

POWER OF PRIORITY SERIES: LEADERSHIP & PRIORITIES

British political philosopher Isaiah Berlin once described the perspective that public leaders bring to their responsibility to govern as the difference between the hedgehog and the fox.

"The hedgehog knows one big thing. The fox knows many little things."

EFFECTIVE LEADERS TAKE AFTER THE HEDGEHOG IN THAT THEY KNOW THE ONE BIG THING — OR AT LEAST THE VERY FEW THINGS THAT REALLY MATTER.

They understand the “physics” of personal focus—like the laser beam, the greater one’s focus the greater the energy released in service of valued ends. They embrace the wisdom of the German proverb,

"The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing."

Ineffective leaders, like the fox, know many little things and consequently lose their focus and diffuse their energy on inconsequential matters.

The late Peter Drucker noted,

"I've seen a great many people who are exceedingly good at execution, but exceedingly poor at picking the important things. They are magnificent at getting unimportant things done. They have an impressive record of achievement on trivial matters."

There is probably no better example of Drucker’s observation than the curious case of Gallienus, Emperor of Rome from 260-268 A. D. Gallienus was a man of many gifts, and great and various passions. But he lacked the personal focus and discipline that comes from having clear priorities. Historian Edward Gibbon described his term of governance.

In every art that he attempted his lively genius enabled him to succeed; and, as his genius was destitute of judgment, he attempted every art, except the important ones of war and government. He was a master of several curious but useless sciences, a ready orator, and elegant poet, a skillful gardener, an excellent cook, and most contemptible prince.

Gallienus possessed every gift, except the “gift” of knowing one big thing. He was unable to focus his passion to serve what should have been his first priority—effectively governing the Roman Empire. Not surprisingly, Gallienus presided over a period of precipitous decline. His days were devoted to a jumbled amalgam of many inconsequential things, which, ironically, he pursued with great energy and some degree of success. Gallienus could have benefited from the warning of the later day Italian philosopher and New York Yankee Hall of Fame catcher Yogi Berra who said,

"If you don't know where you're going, you'll wind up somewhere."

THE ATTENTION OF GALLIENUS —OR LACK THEREOF— IS A REMINDER THAT A KEEN SENSE OF PRIORITY IS A LEADERSHIP NECESSITY.

The one thing that that mattered most—governing well—was subservient to the many things that mattered least, at least for an Emperor—gardening, poetry and cooking. Ignoring his top priority, Gallienus squandered his passion and gifting in service of irrelevant and inconsequential pursuits.

Missionary pioneer and Nobel Peace Prize winner John R. Mott believed that when all was said and done, leadership was a matter of getting a few vital things done, while leaving the rest undone—not wasting precious attention on the “many little things.” In Mott’s words,

“In any work abounding in pressing needs and great opportunities, we must make a study of priorities. We must plan the use of our time. No man can do:

- a). all the good that needs to be done;
- b). all that others want him to do;
- c). all that he himself wants to do.”

APART FROM CLEAR PRIORITIES, A LEADER WILL NOT BE ABLE TO DETERMINE WHERE TO BEST DEPLOY HIS OR HER LIMITED TIME AND ATTENTION, THEY WILL FAIL TO “MOVE THE NEEDLE” IN THE FEW AREAS THAT REALLY MATTER.

They won’t know which opportunities to seize, and which problems to address. Like Gallienus, their gifts and energy will be squandered, and their days will degenerate into mishmash of fragmented and disconnected pursuits; a flurry of activity without progress in what really matters.

Today, take some time to ponder your priorities: do you take after the fox, or the hedgehog?

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