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TIPPING POINT LEADERSHIP: NYPD

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New York's Police Department was notoriously difficult to manage with a large workforce and limited budget. Officers were underpaid compared to their counterparts in neighboring communities, crime had gotten out of control, and the public did not have confidence in the police department to protect them before crimes were committed. William Bratton, police commissioner of New York City, was faced with this problem in 1994. Without an increase in his budget, Bratton turned the NYC Police Department around and made New York the safest large city in the nation. Between 1994 and 1996, felony fell 39%, murders 50%, and theft 35%. The public confidence in the NYPD increased from 37% to 73% and internal job satisfaction was at an all time high. What makes an organization turn around with a limited budget, a demotivated staff, and a difficult culture to manage?

Bratton faced four hurdles managers consistently deal with that blocks high performance and was able to overcome them in record time. These four hurdles include an organization wedded to the status quo, limited resources, a demotivated staff, and opposition from powerful vested interests. Research concludes that Bratton's turnaround

from these four obstacles comes from tipping point leadership. The theory of tipping point leadership hinges on the insight that in any organization, once the beliefs and energies of a critical mass of people are engaged, conversion to a new idea will spread like an epidemic, bringing about fundamental change very quickly. Tipping point leadership is enforced through agents who make unforgettable and unarguable calls for change. Bratton focused his efforts on mobilizing the commitments of the organization's key players and succeeded in silencing most change resistant vocal employees.

In order to handle these four obstacles, Bratton used specific approaches. The first obstacle involved breaking through the cognitive hurdles that block companies from recognizing the need for radical change. Tipping point leadership suggests accomplishing this issue by putting the company's key managers face-to-face with the operational problems so the poor performance becomes something they witness rather than hear about. Communicating the message this way makes the message stick with managers and makes them convinced that a turnaround is necessary, and is something they can achieve. Bratton

accomplished this by having his police officers, including himself, ride the subways to and from work every day so they could share the ordinary citizens subway experience. This way they could witness the situation their subordinates were up against; jammed seats, aggressive beggars, gangs of youths, homeless people sprawled out on benches among others. With this reality staring them in the face, the transit forced senior managers to no longer deny the need for a change in their policing methods.

After people in the organization accept the need for change, leaders have to face the reality that they have to operate within limited means. Tipping point leaders know they can achieve a great deal with the resources they have by concentrating their resources on the places that are most in need of change and that have the biggest possible payoffs. Bratton accomplished this by reducing the amount of police time it took to process arrests. It originally took an officer up to 16 hours to book the suspect and file the papers. The officers hated this process and admitted that they even avoided making arrests in minor cases. Bratton realized he could dramatically increase his available police officers, reduce the crime rates, and motivate his officers if he could condense this process. His solution was to park “bust buses,” old buses converted into arrest-processing centers, around the corners from targeted subway stations. This innovative idea cut the process from 16 hours to just one and reduced the subway crime rate without an increase in the number of officers on duty.

The third obstacle involves overcoming the motivational hurdles that have discouraged and demoralized an organization’s employees. Tipping point leadership suggests CEOs to single out

their key influencers in the company. Getting the key influencers motivated frees an organization from having to motivate everyone, which can be costly and time consuming to the organization. Bratton’s approach to motivating his key influencers involved putting them under the spotlight. He identified his key influential commanders by how many officers they managed and invited them to a semiweekly strategy review meeting that involved the city’s top commanders. At the meetings, the officers had to present to the group how the officers were addressing the city’s crime issues and why performance was improving or deteriorating. These meetings changed the NYPD’s culture by making results, responsibilities, and performance transparent, accountable, and leading parts of their culture.

The last obstacle involves how to neatly close off potentially fatal resistance from vocal and powerful opponents. The more likely change becomes the more negative influencers, internally and externally, will become resistant. Through tipping point leadership, Bratton was prepared for this political hurdle by identifying and silencing the powerful resisters early on. On his top team, he had a highly respected senior officer who would report to him the attitudes of the staff toward Bratton’s new initiatives. This helped Bratton identify those who would fight or silently sabotage his new proposals and Bratton could silence their oppositions by examples or indisputable facts on why his initiatives were better than the old ways. This process works for both internal and external resistance.

Leaders like Bratton can use this four-step process to bring about rapid and lasting change with limited resources. The cognitive and limited resource hurdles represent the internal obstacles that organizations face while the motivational and political hurdles can prevent a strategy's rapid execution if not taken care of early in the process. Overcoming these hurdles is a continuous process because successful leaders do not settle for one successful change in their company. Tipping point leaders understand that the innovative ideas of today will become the conventional norm tomorrow and they

will need to go through these same hurdles again every time they come up with a new competitive strategy to make their organization a differentiator in the market.

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The Center for Business and Economic Analysis proudly serves as a link between the Donald J. Schneider School of Business and Economics at St. Norbert College and the local business community in the greater northeast Wisconsin region. For more information, visit www.snc.edu/cbea or contact the Directors, Dr. Jamie O'Brien (jamie.obrien@snc.edu) and Dr. Marc Schaffer (marc.schaffer@snc.edu).
