the vision. *Organizational Dynamics*. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616\(90\)90061-S](https://doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616(90)90061-S)

⁶ Heifetz, R. (1994). Values in leadership in *Leadership without any easy answers*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

interpreting, and intervening.⁷ Adaptive leadership's view of difficult situations as opportunities for growth and its prioritization of navigating disequilibrated states supports teams in finding solutions to problems posed by opposing interests and finding value in conflict management.

6. Policy Solution

A solution to navigating opposing forces resides within the smaller entity of a team. Internal programming designed to support teams in circumnavigating challenges posed by powerful forces fosters conflict management and resolution skills that serve teams well in handling opposition at all levels. The basis of this policy proposal resides in the theoretical offerings of American social worker, author, and consultant Mary Parker Follett. Follett's organizational theory was based on the idea that personnel, human, and technical problems could only be solved by recognizing their interconnectedness; dealing with the individual as a whole person and valuing the bonds between team members advocates for a more comprehensive approach to leadership.⁸ Follett's emphasis on resiliency and strength iterates the importance of the team and its ability to deal with challenges. In order to successfully navigate opposition and the conflict that arises from it, teams must remain proactive and creative, look for common ground and collaborative opportunities, and retain objectivity.⁹

Internal programming aids teams in cultivating resilience and in doing so, identifies ways to leverage it to navigate opposition from powerful entities. Examples of such programming include the Leadership Navigation Challenge at The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania's McNulty Leadership Program and the Leadership and Management Programs at Harvard Extension School. Beginning with the former, the Leadership Navigation Workshop

⁷ Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). The Theory behind the practice: A brief introduction to the adaptive leadership framework in *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation

⁸ Parker, L.D. (1984). Control in organizational life: The contribution of Mary Parker Follett. *The Academy of Management Review*, 9(4) (pp.736-745). Retrieved from <http://www.istor.org/stable/258495>

⁹ Rabinowitz, P. (n.d.). Recognizing the challenges of leadership. Retrieved on March 13 from <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/leadership-ideas/leadership-challenges/main>

focuses on leadership and followership, essential roles within effective teams, group decision-making processes and techniques, crisis communications, leading through ambiguity, building consensus in critical situations, and individual and team conflict styles and strategies.¹⁰

Facilitated by subject matter experts in leadership theory and practice, such workshops can better prepare teams to navigate conflict and opposing interests in a multitude of situations and scales.

The Leadership and Management Programs offered by Harvard Extension School provide similar opportunities for individualized and team-based leadership development. Guided by maximizing team productivity and driving innovation through hands-on exercises and discussions, the program offers classes ranging from building personal resilience to influence and persuasion in leadership. The goal of these courses is to learn management theories and leadership best practices to navigate challenges as well as capitalize on emerging opportunities.¹¹ Such training and certification provide teams with the ability to further advance their individual and team strengths as well as enhance replicable leadership strategies.

7. Conclusion

Navigating opposition and hostility from powerful forces creates a host of associated challenges ranging from maintaining optimism within the team to finding opportunities for collaboration. The inclusion of case studies and examination of associated challenges contextualize the importance of growth, resiliency, and tenacity within and among teams. The creation and implementation of internal programming is an effective solution to combating the challenges posed by opposition from powerful entities and promoting the success of the team.

¹⁰ Leadership navigation challenge. (2015). Retrieved from <https://leadership.wharton.upenn.edu/leadership-navigation-challenge/>

¹¹ Leadership and management programs at Harvard. (n.d.). Retrieved on March 13, 2021 from <https://www.extension.harvard.edu/professional-development/leadership-management-programs>

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