

## Are you a Bush or an Obama?

Only history can judge Barack Obama's presidency. But, in his election campaign and first days in office, Obama successfully nailed important leadership elements where other leaders, especially his predecessor George W. Bush, often screw up. Here are eight dos and don'ts HR and business leaders can take from the early days of Obama's reign.

**Do: Define joint aspirations.** When was the last time you experienced goosebumps when thinking about your organization's mission or leaders? Obama has created goosebump experiences worldwide, mobilizing millions to want to work jointly and passionately toward higher aspirations — hard work and sacrifices notwithstanding.

**Don't:** Create a mission statement that no one can relate to or use fancy strategy words that no one except your hired consultants can understand.

**Do: Offer a "sticky" message.** Obama's "Yes, we can" is a sticky idea that stays with those who hear it. It has transcended conventional and geographical boundaries.

**Don't:** Use messages whose only stickiness revolves around fighting a joint enemy. Bush's "axis of evil" presented a memorable slogan but its stickiness alienated rather than transformed.

**Do: Make it matter by creating deep engagement.** During his campaign, Obama reached out to traditionally indifferent younger voters through channels familiar to them. His clever use of Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, SMS and Flickr led millions to feel they had a personal stake in his success. He deepened this engagement by launching a website focused on harvesting people's ideas.

**Don't:** The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks presented a golden opportunity to meaningfully engage Americans in recreating the very extraordinary society Al-Qaeda was trying to destruct. Instead, Bush told them to go shopping.

**Do: Eliminate the intermediaries and create direct relationships with those in the trenches.** One of the biggest problems leaders face is losing touch with what's really going on



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amongst their ranks.

Obama's direct relationship with the public is remarkable. For example, campaign volunteers received thank-you text messages on their cellphones as he made his way to Grant Park to declare his victory. He reads 10 letters from regular folks everyday, chosen by his staff as a sampling of the 40,000 letters he receives daily. At times, he instructs advisors to create policies that address the issues raised.

**Don't:** Bush built a thick layer of management between himself and the populace. Secretive cohorts had neither his charisma nor his ordinary-man charm. Worse, they hampered his ability to grasp what ordinary folks really wanted.

**Do: Create a map — any map.** Organizational theorist Karl E. Weick tells the story of a group of soldiers hopelessly lost in the Alps on a training mission. But one soldier found a map at the bottom of his pack and they found their way back. Only later did someone notice it was a map of the Pyrenees.

Taking steps, in any direction, will lead to new paths, offering new experiences and insights. Only the years will tell whether Obama's economic plans will guide the U.S. and the rest of the world to a safe destination. But when leaders behave as though the map they're following is reliable, others will follow.

**Don't:** Offer a map that everyone can see is bogus. Whatever map Bush was using, it was divisive inside the U.S. and destructive to its image across the globe.

**Do: Demonstrate calm in the eye of the storm.** One of the decisive factors that made Americans elect Obama over the tempestuous John McCain was his consistent equanimity in the face of chaos.

When people sense the person at the helm will not be fazed by a crisis, confidence and trust develop. Such calm provides a huge competitive advantage to any organization going through turbulent times.

**Don't:** Be calm in a clueless way. George Bush definitely demonstrated calmness. Unfortunately, people began wondering whether he lacked a grasp of the issues.

**Do: Admit your mistakes.** Most leaders operate under a "Thou shall never admit thy mistakes" imperative. True leaders, however, reflect on their actions, admit mistakes and learn from them to move forward.

When it became apparent his original nominee for health and human services secretary carried a questionable tax record, Obama withdrew his nomination and stated in a CNN interview: "I screwed up."

**Don't:** Under Bush's administration, there was never an admission weapons of mass destruction never existed. In the meantime, American soldiers died and Iraq was destroyed.

**Do: When necessary, let them fail.** Obama inherited a barely viable auto industry. Shortly after assuming office, he took a "no sacred cows" approach. He was willing to let these giants fall, regardless of the consequent domino effect, to protect the health of the larger system.

**Don't:** Hold on to systems that lost their reason for existence. Bush did not shut down Guantanamo Bay even when it became blatantly evident the solution it offered led to nothing but dead ends.

Implementing these Obama-inspired principles is no small feat. But if Obama could rally people worldwide, it's definitely worth applying them in any organization.

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