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Change -- Time for a shakeup

Much of my time for the past few weeks has been given to opening a new branch library and researching the idea of change within organizations. The new branch is now open and, hopefully, running successfully, and the survey regarding change that Laura and I conducted is now closed and awaiting analysis. But recent developments in the Bush White House have made me think about high-level change and the role that it plays in successful organizations.

No matter your politics, it's difficult to look at President Bush's past twelve months without seeing the major problems he has been facing and the role that communications has played in those problems. Both his domestic and international political agendas have been struggling to gain solid footing and numerous missteps have led many to question his administration's ability to make well-informed and timely decisions. I am not criticizing or praising his administration's ability to deal with the press and public, but the difficulties are obvious and worth examining.

Entering his second term, Bush found himself surrounded by many of the same faces who were with him from the beginning, and while this most certainly gave him a high degree of comfort, it would prove to be a mistake when new and serious issues arose. Maintaining the same individuals in key positions gives any leader a strong sense of security and continuity, but it also begins to erode that leader's ability to properly and effectively respond to new crises.

Organizations, like individuals, learn to respond to certain problems by reacting in a specific way – often in a repetitive way, using tactics that worked before and it is assumed will work again. New problems that on the surface appear similar to problems from years past will be met in the same manner, using the same tactics. Unfortunately, all too often, those tactics will fail the second or third time around. What once worked is now no longer effective.

This was what the Bush White House was facing. Tactics that worked in 2002 and 2003 were now being used with limited success in 2005 and 2006. This is almost never the fault of one individual – the President's Chief of Staff or National Security Advisor or cabinet officers will naturally attempt to meet new challenges the same way they have met old challenges. But old solutions rarely fit new challenges, and unless your staff has built in a very high level of recurring structural change then you will not be able to meet those new challenges without some level of shakeup. And that is where the Bush White House now finds itself.

Andrew Card's March 28 resignation and Scott McClellan's resignation today are probably only the beginning of what will be a major upheaval in the Executive staff. This is far from unusual in any President's second administration. People grow stagnant in their positions. They meet new challenges in the same manner they have always (successfully) met prior challenges. New tests are viewed through old glasses.

So Presidents shakeup their staff – they seek fresh blood, new ideas, and new outlooks. This is change that must happen, albeit often late and almost always done in a very public and rushed manner. But it does not have to be this way. Change can be built into the organizational structure from the very beginning.

Any good leader will see the advantage of moving staff around to new and challenging positions. We're no longer simply talking about the federal government. Even library managers will be well served by regularly shifting staff around to new duties in order to increase abilities and inject new ideas into old positions.

Higher level positions are not necessarily as easy to change. The CEO of a large organization often has to work with the same group of administrators for years on end, and this can prove very difficult. Building change into this level of leadership is difficult but not impossible. Having a strong succession plan in place is one way to facilitate smooth change. A willingness to move people around is also an excellent way of injecting new life into job positions without having to let anyone go.

We've seen successful implementations of this type of change before, such as in the many positions that James Baker held. He served as Undersecretary of Commerce under President Gerald Ford, and during the first Reagan administration he was White House Chief of Staff. During the second Reagan administration he served as Treasury Secretary. Then, under George

H. W. Bush, Baker served as Secretary of State, and under George W. Bush he has served as legal advisor. Baker's many roles illustrate an often under-utilized tool of change – people are often far more talented and capable than we give them credit for being, and they are often capable of stepping into new positions and bringing about positive change.

On a very local basis I see this simply through the shifting of staff responsibilities at the branch level. Someone who has been in charge of periodicals for two years may be both ready and capable of moving over to a new task, while someone else can bring new ideas to the role of periodicals manager. At higher levels, managers and department heads are often capable of learning new roles, new skill sets, and can often bring new ideas to positions that have not changed in years.

But as a leader, be it the leader of the free world or a local library, building some level of change into those positions that report to you is vital to maintaining your ability to successfully lead. Hardened opinions, firm ideas of what works and what does not work, and standard operating procedures that have not changed substantively in years, are all signs that the time for change is upon you. Move things around, put fresh faces into old positions, and then, after you're done, build in that change so you don't go another five years without thinking about upsetting the status quo.

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