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## Compelling Direction

**W**e have arrived at our climbing camp at the base of the Big Horns, ready to attack one of the several peaks stretching across the horizon before us. As we sip our coffee, maps of climb routes laid out before us, our leader poses the Big Question: “All right then, which one shall we go for? Cloud Peak? Bomber Mountain? One of the others? What do you think?” Opinions are ventured, objections raised, and alternatives proposed. By the time we bed down for the night, some members of our team have become more committed to their prior preferences than they were before the discussion. The feelings of others, including the leader, range from frustration to irritation. And we still have not decided which peak we will ascend the next day.

Have you ever spent most of a holiday weekend deciding how the family will spend that weekend? Or come dangerously close to the deadline for a task force report with members still debating the report’s purpose? Or switched approaches to a work problem again and again trying to find a way to frame the task that is agreeable to all group members?

We all have experienced such frustrations. They are among the reasons many of us avoid working in groups whenever we can. But it does not have to be that way. See how this feels: “I’m getting a group together for a climb in the Big Horns next weekend. There’s a bunch of interesting mountains in that range, but I thought we’d have a go at Cloud Peak. It’s a challenging climb and the afternoon weather up there can get real nasty. Probably we’d have only a fifty-fifty chance of making it. But they tell me the view from the summit is just amazing, and at the very least it should be quite a day making the attempt. How about you joining us?”

It’s a wholly different experience. This time the leader’s direction is clear (“*This is the mountain we’ll climb*”). It is engaging (“It’s challenging, we may not make it, but success will be exhilarating”). And it offers choice (“Will you come?”). This invitation is far more likely to energize, orient, and engage team members than is any open-ended discussion about what the group should do. At the risk of offending those of my colleagues who believe that the only way to “empower” teams is full participation by all involved parties until consensus is reached, let me extrapolate from this little example to a bald assertion about self-managing teams in general:

*Effective team self-management is impossible unless someone in authority sets the direction for the team’s work.*

The assertion may seem to contradict itself. One is, after all, issuing orders to the very team members who are supposed to manage themselves. Doesn’t self-management by a team require consensus decision making about team directions? No, it does not. Those in authority can indeed consult widely with team members and other constituents about alternative aspirations, and draft statements of direction can be circulated, tested, and revised many times. Such consultations and revisions are well advised because they increase the chances of getting the direction right—and they do foster its acceptance by team members. But at some point those who have the legitimate authority for the enterprise must step up to their responsibility and clearly designate the mountain to be climbed.

Who properly sets direction for a team varies from situation to situation. Sometimes it is the team leader, as for our mountain-climbing team. Other times it is someone outside the team, as when a manager appoints a committee to review an organizational issue and make a recommendation for action. And sometimes it is the team itself, as for self-governing groups

such as partnerships and boards of directors. The key is to identify who has the legitimate authority for direction setting and then to make sure that that person or group exercises it competently, convincingly, and without apology. Team performance greatly depends on how well this is done.

## THE MULTIPLE BENEFITS OF GOOD DIRECTION

Authoritatively setting direction about performance aspirations has multiple benefits: It energizes team members, it orients their attention and action, and it engages their talents. These are significant benefits, but, as we will see, the challenge of harvesting them also is significant—far more demanding of leadership skill than making an inspiring speech or posting on the wall a statement of collective vision.<sup>1</sup>

### *Energizes*

John F. Kennedy did not assemble a committee and take a vote back in 1961 when he articulated the goals of the U.S. space program. Instead, he exercised the authority of the presidency by standing before Congress and, with the nation watching on television, declaring that the United States “should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth.” Nor did Martin Luther King, Jr., hold a national referendum to determine the aspirations of African Americans for the next stage in the struggle for racial equality in this country. Instead, he exercised his considerable moral authority by standing before his people at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 and delivering the “I Have a Dream” speech—a statement of direction that still inspires those who view it on film.

We all seek purpose and meaning in what we do and how we live. When someone articulates a set of aspirations that elevates our purposes or deepens the meaning we find in our lives, motivational juices flow. That is what Kennedy and King accomplished. Even people who might have chosen other directions for the space program or the civil rights movement found themselves energized by the visions these leaders articulated. Great political and religious leaders are masters at doing this, at creating

and communicating collective aspirations that align and excite others. When leaders' visions do not inspire, however, people quickly turn away from them. In almost every U.S. presidential election, some campaigns falter early in the primary season because the candidates are unable to articulate an engaging vision for the nation.

Establishing a clear and engaging direction is just as important for organizational and team leaders as it is for leaders with broader constituencies. The way David Mathiasen surmounted the considerable leadership challenge he faced as head of the Fiscal Analysis Branch of the U.S. Office of Management and the Budget (OMB) illustrates this point. David's branch had the job of conducting economic analyses of the federal budget for the president's budget director. Ronald Reagan had just defeated Jimmy Carter for the presidency and had appointed David Stockman as budget director. Shortly after the new administration took office, Stockman met with Mathiasen and other senior OMB managers and told them that the agency would proceed immediately to dismantle the Carter budget and replace it with one that expressed the political philosophy of the new president. Achieving this, Stockman told the managers, would require extraordinary commitment by everyone at OMB. He made it clear that he expected nothing less.

How, David wondered, could he engender sufficient commitment among members of his fiscal analysis team? They had worked terribly hard on the Carter budget and had finished up not long ago. Now it was to be unceremoniously discarded. How could he get members fired up to restart a task they had just completed—especially since the Reagan budget was certain to be distasteful to at least some team members? The fiscal analysis team was composed entirely of civil servants rather than political appointees, and their personal politics ranged from strong liberalism to committed conservatism. How much conflict would develop among team members as they worked together to help prepare a conservative federal budget?

David's solution relied mainly on the direction he provided to team members. He was not one to call everybody to a big meeting and make a charismatic speech. Instead, he went around from person to person, from team to team, on no special schedule, making sure that everybody understood what the mission of the fiscal analysis team really was. The essence of what he said on his rounds was this:

As corny as it may sound, what we are here for is to *serve democracy*. We don't make policy, but we make sure that the people who do have available to them absolutely the best information that they can have. Some of you applaud the priorities being set by Reagan and Stockman; others of you are certain that their proposals will lead the country to social and economic disaster.

As a citizen, I too have some opinions about what they are doing. But my personal views don't matter in our work here and neither should yours. We are the only people on this planet who are in a position to provide the president and his director with comprehensive and valid analyses of the likely effects of their policies. The PADs [political associate directors of OMB appointed by the director] can't do it—they don't have the time or the expertise and, besides, they have to keep passing political litmus tests. The director cannot do it himself—although this particular director, if we don't do our job right, is likely to try with who knows what consequences. And the Congressional Budget Office works for that other branch of government; they have a different job to do.

So there's nobody else, it falls on our shoulders. Those of you who love what Reagan is doing can take pleasure from knowing that your analyses will give him the information he needs to implement his policies promptly and decisively. And those of you who detest what he is up to can take pleasure in the fact that, with complete and accurate data, he'll probably do less damage than he would if he didn't have those data, or they were distorted.

No matter what your personal politics, it all comes down to the same thing: Our democracy will work better if the president and the people he appointed to advise him have complete and trustworthy data. Frankly, I don't know whether we can get it all done in the time that we have. It will be quite a stretch. But we're all professionals, so let's pitch in and show them what we can do.

It worked. Even staffers who had unhesitatingly pulled the "Carter" lever in the voting booth found themselves coming in evenings and weekends, when needed, to work with their teams to do their part in rebuilding the national budget. That is the energizing power of good direction.

## *Orients*

It is Cloud Peak on which all members of our climbing team have their eyes fixed. Once we know which mountain we will climb, we have a collective focus—and we have protected ourselves from that special kind of anarchy that can come when each member of a group or organization heads off in whatever direction is personally most agreeable. Perhaps most important, however, is that our choice of mountain has given us a shared criterion against which to test alternative ways of proceeding. When we get to a fork in the trail, we ask ourselves which branch is more likely to take us toward our objective. There will still be ambiguity, of course. Sometimes the trail that looks as if it goes directly to the base of the mountain actually doesn't. But even under ambiguity a clear and shared sense of purpose helps team members sort among options for how they should proceed. As David Campbell titled his book on career decision making, a personal activity surely as uncertain as even the most ambiguous of team tasks, *If You Don't Know Where You're Going, You'll Probably End Up Somewhere Else*.<sup>2</sup>

For careers, ending up “somewhere else” sometimes turns out to be a happy surprise. The same can be true for task-performing teams. In research and development work, for example, focused teamwork in pursuit of a particular objective sometimes unexpectedly results in an important finding about an entirely different matter—such as when Pfizer scientists who were assessing sildenafil citrate as a possible blood pressure medication serendipitously discovered its efficacy in treating erectile dysfunction and, without having set out to do so, created Viagra.

A good orientation comes to some teams virtually automatically. Members of an athletic team need not have a group discussion before the start of each game to figure out what they are supposed to accomplish. They are there to win—or to come as close to winning as they are able. Nor do members of the systems team at a computer facility have to debate purposes when a server goes down. They are there to get the server back up and on line as quickly as they can. But for many work teams, perhaps most of them, getting agreement among members about which mountain to climb is far from straightforward.

This problem is especially pernicious for management teams whose main work is to organize and oversee work that actually is performed by