

***Provocative Leadership:
Beyond “Best Practices” to “Next Practices”***



Have you thrown out your strategic plan yet? If you made one several months ago, I'm willing to guess that you have. The landscape of reality has already changed So now what? Here's a story-poem, "Brief Thoughts on Maps," to consider:

Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, who knew a lot about maps
according to which life is on its way somewhere or other,
told us this story from the war
due to which history is on its way somewhere or other:

The young lieutenant of a small Hungarian detachment in the Alps
sent a reconnaissance unit out into the icy wasteland.
It began to snow
immediately, snowed for two days and the unit
did not return. The lieutenant suffered: he had dispatched
his own people to death.

But the third day the unit came back.
Where had they been? How had they made their way?
Yes, they said, we considered ourselves
lost and waited for the end. And then one of us
found a map in his pocket. That calmed us down.
We pitched camp, lasted out the snowstorm and then with the map
we discovered our bearings.
And here we are.

The lieutenant borrowed this remarkable map
and had a good look at it. It was not a map of the Alps
but of the Pyrenees.

Goodbye now. ¹

When faced with an unfamiliar situation, the soldiers discovered that "any map" can be useful. Why? A map leads to confidence and action. You take steps forward, re-check the map, learn, make adjustments, and take more steps. As you re-check the map, you look around, surveying the environment. You re-orient to the reality that is. You learn, assess, and consider options. You make decisions about what to try next. You embrace error and uncertainty; yet you still chose to take the next step.

Provocative leadership is not about authority. Provocative leadership is about relationships: how well people work with each other and with the resources they do have. Provocative leadership is about creating space, providing sufficient support, and offering appropriate challenges to people – tempting them to grow on their own. How does this work “on the ground?”

Provocative leaders practice some known competencies:

- Offer affirmation and safety: They see others’ strengths and the edges of their comfort levels. They nurture those strengths and encourage people to move beyond the familiar. They create a safety net, a supportive environment where it’s okay to experiment, fail, learn, and try again.
- Create small disruptions: They alter the routine, introducing small changes that keep people and the organization learning. They don’t do this constantly; that leads to insecurity. But doing it in the right time, increases curiosity and energy.
- Expect action: They expect everyone to jump in with both feet and start doing. They don’t tolerate the status quo or passivity. They support trial-and-error – an experimental cycle that leads to incremental improvements.
- Sharpen thinking processes: They intentionally create times for people to recall stories from the past, to honor what exists now, to ask what has changed and what is emerging, to reflect on connections between the new and old, and to look at issues from different perspectives. They ask, “What should we try next?”

As provocative leaders practice these competencies, they create a “virtual” strategic plan. The plan adapts and creates action instead of paralysis – even in the face of change and uncertainty. The vision remains foundational, creating a boundary that frees everyone to safely experiment, create, and innovate. But provocative leaders go beyond the fundamental management map to build relationships that not only offer hope, but support continuous acting and learning. Provocative leaders move beyond “best practice” to “next practice.”

¹Holub, M. (1977) ‘Brief Thoughts on Maps’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 February 4, p. 118.

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Kathleen can be reached at kkfriesen@friesengroup.net.
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