

Divided

“It doesn’t pay
to hate your
enemies,
because it is
liable to affect
your
judgment.”

*Don Corleone
The Godfather*

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Exactly a year ago as our troops were going to war in Iraq, I wrote in this space about ‘Winning the Peace.’ Winning the peace is every bit as challenging, and probably more, than expected. One major reason is the competing factions vying for power. We have learned that the leaders of the Sunni, Shiites and Kurds are often more concerned about their sects than about some abstract concept called Iraq. So as the formal power structure is being formed, competing interests are vying to fill the power vacuum.

It is painfully ironic: While our forces work to unite these factions through a constitution, a government and selection of leaders – as we espouse to Iraqis the virtue of sacrificing partisan gains for the greater, common good – we are so divided here at home.

I am not talking about the lively, healthy debate about our strategy and how we should proceed. I am talking about the venom so harshly directed at President Clinton a few years ago and now so harshly directed at Bush. Like the factions in Iraq, the venomous seem to value winning the argument and the power over seeking the truth and the common good.

The terrorists’ quote that “Americans love life, and terrorists love death” seems less true each day. We had hoped to make Iraq more like us – united, broad-minded, optimistic. But it appears that we are increasingly becoming more like them – divided, narrow, angry. This growing domestic hatred sure isn’t doing anything for our collective “judgment.”

This is not the first time we have seen the seeds of disunity grow into the potential for failure – among nations or in corporations.

Divided by Strategic Intention

We see Al Qaeda and a loose association of smaller, local terrorists groups in Afghanistan, Iraq and around the world keep much larger, more technology-enabled, and much better funded forces at bay.

Many organizations have intended to use capital to dominate in size and technology in order to create overpowering competitive advantages. Yet we see Southwest Airlines outmaneuvering the major carriers. Harrah’s Casinos, certainly not the newest or largest casino in Las Vegas, leads the way with customer management while showing very promising growth. In banking, we see smaller, more local, less technology-invested banks more than hold their own against the larger institutions.

Executives who had hoped to win by depending on size and technology are now having to do an about face. Yet they are uncertain where to pin their next strategic hopes. On that question, many organizations are in an abject state of disunity.

Divided – Management from the Front Line

As of this writing we are considering more troops for Iraq and dealing with limited troops in Afghanistan. Enough people to win the war, but not enough people to win the peace.

Disunity about strategy is often compounded by a persistent divide between centralized management and front lines. As organizations invested heavily in technology, many purposely or not, divested themselves of human capital, downsizing staff, decreasing training, and de-emphasizing people.

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Looking at the recent focus of many banks on adding branches and staff, it would appear that many of the banks are arriving at the conclusion that feet on the ground in the local market matters a lot.

“Booz Allen Hamilton research in 2003 shows there is a good reason for this revival of branch systems: They are significant growth engines for retail banks. Indeed, up to 90 percent of customer relationships are won or lost in branches.” (February 24, 2004)

The lessons of both militaries and corporations seem to form a pattern. Even in a technology-enabled world, quality and quantity of human resources at the frontline has been underestimated in realizing long-term, sustainable success. Can you say “jobless recovery”?

Divided Horizontally – Disaggregated Functions

The 9/11 Commission Hearings are not the first time we have heard of major intelligence busts. The inability of the heads of the FBI, CIA, FAA, etc. to put the puzzle parts together precluded the possibility of fending off a major attack on our soil from some remote place like Afghanistan.

We have our own acronyms that conjure up the same images – the CTO, CFO, CMO and COO who failed to put the puzzle parts together to prevent some really big busts – spending large amounts on what addressed no discernable business problem while overlooking some really big ‘gotchas’.

This “horizontal” divide in many respects is the hardest to overcome because the typical use of organization structure – command and control – is usually impotent against it.

It is hard to bridge these strategic, vertical, and horizontal divides. Yet the never-ending job of leader is to do so. To link together things that don’t fit exactly, where full agreement is nearly impossible, and where healthy disagreement is valuable. Leadership knows no greater challenge and no greater reward than bringing together disparate groups to work together for a noble purpose with unity built on the residue of disagreement and divide.