

The Presidential Disease

By George E. Gercken, Ph.D.

The day you become the president of an organization is the last day you hear the truth. And the longer you are the leader, the more agenda laden input and feedback you receive. Because you hold the proverbial “big hammer,” your jokes somehow get funnier, while the challenges and pushback from staff diminish. In this sheltered state, the information loop closes as you receive less input from the outside. You begin to believe your own press clippings. And when receiving straightforward feedback, you might actually be overly sensitive to learning that you are incorrect.

Now, you reached the top spot because you have a history of effective decision-making and action taking. Having logged many impressive accomplishments and successful judgments, you were justly promoted. Of course, that does not mean you are perfect or have always been correct. It does mean that, along the way within a layered organization, you have received input and feedback that enabled you to learn and better adjust your decisions.

Being able to adjust your decisions is always beneficial, particularly when combined with the ability to be both a fast and slow thinker. Fast thinking is an intuitive impression based upon experience and knowledge. It can be a very helpful and perhaps even creative ability. Slow thinking enables you to reflect upon your intuitions, adjusting them while further dredging your ideas. This symbiosis enabled you, as a rising leader, to hone your talents within the context of input received from peers, leadership and external sources.

As a rising leader, you were often tasked with increasingly complex undertakings that further stretched and added to your capacity base. That was a healthy stage of development, as there were course adjustments along the way. Having multiple sources of input, direction and feedback often resulted in greater emotional and intellectual maturity. You developed a decision-making mindset that considers other opinions and increasingly grows in perspective, building higher levels of executive wisdom.

Presidents are typically adept at interacting and communicating with others. They recognize the necessity of planning their communications and anticipating responses. When used wisely, this ability enables leaders to achieve cooperation and buy-in from others regarding a preferred future. They communicate their vision in ways that others readily understand, while conveying a sense of common purpose.

When a leader has been at the top of an organization for several years, however, that tenure has implications for their judgment. Because there are few, if any, real course corrections at the top level, a president’s decision-making can become a feedback loop unto itself. Since this leader is so adept at communicating to various constituencies, such

as boards, investors and the like, they are often able to position their decisions in ways that are readily accepted.

Are the above leaders intentionally manipulating others? Are they trying to push an agenda that only increases their own worth? The answer to each question is no. These are mostly reasonable individuals who rose to the presidency because of skills that enabled them to discharge their responsibilities seriously and with positive intent.

The real reasons are more prosaic, such as believing you are correct when there is insufficient data to dissuade you from this stance. Because you have been out of the arena, where the give-and-take causes you to adjust, you lose some of your resilience and fall back upon a more ego laden mindset. It is rather like the pharaoh who decrees, "So let it be written. So let it be done." This is where a president needs advisors comprised of honest and trusted confidants. These individuals form a sounding board and feedback loop that brings candor to the president's thinking.

Some presidents find external input to be threatening. This may be due in part to their own concerns, as well as an aging process that makes them less flexible and perhaps more easily threatened by younger, more dynamic executives.

The following are recommendations for presidents, and frankly all leaders, to make better decisions:

1. Know what you do not know, and value your ongoing ignorance. This helps you to learn and adjust your decisions. It becomes a natural habit, not a sign of weakness or loss.
2. In the United States Marines Corps, a captain in training learns that only seventy percent of their decisions will be fully accurate, no matter how long they think about an issue. Thus you need to know that a good portion of your decisions will require adjustment.
3. Continued reflection is the key to sophisticated, strategic decisions. Do not trust any label until you have run it through a thoughtful process. Even if your intuition was initially correct, greater reflection will enable you to put your decision into practice more effectively.
4. Actively seek different sorts of feedback, not just from the people who agree with you. Reward individuals who appropriately challenge your thinking, versus those who simply want to show how smart they are.

We live in an increasingly complex and faster changing world. You need to know that no one knows it all. Do not let your ego get too close to your position, for when your position falls, so does your ego.

It is a sign of strength for a president, or any leader, to actively seek honest input and feedback. It enables you to continue to learn and adjust your decisions. That is the best way to stay relevant and competitive in these transformative times.