

Leadership for Navigating Competing Interests

How many times have you experienced mounting concerns about an issue in your community, implemented a fix, only to find that a new set of problems is created down the road? Or how frequently do you find yourself between a rock and a hard place having to deal with strong advocacy groups who cling to positions that are often opposing or contradictory?

Well, you may be trying to solve “unsolvable” problems. What I mean by that is you have chronic, ongoing challenges that might not be suitable for traditional problem solving, which is what most of us were taught in school. Traditional problems have one “right” answer or a set of *independent* answers, any of which could do the job. For example: *There is more than one way to skin a cat*. On the other hand, these “unsolvable” problems cannot be solved, but instead can be managed over time to gain optimal results through a set of seemingly contradictory, yet *interdependent* actions – actions that are in some way connected and related.

What’s key here is to be able to distinguish between issues most suitable for traditional problem solving and those which are not. As leaders, you face numerous challenges where you need a way for yourself and those with competing interests to see a more complete or bigger picture before taking action.

These more chronic ongoing challenges or “unsolvable problems” require a different mindset and approach. Here is an AP report I saw on April 22nd, Earth Day, in the Charleston, SC, daily newspaper, the Post & Courier:

“President Barack Obama declared that a ‘new era of energy exploration in America’ would be crucial to leading the nation out of an economic crisis. Now, the choice we face is not between saving our environment and saving our economy. The choice is between prosperity and decline.”

The President’s words describe a bigger, more complete picture where leaders recognize that if the Higher Purpose is to maintain prosperity rather than decline, then we cannot choose between the environment OR the economy. We have to choose to focus simultaneously on the environment and the economy in order to direct future actions ensuring prosperity and thwarting decline.

In dealing with these sorts of complex situations successfully, it is essential to tap the power of “and,” getting the best for the environment while not damaging the economy or from the other point of view, spurring the economy while not damaging the environment because we need *both* to remain healthy and strong. We can do this by honoring competing viewpoints while directing efforts towards a Higher Purpose where collaboration is possible rather than conflict and antagonism.

In my book, *Power Surge: A Conduit for Enlightened Leadership*, I help leaders look at the power of the “and” to understand this mindset and approach within themselves first to get a more complete picture of how they lead. Once you’ve accessed this new level of awareness, you can see and appreciate the importance of competing interests and are able to apply more strategic insight to the complex issues facing your organization or community.