

## Management Lessons from Obama?

President Obama's leadership style may have been examined and discussed more closely than any other new resident of the White House. The observations began early in the primary campaign, continued during the general election, and accelerated as he began naming cabinet members and advisers.

It remains to be seen how he'll respond on the job. But whether you voted for Obama or McCain, agree with some or none of the President's policies, there may be some management and HR lessons that could be drawn from "Obama mania."

### Fifteen keys to good management

1. **Hiring Someone Like Me Isn't Necessarily the Goal.**

While you may be an exceptional person (I'm sure you are!), hiring people like yourself isn't the goal. Employing someone who looks like, thinks like, or has the same skills as you possess isn't often the best choice. Think about the hiring of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State. She and Obama didn't share a lot in common.

2. **Diversity.**

Tokenism shouldn't trump experience and skills. Luckily with the large pools of qualified people of different sexes, races, religions, backgrounds, etc., it's fairly easy to employ many different types of people. Good and extensive recruiting and hiring practices promote diversity. But most importantly diversity results from commitments "from the top" and an organization that values it. Obama's hiring of a Bush holdover at the Defense Department (Gates), a female Senator as Secretary of State, a black man as Attorney General (Holder), and a daughter of immigrants as the nominee for Labor Secretary (Solis) show the diversity of the Obama administration. Creativity, perspective, and independent thinking often come with a diverse workforce.

3. **Group Think.**

Much has been written about Obama's bringing a Team of Rivals into his cabinet and other key positions. He has surrounded himself with extremely strong personalities who won't hesitate to offer their opinions. A good manager has the self confidence to encourage and listen to a wide range of opinions. High performing organizations successfully dodge group think.

4. **Going for Competence, Not Your Brother-in-Law.**

Being surrounded by friends, family, and past associates at work may make your days more pleasant and fun. It may or may not make your organization more productive and successful. Too often, in Washington and at work the "good 'ole boy (or girl) who is not particularly qualified gets the job. If this is a cultural issue it can be hard to overcome. But if the hiring process includes good preparation of position criteria, questions, and requirements, objectivity increases. Effective performance appraisals also promote competence. While not everyone is happy with the Obama appointments, most commentators agree on their competence.

## Management Lessons from Obama? (continued)

5. **Background Checks Matter.**

The value of good, thorough background checks became clear to the President as several of his nominees (e.g., Tom Daschle) were forced to exit due to tax problems. The White House's attempts to salvage the nominees took considerable time, resources and political capital. Given that it's been estimated that 25-33% of applicants seriously lie on a resume, a little time checking references, confirming dates, and employments saves a ton of pain down the road. "Wrongful hires" can be just as damaging as wrongful termination (maybe more).

6. **"I Screwed Up."**

A good manager owns his mistakes, apologizes as necessary, and doesn't scapegoat. The problems with the Tom Daschle nomination prompted the President to take responsibility and say "I screwed up."

7. **No Drama.**

"No drama Obama" was a hallmark of the Obama campaign. Observers have continually commented on the President's calmness and coolness. Managers need deep reservoirs of emotional intelligence also. Consistency, stability, reliability, steady temperament, and avoidance of big drama in the workplace are keys to a manager's success. It will be interesting to see how the President maintains "the no drama" as various crises start flying his way.

8. **Motivate.**

Obama's speaking skills and his ability to inspire people served him well during the campaign. The "Yes We Can" theme seemed to resonate. The importance of creating a vision for your employees, engaging them, and securing "buy-in" can't be overestimated. And best of all, key motivators are often free.

9. **Celebrate.**

While we can't compete with a large victory celebration in Chicago or an elaborate inauguration, managers can and should celebrate the successes of individuals, teams, and the organization. Sometimes they're small successes, sometimes they're huge. Celebration brings increased morale, commitment and a spirit of teamwork.

10. **Communicate.**

Obama is credited with being a great communicator. He understands that great communication is the vehicle to many successes and uses texts, email, YouTube, speeches and any other way he can to get his message out. He even won't relinquish his BlackBerry. Studies consistently show that good communication is the foundation for success and that poor communication is the number one organizational problem. Sharing information thoroughly and timely helps employees do their jobs, builds trust, and makes them feel a part of the organization. Most managers need to do more of it. Don't forget that listening is also a key component.

## Management Lessons from Obama? (continued)

### 11. It Comes From the Top.

Obama (for better or worse) has set the tone, culture, and agenda for his administration. History will judge and assess it. Analysts will provide a one minute sound bit to encapsulate it. Obviously senior management and an organization's current culture have the greatest influence in establishing goals, the mission, and what's important (or not) in a company. But managers and supervisors have tremendous influence as well. What you do, say, how you say it, what you reinforce, and what you value have a great impact on your team.

### 12. Be Yourself & Stay Visible.

It's been said that Obama seems "comfortable in his own skin." He's seen with his kids, playing basketball, and out in Washington. His critics may not agree with him, but appearing genuine and accessible scores points with the media and the public. Managers don't need to worry so much about managing their images, but being authentic, doing what you say, talking to your people, and not hiding in an office are key.

### 13. Compromise and Collaborate. "Win-Win."

As a community organizer, senator, and presidential candidate Obama has touted the importance of compromise and collaboration. It remains to be seen what kind of impact he'll have on the partisan Washington politics. The principles of Win-Win are applicable in dealing with an individual employee, team, or vendor. A manager's ability to see multiple sides of an issue, in acknowledging that she doesn't have all the answers, and to create an atmosphere where the goal is to get things done, not necessarily "win" will be successful.

### 14. Set and Maintain High Ethics.

Ethics and Washington? We'll see how that turns out, but you probably noticed the emphasis that the President placed on this in his speeches, new rules for his staff, and relationships with lobbyists. Good managers have high ethical standards, fight for what's right, and can be counted on to be fair and professional. They also tell the truth and don't just say what the employees want to hear.

### 15. On the Job Training & Learning Curves.

If you followed the presidential campaign you will remember some of the mistakes Obama made in the debates and in some speeches. At times he seemed surprised by things, unsure, and not always comfortable defending his positions. But if you watched closely you also observed him improving. McCain and Clinton also worked the learning curves well. The point is nobody has an advanced degree in how to manage people. It's pretty much on the job training. Individuals get promoted to a management position because they've done a particular job well and often have little or no management training. Good managers realize that they have a lot to learn and need to keep growing.

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