



Why Today's Congress Needs A Lesson About Thoroughbred Leaders

Like millions of other Americans, I watched the tense 'fiscal cliff' negotiations over the past several months with many different reactions. Never in my lifetime did I expect to see the United States Congress not only fail to collaborate, but to become virtually gridlocked as a governing body. News reports suggested that this organization's inability to work together could literally plunge the country (and possibly the world) into an economic recession. Political experts were often questioned about why it seemed that the governing body had become so gridlocked and unable to reach compromises as they'd obtained historically in years prior amidst ideological differences that have always existed. When I put on my management consultant hat, the constant uncompromising behavior of both political parties, actually began to make some sense as political experts blamed the significant problem (albeit often under acknowledged) due to the simple fact that Congressional members simply don't have the personal relationships that they once had. They explained that over the past several years the culture of Congress has shifted in large part because many members don't "live" in Washington D.C. with their families. Instead, they typically fly in for just a few days immediately returning home for extended weekends to be with their families who remain back at home in their districts. As a result, Congress members' families today don't really know each other and they don't tend to socialize much or eat dinners together as they had regularly in previous years. This void of relationship, experts reiterated over and over again, has led to a void of trust which has made it much more difficult to work towards consensus on much of anything.

When consulting for small businesses and corporations, I often teach what I call the universal law of relationship building. Taking a step back and watching the actions of our U.S. Congress unfold, it became apparent to me that our leadership could use a lesson about this law. The universal law of relationship building impacts trust, it determines leadership style, and it is truly necessary to the functionality of any organization, And, here's why:

Simple Truth #1

It's hard to trust a person you don't like and harder to like a person you don't know.



Trust is absolutely key to building any strong relationship. It's certainly key for building relationships where there is a need to work through conflicts and develop consensus. Why? Because it's difficult to trust a person that you don't really like, and likewise it's hard to like a person that you don't know.



One may be tempted to think that relationship building while important for political adversaries charged with regularly negotiating legislative compromises may be more superfluous for the average everyday leader. FALSE! Relationship building is absolutely critical for effective collaboration in virtually any organization – not just because it helps in negotiation situations or makes the workplace more palatable, but it truly does improve task effectiveness and efficiency.

If we accept this as true, one interesting question to consider is what leadership style is most effective to build a high trust organization. Various factors can influence leadership style; however, one key determinant is the leader's level of focus on "the work" (task) vs. their level of focus on "the people" (relationships) as it relates to their natural leadership style. There are three distinct leadership styles that most leaders seem to embody – The Bull, The Lamb, and The Thoroughbred. As consistently as I've noticed the three distinct styles, I've observed that the balanced "Thoroughbred" style reaps far superior results particularly over time. With multigenerational workforces that are more diverse today than ever (and this trend is expected to only increase), leaders are "required" more and more to develop and project a style that truly balances focus on "the work" and "the people" in their day to day interactions, decisions, and communications. The choice between the strong task master and the sensitive community builder is no longer a valid option...today's workforce demands both qualities in the same leader...the Thoroughbred Leader!

How much is your style driven by a focus on work vs. people?





Let's take a look at some general characteristics of each style:

	The Bull	The Thoroughbred	The Lamb
Strength Area	IQ	Both	EQ
Staff Motivated by	Fear	Respect	Affection
Communication tends to be	Direct/Blunt	Nuanced	Sensitive
Conflict Management Style	Bully or Avoid	Problem Solver	Doormat or Analysis Paralysis

The Bull

This type leader is much more comfortable focusing on work related tasks during day to day interactions with staff and others. Some Bulls exemplify the old school task masters who simply walk around cracking the whip to get things done. Others may be much more cerebral and intellectual personalities who are simply much more comfortable focusing on work specific issues than engaging in casual banter or other relationship building activities which they may view as less than comfortable. Bulls can tend to be very directive, task oriented, and specific by nature – qualities that can be beneficial or detrimental depending on the circumstance. The Bull can be effective in certain environments in the short term; however, the risks/costs typically quickly outweigh the benefits in most environments. An instance when this style might be more effective is when the group is comprised of other similarly task driven individuals. In this case, they may respond fairly well to one of “their own”. In general however, this style has limited effectiveness in the short term and can be particularly ineffective longer term creating an environment based on fear, distrust, or even worse apathy.

Typical Benefits-

- ❖ Emphasis on work details can provide needed task clarity and result in high productivity (particularly in the short term)
- ❖ Exclusive focus on “the work” minimizes any concern about inappropriate “fraternizing” in the workplace.

Typical Risks-

- ❖ Employees may not feel that you care about them as individuals which stifles trust and camaraderie.
- ❖ A culture of fear may set in which typically results in low employee morale.

The Lamb

This type leader tends to focus primarily on building relationships, getting to know employees on a more personal level, and enhancing team morale. The Lamb is quick to take the staff out for drinks after work and knows everyone by name, but they could also be perceived as a bit of a “pushover” or more of a peer than a true leader. The danger with this type leader is that they may be too focused on winning friends and not focused



enough on the team's mission and tasks. They may be best received by a small group of individuals with high need for relationship focus who truly need and appreciate significant personal attention and could be a particular turn off (maybe perceived as too "touchy feely") for staff who are more motivated by task driven.

Typical Benefits-

- ❖ Employee morale (particularly short term) can be quite high as the leader tends to focus on individual needs and employee satisfaction – let's face it, these leaders are often perceived as much more fun and easy going.
- ❖ This style encourages a culture of informality and team building which can be beneficial for the organization long term.

Typical Risks-

- ❖ Employees may feel that this style "intrudes" on their personal life; they may be uncomfortable with the blurring of the line between personal and professional.
- ❖ Leaders who build friendships with employees may find it difficult to manage conflict or discipline them as needed.
- ❖ Organization may lack needed structure and attention to relevant tasks if there's not enough focus in these areas. This can be a particular challenge for workplace environments struggling with particularly complex business models, organizational structures, or domain areas.

The Thoroughbred

The Thoroughbred leader tends to balance their focus on people development with their focus on the work activities. In my experience in most organizations this leadership style produces far superior results – developing teams and individuals that not only work well together but also maintain stronger focus on the team's goals and tasks and ultimately produce better results. The Thoroughbred style becomes even more necessary for those in higher levels of leadership because they tend to manage larger organizations with more heterogeneous mixes of employees with varying needs for focus on work and people.

Typical Benefits-

- ❖ Morale tends to be high with employees having needed structure and task focus along with attention to relationships, employee development, and individual needs.
- ❖ This leadership style creates a more balanced work environment which can inherently be much less stressful for employees.
- ❖ This style tends to appeal to a broader range of employee needs. Like leaders some employees are more work focused while others are more people focused. The Thoroughbred style often appeals to both sets of needs. Also, the Thoroughbred leader (naturally maintaining dual focus on both) tends to shift focus towards either work or people focus as needed much more easily since their style is naturally more flexible in nature.



Typical Risks-

- ❖ This style could frustrate employees or organizational cultures with extreme needs on either the “work” or “people” end.

It’s important to acknowledge that this balanced style is much more than a simplistic Goldilocks approach of “not too hot/not too cold”. Instead, it’s a truly balanced leadership approach where the leader...

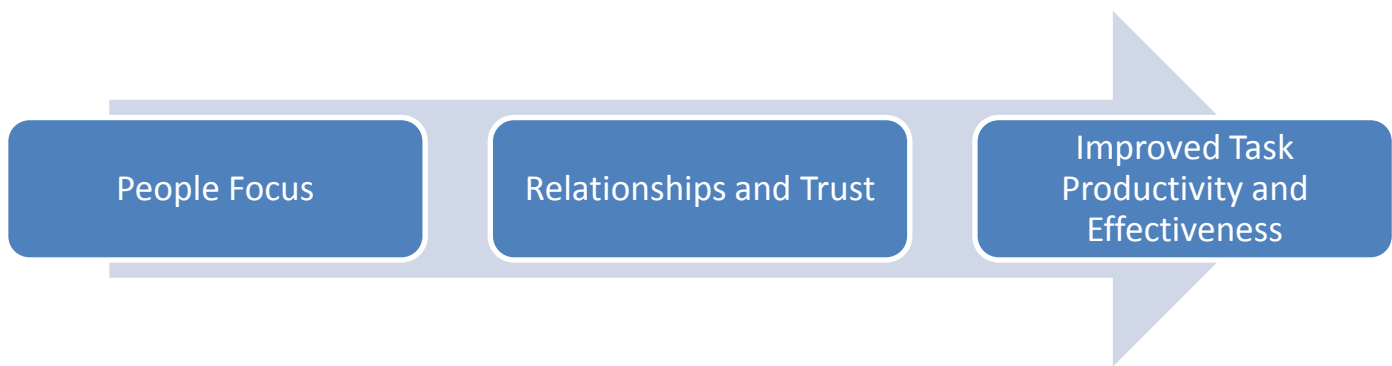
- Maintains focus on tasks, mission, goals, and addresses issues and conflicts head on as needed
- Provides necessary structure to help employees understand their roles and what’s expected of them
- Makes decisions and takes actions that demonstrate genuine concern for employees
- Takes time to get to know each individual personally and develops relationships built on trust and respect.

The Thoroughbred leader truly infuses a focus on both people and work throughout their day to day interactions. This is quite different from the Bull who may guiltily sprinkle in a few team building retreats or group lunches when they haven’t done them in awhile or the Lamb who brings in a consultant to generate process flowcharts or conduct root cause analysis sessions to address pressing workplace issues sporadically. For the Thoroughbred leader, this mutual focus is natural and present throughout day to day activities.

If you’re scratching your head saying, “*What’s wrong with focusing on work at work?*” the answer is nothing. Of course, we should work at work, but the question is what leadership style generates the most staff productivity/effectiveness and highest staff morale. While the recommendation that leaders should focus just as much on “the people” as “the work” may sounds altruistic, the primary motivation isn’t really altruistic at all because the simple fact is that improved personal relationships builds organizational trust and typically improve task productivity and effectiveness significantly.

Simple Truth #2

People focus builds relationships and trust which in turn improves task productivity and effectiveness





Unfortunately, the inverse is true as well. When a leader doesn't focus enough on building individual personal connections, it doesn't just damage those relationships; it oftentimes also ultimately negatively impacts task effectiveness. Let's examine a few typical examples of the how lacking relationships can negatively impact task/productivity....

- *Early in my career, I worked for a very task focused leader (nicknamed “techno weenie”) who surprised his staff with the purchase of an expensive coffee maker for their break room. He quickly noticed to his surprise that morale among his staff of nearly 200 seemed to decrease if anything with the presentation of the gift. When I asked around about what people thought of the gesture, I was told that most people interpreted it as his not approving of people walking across the street to a popular coffee shop for a mid morning break and this was his solution. Clearly, what was intended to be a gesture of appreciation for his employees was completely misinterpreted to be a punitive act. This miscommunication happened in large part due to a void of personal connection between him and his staff. Oftentimes, where there is little/poor relationship established, actions will be misinterpreted or assumed to have malevolent intentions.*
- *A manager (Sara) asks an employee (Mark) to develop a business plan as part of a new project. As Sara talks, Mark nods and honestly feels confident about working on the task. A few days later when Mark begins working on the business plan, he finds himself scratching his head not quite sure what she really meant by “business plan”. He had vague ideas of what a business plan was (at least from his perspective), but he wasn't exactly sure what she wanted included, whether it should be done in Word, Excel, or PPT, or how detailed it should be, etc. Because he had very little relationship with Sara, he hesitated to ask her bluntly to explain her needs in more detail (in part because he didn't want to seem like he didn't understand her initially). Instead, he asked another friend in the organization to help him interpret her direction and just took a stab at developing what he hoped she was looking for.*

Just as most people are right handed or left handed, most leaders typically have a natural preference for leading by focusing on “the work” or “the people” so it's perfectly natural for most leaders to be “Bulls” or “Lambs”. Indeed, the true “Thoroughbred” is a rare find. The benefits of this style are not just limited to the immediate, obvious ones. Indeed, this dual focus on work and people has a powerful, synergistic impact as well:

Now that we understand the “magic” of the Thoroughbred the question is.....can you develop this style?

Dana Brownlee is an acclaimed keynote speaker, corporate trainer, and team development consultant. She is President of Professionalism Matters, Inc. a boutique professional development corporate training firm based in Atlanta, GA. She can be reached at danapbrownlee@professionalismmatters.com.