



6 Leadership Lessons from the 2016 U.S. Election

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Regardless of your political leanings, the United States and the world had the opportunity in 2016 to observe the behaviors of about 20 leaders vying for the highest leadership post in this country. We read and saw some of the top leaders in the US make the case for why we should choose them. From these months of media exposure, here are six leadership lessons that can be applied to any leader:

Clarity trumps style. Think back to when the election primaries started, and there were 18 Republican and 3 Democrat candidates in the presidential race. What were the slogans for each of these 21 candidates? Okay, easier question: can you still name everyone who entered the race?

It is clear that very few candidates distinguished themselves by their styles or the clarity of their message. Their slogans or themes were equally hard to remember. In the end, Hillary Clinton landed on 'Stronger Together' as her campaign theme, having cycled through half a dozen others. Donald Trump started and ended with 'Make America Great Again.' Even though his style offended, angered, and worried a large percentage of the voting population, the clarity of his message apparently resonated with disaffected voters desiring change.

Whatever your natural style is as a leader, your people understand that everyone is unique. They may not find your style to be the most warm, engaging, or witty, but they will follow you, if your vision, strategy, and direction are clear to them. Clarity trumps style.

Words have consequences. Throughout the campaign, we heard and read the words (and actions) of the candidates on both sides. Some of those words inspired us to vote in the primaries or the general election, while others convinced us not to ever consider supporting a candidate. Many believe that James Comey's words that opened and closed and re-opened and closed the FBI investigation of Hillary Clinton had a major impact on the election outcome. Others felt that the words in John Podesta's hacked emails had a dramatic impact on the election. Donald Trump's words, communicated in a dated Access Hollywood video, various tweets, and debates made some conclude that he was not presidential. Hillary Clinton's phrase that Trump supporters fell into "a basket of deplorables" became the rallying cry for ads, T-shirts, and placards for the other side. Words have consequences.

You may not have the same number of cameras, cell phones, microphones, and other electronic equipment around you to capture your intended and unintended words, but your words matter to those in your employ. They listen to what you say and the manner in which you say it. Your words matter; choose them carefully to be your audience, and be aware of the potential consequences.

Passion inspires action. From my vantage point, there were two candidates whose passion inspired the most action by their supporters--Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. Sanders inspired waves of young, energized supporters to show up at rallies across the country, as well as to protest at Trump rallies.

Trump saw thousands attending his rallies, particularly in swing states. In fact, I was trying to meet with a coaching client in Sanford, FL in October and got caught in a traffic jam about a mile from the airport. When I finally got to the officer directing traffic, he asked, “going to see Trump?” That was my first clue that all these cars were headed to a Trump rally. His passion inspired their action.

Your passion can do the same as a leader. You don’t need to be outrageous, gesticulate wildly, or yell into a microphone to convey passion. Just tap into your core as a leader, into those beliefs and philosophies about which you are most passionate, and then convey these to those you lead. Whether it is through ideas, vision, or energy, if it is genuinely you, your passion will inspire action.

All stakeholders matter. With the electorate in the US evenly split, it is clear that all voters count in elections. We know the founding fathers set up a Democratic Republic, not a pure democracy, to make sure that election victories would be the result of the most people voting across the most states and towns, large and small, urban and rural. Typically, the presidential winner takes the popular vote and the Electoral College, but not this year. In the end, it became clear that Trump’s strategy of ‘rally blitzkrieg’ during the final weeks of the campaign was a winning strategy to connect with the swing voters. Trump’s campaign seems to have more clearly recognized that all stakeholders matter.

As a leader, you must identify your stakeholders and get to know them. Your team members, manager, internal/external customers, peers, senior leaders, family, and perhaps others hold a stake in your success--and you in theirs. Regularly communicate with them, keep them informed, ask for feedback and suggestions, leverage their talents, and help them develop successfully. All stakeholders matter.

Direct messages get through. I’ve been observing presidential elections for many decades, since the Nixon-Kennedy debates on black and white TV. Always in the past, politicians have conveyed messages primarily through the news media. This is the first year I can remember where a candidate, Donald Trump, got his message across mostly by directly talking to people through in-person rallies and Twitter. People said he spoke what they were thinking. His direct messages got through and resonated.

Similarly, in your role as a leader, you need to speak directly to people and make sure they understand your message. Assert your point of view clearly. Make sure that all those involved receive the communication at the same time, and that you do not nuance the message for different audiences to avoid conflict or adverse reactions. Direct messages get through.

Integrity matters. We saw a number of examples of lack of integrity by candidates. Kasich, Cruz, and Bush promised they would support the eventual Republican candidate, and then publicly pulled their support when Trump won. The DNC’s Wasserman Schultz publicly indicated support for both Clinton and Sanders, but Wikileaks hacked emails showed that she was supported Clinton and undermined Sanders. When Trump’s vulgar comments were shared in an 11-year old video, he quickly apologized to his wife, family, and the public for these abhorrent comments. Trump then focused on lack of integrity in Washington with the phrase, “drain the swamp!” People suspected that politicians were corrupt; this phrase supported them in the belief that integrity matters, and that Trump would help restore it.

When you as a leader are confronted with a problem you created, admit it quickly and completely, apologize, and make necessary reparations. People do not expect you to be perfect, but they absolutely need to trust you. Trust is built in consistent installments of honest, sincere, open interactions over time. Speak the truth. Integrity matters.