

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Practical Lessons in Leadership and Communication

The Two Howard Deans

As many of you are already aware, my wife, Emily, teaches at Choate Rosemary Hall, a private boarding school in Wallingford, CT. And in an effort to expose the students to the world outside the campus, the school attracts many high-profile leaders to come and speak.

On January 22, 2009, Howard Dean came to the Choate campus to speak to the student body. The timing was fascinating. President Obama's inauguration had taken place 49 hours earlier, and Mr. Dean's contract as chairman of the Democratic National Committee had expired at midnight on January 21. Politics aside, I was eager to hear his perspective.

In all honesty, and regardless of one's political persuasion, the speech didn't offer much that was valuable. Mr. Dean did what the chair of a national political party does. He trumpeted the people on his side of the political aisle, denigrated the other side, and showed his form as one of the highest-paid cheerleaders in national politics. If one agreed with his views, his speech was certainly entertaining. It was designed to motivate his base, and he gave the audience plenty of opportunities to join in with "rah rah" enthusiasm. If one disagreed with his politics, it was an annoying, partisan and shockingly one-sided view. In other words, it was exactly what a speech from the DNC or RNC chair is supposed to be. It was the type of communication that was effective at firing up those who already agreed with him, but it was far less likely to persuade anyone who disagreed or was unsure.

Far more fascinating, however, was what occurred afterwards: a follow-up discussion with Mr. Dean in the Alumni House, open to faculty and students. Only about 30 people participated in this casual and enlightening question-and-answer session, which lasted more than an hour.

During this discussion, we saw a far more balanced and moderate Howard Dean. He still held to his beliefs,

but he communicated in a way far less likely to alienate anyone. This was just a smart guy with strong opinions, happy to discuss a range of topics and willing to hear from people who disagreed with him. This was honest debate. This was open discussion. This was respectful. Regardless of one's politics, it would have been impossible not to enjoy discussing the big issues in this sort of environment.

It's been a few days since this experience and I've been struggling to isolate the most valuable lesson in all of this. But the more I think about it, the more I realize that the lesson is a simple and powerful one. The lesson here for leaders, directors, managers and elected officials is that the ability to build consensus is almost never about beating people over the head with a one-sided view. Persuasion and building consensus is almost always about listening first, acknowledging other perspectives, and then respectfully and clearly making a persuasive argument that shows mastery of the full range of issues.

I saw two Howard Deans at Choate that night. The first one acted as if there were only one way to look at an issue, as if his view was entirely correct and the opposing view was entirely wrong. The first one would only have been able to persuade people who already agreed with him... which isn't even really persuasion. The second one acted in a far more persuasive and, I would argue, effective way. The second one was happy to hear another perspective and debate it. The second one stood a much better chance of persuading an undecided person on an issue.

My advice is that, of the two Howard Deans who spoke that night, you should model the second one. If you want to communicate well and be able to lead and persuade and build consensus, make sure to listen, make sure to acknowledge other perspectives, and then make your case in a thoughtful, articulate and respectful way. Doing so will make you far more likely to get the results you are looking for.