

Leadership in Tough Times

“All of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common: it was the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of their people in their time.”

~ John Kenneth Galbraith

Americans are anxious about their financial future. Their government, like a spendthrift shopper, has piled up debt and maxed out its available credit limit. As the national debt balloons, a potential crisis looms. To prevent the United States from defaulting on its financial obligations, the government appears likely to expand the debt ceiling—the equivalent of an out-of-control spender using a tenth credit card to meet the minimum payments on nine others.

How should the President and Congress lead the country in confronting the financial mess? While the specifics of reaching a political solution are far from clear, here are a few principles for leading during tough times.

1) Confront Reality

Politicians on both sides of the aisle finally appear to have grasped the seriousness of America’s financial condition, but for too long they dithered as the country’s debt crept upward. Why are leaders slow to confront reality, even when problems loom large in front of them? One reason is that leaders surround themselves with a like-minded inner circle. The resulting uniformity of perspective blinds them to the reality of the situation. Likewise, leaders naturally have selective-hearing. They more readily latch onto news they want to hear than information that’s painful to process. Another reason that reality goes unaddressed is wishful thinking. Leaders are tempted to hope for improvement or a change of fortune instead of making tough choices to bring resolution to a problem. Finally, fear factors into the equation. Afraid of making the wrong decision, a leader may freeze up and do nothing.

2) See the Big Picture

Pundits worry that political leaders, mindful of their prospects for reelection, may strike a temporary bargain to avoid having to cast the controversial votes necessary to deal with the debt. However, postponing real action on the financial crisis will only increase the magnitude of the problem. The question of the hour is: will public officials lead or follow?

Followers think first of themselves and fret about short-term results. Meanwhile, leaders focus on others and concern themselves with the long-term health of those they lead. While followers worry about the penalties of failure, leaders concentrate on the rewards of success.

3) Value Teamwork

In politics, bipartisan cooperation appears to have gone the way of the dinosaur. Yet, as the challenge escalates, the need for teamwork elevates. Republicans and Democrats cannot simply set aside their differences, but they can tone down their insistence on having all of their demands met. A leader who values teamwork creates a sense of urgency compelling enough—and a vision for the future attractive enough—to convince rivals to find common ground. Ultimately, success comes to a team only when its players let go of self-serving agendas and combine their abilities in the interest of the team as a whole.

4) Make It Happen

Leaders can be evaluated by the size of the problem they're willing to tackle. The best leaders push beyond their comfort zones and challenge themselves to wrestle with the biggest obstacles in their pathway. Making it happen requires risk; there's no escaping the possibility of failure.

Leaders committed to curbing the national debt of the United States government face immense political risks. They may have to distance themselves from fellow party members and incur the ire of segments of their support base. Yet until they're willing to imperil their political popularity, they stand little to no chance of bringing about lasting change.



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