Continuing Struggles with Challenge The Process

By Steven C. Coats

On several occasions I have written about an essential leadership practice called Challenge the Process. It is a key component of one of the world's most widely accepted models of leadership, The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership®, by authors James Kouzes and Barry Posner. This model was first introduced in 1987, and detailed in the book, *The Leadership Challenge,* a world-wide bestseller. The book and its subsequent updated editions, explain what leaders most frequently do when leading at their very best.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with this powerful practice, Challenge the Process can be broadly summarized in the following manner. It is the practice in which:

> *Leaders search for opportunities and seize initiative in order to change the status quo. They look for innovative ways to improve the organization or the world. In doing so, they experiment, take risks and achieve small wins. And because leaders know that risk taking involves mistakes and failures, they accept the inevitable disappointments as learning opportunities.*

The concept is relatively easy to grasp, and I can confidently say that the people who have been exposed to it have readily connected it with the work of leaders.

Challenge the Process has always been of great interest to me for a couple of reasons. It is the practice that kick-starts change, innovation, growth, and everything else needed to survive in a world that continues to reshape itself on a daily basis. This makes it hugely important – for individuals and organizations. No great leader has, or ever will, settle for simply maintaining the status quo, when ambiguity and constant upheavals in all aspects of life are the current reality.

At the same time, it clearly remains, at least in my mind, the most misunderstood of all the practices, which is why I continually examine it. And this misunderstanding and faulty interpretation can cause organizations to get derailed from the work needed to sustain themselves in the immediate and long term time frames. Following are a few examples, of some *incorrect* viewpoints about and applications of this practice, which can lead to unrest and difficulties within organizations. Be on the lookout for them, so that you are not led astray.

Prevalent Pitfalls when Applying

1. To many, the word challenge connotes confrontation. In fact, I have met people who have misconstrued the practice to mean, "challenge the person," and sometimes in a not so positive way. Too often, I still hear clients tell me that they encounter people who will make comments such as, "That is a terrible idea. Only an idiot would believe it could possibly work. Now, don't take offense; I am only challenging the process."

    The funny thing is, when I read the definition of Challenge the Process, I do not see the part that says "attack others - and the horse they rode in on." Yet be aware, when challenging the process, spirited disagreements will occur, and as humans, we will get testy with each other. That said, you cannot use this practice as an excuse for lousy, attacking behavior. Challenging people to stretch their thinking or to consider different alternatives is not the same as attempting to make them look or feel inferior simply because their points of view differ from yours.

2. Challenge the Process is often wrongly interpreted to simply mean "point out everything that is broken." This refers to the person who harps about problem after problem, offers no desire to help, and in exiting, self-righteously trumpets that you

cannot challenge the process if you are unwilling to acknowledge the issues that need attention.

Once again, I don't see many similarities between the definitional statements, "search for opportunities and seize initiative," and the non-productive behaviors of "drop bombs and run." Keep in mind that it is useful for people to willingly call out a problem, especially when the problem is critical, and there is no apparent solution. But the problem proclaimers have to commit in some fashion to helping resolve the issue vs. simply leaving it for others. And leaders, don't you get caught up in convenient slogans such as "don't bring me problems, bring me solutions." It is not that simple and you know it. What you can ask people to bring is their hearts, minds, creative ideas and passions in order to figure out an answer to the problem. Those are all essential ingredients for this practice to bear fruit.

3. Challenge the Process is confused with challenge the standard. This is still a prevalent point of contention regarding this practice. Here is a common lament I hear about this confusion. "There are people here who think they are challenging the way we do things, but all they ever suggest is how we need to cut back on important work requirements, because the work is too hard or there is no time to do it."

Looking at work requirements and time frames is usually a fertile opportunity for challenging the status quo, while discovering new and better ways to accomplish required goals. But, avoiding necessary work merely because it is inconvenient or uncomfortable, is neither the intent nor the spirit of this practice.

4. Challenge the Process is translated to mean challenge every process, every minute of every day. Over the years, I have been asked, "Are you suggesting that people spend all their time making a fuss about and challenging how we do every little thing?"

The answer is clearly no. This practice requires thoughtfulness and discipline. It is about priorities and results-based change, not just constantly disruptive activities. At the same time, leaders do

keep their eyes open for opportunities, and are intentional about keeping themselves and their organizations from becoming lulled into complacency.

Behaviors That Derail It

Sometimes aspiring leaders unintentionally send mixed messages about this practice. Although they believe they are actually trying to promote more frequent application among their teams, they inadvertently set others up to resist and avoid it. Following are a couple of examples of which you should remain mindful, as you attempt to encourage others to challenge the way things are done.

1. Challenge the Process is more easily preached than practiced, often resulting in a strong feeling of hypocrisy about leaders. On numerous occasions, people have told me, "My boss says she wants us to be creative, challenge the status quo, and think outside the box. But when we question why certain work must be done the way it is being suggested, we hear something akin to, *"If you have a problem with it, no one is forcing you to work here!"*

How would you translate that message? It can certainly come across as controlling, duplicitous, and quite disabling to creative efforts. I wish this example was an exaggeration, but most of us realize it is all too accurate. So please remember this: *it is usually much easier for you to challenge something you believe needs improving, than to have others challenge something you believe does not.* There will always be operations in an organization that are untouchable at the moment. But, you will lose your credibility as a leader if you declare yourself immune to change or your favorite things off limits to the scrutiny of others.

> *When challenging the process, you almost always risk offending someone else. They may prefer things the way they currently are.*

2. The practice is communicated as "challenge only the little things." I have worked with organizations that seem to allow people to dabble, tweak, fine-tune, or slightly improve, but any change that might

be considered too big is off limits. There is nothing at all wrong with continuous improvement. It just does not require the same degree of leadership that more ambitious opportunities call for.

Inherent in this practice is the need to experiment and take risks. (Notice it does not say thoughtless, unbridled risk taking.) Challenge the Process is never completely safe. Remember, if there is no chance of failure, there would be no risk taking, only sure thing taking. Leaders must continue to work at creating an environment which promotes the taking of a few chances. Consider the following example.

In some recent research published in HBR, executives were asked about the percentage of failures in their organizations which were actually worthy of blame – where someone intentionally did something that might be considered boneheaded, for lack of a better word. Their answer was 5%. When examined, most of the so called failures were actually learning opportunities, and could even be considered praiseworthy. In spite of this, the executives were then asked how many failures were actually treated as blameworthy. You can guess the answer: 70 – 80%. Does that encourage you to want to stick your neck out on something new?

3. Challenge is positioned as additional work vs. part of the job. I remember one time hearing a boss actually say, "If people around here think they have time to go off and look for new ways to do things, maybe they don't have enough to do right now." Can you imagine? My guess is he wanted people to deliver on their current objectives, but only in the way they were approaching them today.

Challenging the process is not "something else" that people need to do, on their own time. It is the only way to keep up with change occurring every day— from competitors, technology, economic conditions or whatever. If change is not done by you, it will be done to you, and leaders know on which side of that statement they most want to be.

Three Remedies

In closing, here are three pieces of advice when attempting to bring forth the full power and value of Challenge the Process. First, keep yourself and others focused on the specific behaviors associated with it, and do not get caught up in the various misinterpretations of the word challenge. (Those behaviors are fully described in *The Leadership Challenge*, and further clarified in the Leadership Practices Inventory®, the assessment associated with The Five Practices model.)

Next, remind others that the practice is ultimately about taking action to create change. It requires preparation, dialogue, respecting others, and cooperation, because change usually produces some level of discomfort for those affected by it. Finally, remember that Challenge the Process is a two-way street. You cannot expect others to enthusiastically pursue growth in this practice if they are repeatedly shut down every time they offer a new or different approach.

I agree wholeheartedly with authors Kouzes and Posner, who state that "challenge is the opportunity for greatness." Heed their words, and go enlist some good people around you to create some greatness in your world.

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