

Rally, Motivate, Mobilize The Action Agenda for Leaders

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Our last three episodes have delved into the definition of leadership which I've used for twenty years in my executive coaching and leadership training. If you've been with us for those prior programs, you've heard the definition several times. But here it is once more by way of reminder: "Leadership is the art of rallying people around a shared purpose, then motivating them and mobilizing them to achieve it."

We began our analysis by exploring the importance of the words "people" and "purpose" in this definition. I described them as the two anchor points for leadership. That is, all leadership centers on a purpose and revolves around people.

Then we used the second episode in the series to examine the considerations which went into my decision to describe leadership as an art.

Last week we set the definition aside for the most part to explain why it is important to embark on our work as leaders with a precise, clear definition of what truly constitutes leadership.

Today we wrap up this series by taking up three other key words in the definition: "rallying," "motivating," and "mobilizing." We might consider them the action agenda for leadership. What do they entail individually and collectively? That's the question we answer today. The implications which we will draw from them are sure to upsize your leadership.

When I was developing my definition of leadership, I wanted one which would be equally valid for the work of a leader wherever he or she might function – from someone leading a neighborhood association of volunteers to someone heading a global organization. I spent a great deal of time, therefore, thinking through dozens of leadership scenarios and extracting from them those things which were common to all.

As I said in the first episode in this series, people are the first common denominator in all leadership. After all, leadership is always people-centric. We manage people and we lead people. We also manage inventories and cash flow. But we would never speak of leading an inventory or leading the company's cash flow. We only lead people.

The second common denominator is the orchestrating purpose for what the leader seeks to accomplish. The purpose provides the “why” for the commitment and sacrifice which the leader is asking of his or her people.

Once I was clear on those common denominators, I next tried to isolate the critical actions which every leader in every age has had to accomplish. Although a number of action verbs made their way onto my original list, I eventually recognized that they boiled down to three things: drawing a group of people together, building their enthusiasm for the orchestrating purpose, and then deploying them to achieve the purpose by fulfilling their individual and joint responsibilities within an implementation plan. In time, I reduced these three functions to the terms “rallying,” “motivating,” and “mobilizing.”

Actually, I originally used the word “marshalling” instead of “rallying.” Since I’m a fan of alliteration, “marshalling, motivating, and mobilizing” had a nice alliterative pattern. But when I tried out this trio of terms in leadership training, “marshalling” turned out to have some liabilities. It’s not a verb that the younger generation has grown up using. Many were not sure exactly what it meant. And others, especially those with something of a pacifist streak, said that it made my definition feel too militaristic.

Because the feedback revealed that the concept of “marshalling” was not easily envisionable for many people, I wanted to be sure that the term I used to replace it would connote an experience that almost everyone has had. That’s when I struck on the word “rallying.” Everyone who has gone through high school has attended a pep rally. And even people who do not follow politics closely understand the concept of a political rally.

Moreover, as I started weighing the merits of the term, I realized that it actually added an important nuance to my definition that “marshalling” did not. When we think of pep rallies or political rallies, two things stand out in the resulting mental picture. One is the uniting of people with a single resolve. The other is excitement and enthusiasm.

And leadership is best served when the process of gathering people together creates a unifying resolve and a shared excitement for achieving what the endeavor seeks to accomplish. . . building enthusiasm for the underlying “why” behind the leader’s rallying cry.

So, twenty years ago I settled on the word “rallying.” And of the scores of leadership definitions which I’ve since consulted, mine is the only one, so far as I can tell, that includes the word “rallying.”

I’m convinced, however, that it’s a critically important term. It draws attention from the beginning to the emotional dimension of leadership. At the time that I was forging this definition, emotional intelligence was one of hottest new topics in management literature. But I did not choose “rallying” with any intent to capitalize on the growing interest in emotional intelligence. It simply seemed to me that while books on leadership had long touched on the emotional dimension of motivation, they paid too little attention to the emotional dimension of enlisting people in the leader’s endeavor in the first place.

As leaders, therefore, when we start thinking about pulling people together to embark on a shared enterprise, we must arm ourselves with a clear sense of the emotional energy field within which we will couch our appeal for people to join our undertaking. Then, having defined that field, we must design a purposeful strategy for creating it.

The emotional field established in the rallying stage must then be amplified in the motivational stage. Motivation occurs when leaders succeed in bringing people to see the linkage between the purpose of the undertaking and their own personal values. People are not motivated to pursue something which holds no value to them. The duty of the leader is thus to foster linkage between purpose and personal values in the minds of their people.

Put simply, motivation serves to create motion. Our English words “motivation” and “motion” both derive from the Latin word *motus*, which means movement. The words “motive” and “emotion” come from the same root. Motives and emotions both prompt us to act, to move.

Thus, whenever you hear the term “motivation,” picture movement. Leaders have a dual focus when it comes to motivation, both of them related to movement. The first goal is to move people to be eager to serve. The second is to move them to be excited about their service.

We can therefore offer this definition of motivation: “Motivation is the process of providing the motive and the reinforcing emotions which result in people undertaking an endeavor both willingly and eagerly.”

This sense of movement carries through to the third stage of leadership, mobilizing the people to achieve the purpose. I spent 35 years in active duty and reserve components of the Navy. During those years we experienced many mobilizations, beginning with the Cuban missile crisis shortly after I enlisted, then the Pueblo crisis, and various crises in the Middle East. Military mobilization is always about moving the right people into the right places to achieve the ultimate purpose.

We can envision the mobilization role of all leadership in much the same way. Mobilization is the process of translating the motivation of the people into concrete action. We can think of it as the management dimension of leadership. Not all management has a leadership component. But because leadership must mobilize people, leadership always includes a management function.

Going back to what I said about military mobilizations, leaders must position people in the right place; assign them the right roles and responsibilities; equip them with the right tools, resources, and training; and hold them to the right standards and expectations. Do you hear the management function in all of that?

Whereas rallying and motivating are people-centric, mobilizing is process-centric. True, it involves coordinating the roles that people play. But when it comes to mobilization, people are simply another resource alongside all of the other resources needed to achieve the purpose.

As a result, leaders must be able to be equally effective in both the people-centric modes of leadership and the process-centric ones. For some people, it’s not easy to maintain this balance. I’ve dealt with hundreds of leaders who excelled at implementing plans of action, but who fell short at rallying people and motivating them.

Others are exceptional motivators, but are far less effective at mobilization. This is particularly commonplace in the non-profit world, where someone’s passion for a cause allows them to excite and inspire others to join them in pursuit of some noble calling. Yet, they prove ill-equipped when it comes time to manage the mobilization.

In the 1980s I agreed to be part of a not-for-profit initiative that suffered from this very malady. As a promoter, the man behind the initiative was brilliant at motivation. Those of us who agreed

to get on board were excited about what he proposed to do. Once the endeavor reached the mobilization stage, however, things started coming unglued.

One day, after a planning meeting had revealed just how deep our disarray had become, I asked another person in the group to enlighten me as to why this entire project seemed so slipshod. He responded with an unforgettable and insightful metaphor.

What he said was, “Think of this effort as a steam locomotive barreling down the track. For a steam locomotive to go fast, someone has to be shoveling lots of coal into the engine. But if you furiously pile coal in the steam engine, someone better be laying track ahead of you or you will soon run off the rails.”

Then, mentioning the erstwhile leader of this project by name, he said, “No one is any better than he is at shoveling coal. But he has never been good at laying track, and he is unwilling to entrust anyone else with doing it.”

The leader in question has been a frequent associate of mine for over 40 years. We cross paths often. And to this day, he is still blind with regard to his limited ability to manage the process aspects of the mobilization phase.

Let me ask, then. As a leader, are you better at the people side or the process side of your role? Be tough-minded as you consider your answer. Many leaders whom I admire are equally proficient at carrying out both the people and process components of their leadership. But others are not. Being honest with ourselves in this matter is critical for any of us in leadership.

Now, one final observation before we wrap up. When rallying, motivating, and mobilizing are fine-tuned, they mutually reinforce one another. We’ve seen that rallying done well smooths the skids for motivating to succeed. And successful motivation makes mobilizing far easier. However, causal relationships flow in the opposite direction, as well. The better the mobilization, the easier it is to motivate. Success in the mobilization phase also makes the entire enterprise more inviting and thus furthers the rallying function. Similarly, when motivation within the group is high, people are attracted to it, allowing the rallying function to be more effective.

Consequently, leaders must not neglect any of these three phases. Rallying, motivating, and mobilizing must all be done well.

So, there you have it. A leadership model which illustrates the key components of leadership wherever it’s practiced. Because so much of my doctoral study was in ancient, medieval, and early modern history, I’ve studied the lives of leaders in every era of human civilization. To a person, they rallied people around a shared purpose, then motivated them and mobilized them to achieve it. It’s a simple way to picture what leadership is about. Yet, implementing is fraught with nuance and challenges. That’s why being an effective leader is an unending learning experience.

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