

“Beating the Incumbent Curse”

What happened? Barack Obama ran a brilliant insurgent campaign against the *status quo* in Washington. He was swept into our nation’s highest office on a wave of public demand for fundamental change. Once elected, though, he turned away from the insurgent principles that had brought him from out house to White House. He and his Administration began almost immediately to think and act like typical incumbents—like the *status quo* itself. And today, their programs and policies are sputtering.

It’s happened before and will happen again—and it is happening in both politics and business. Today, a low-low 34 percent of Americans support their congressional incumbent, and research shows unprecedented levels of distrust, cynicism and anger, which often turns consumers against incumbent brands and companies.

The answer for both President Obama and for leaders of incumbent businesses is to retain the revolutionary principles that brought you to office or made your company great in the first place. Today, leaders must do three things to succeed:

The **first** principle of insurgent strategy is to “do the doable.” Insurgent campaigns, in politics or business, begin with few resources and must build strength and momentum. This means taking on achievable objectives. And it means never taking on the impossible—doing that only demoralizes your supporters and energizes the opposition.

Of course, the Obama Administration’s mistake was taking on the whopper of issues—health care reform—right out of the starting gate. The reason is that insurgents must continually do more with less—so the successful insurgent arranges objectives in order of difficulty to get some easy, symbolic wins and gain momentum from the beginning. This creates traction for the bigger goals later on: Before going for the Hail Mary touchdown, get some first downs

with small, but meaningful, victories. Gain momentum ... then gain traction for the bigger goals.

The **second** principle is “move the movable.” The point is to identify the voters—and only the voters—you’ll need to win the Election or win your policy goals. In doing this, you must understand what it will take to move these targeted voters and then you must activate this “move the movable” strategy. First priority always is to lock down your loyalists.

The **third** priority is to move the “soft support” to greater loyalty—to harder support. In politics, these are the “voters” who like the candidate, believe his or her values are true and generally support his or her policy goals. The problem is that they are not truly committed “hard core” loyalists. They’re the supportive voters who can be discouraged away from the polls by a little rain. And they must be motivated constantly with reasons why they should activate for the candidate ... and do it now.

You must not compromise your principles to reach for these soft supporters—but you must speak in their language and to the issues that make a difference to them. In most insurgent campaigns, political or business, the soft supporters outnumber the hard core loyalists by two-to-one. So they are necessary for victory—in winning the Election, or winning support for your policies, or gaining your business share.

Furthermore, the viral communicating and buzz these soft supporters create as they move toward greater loyalty is the most powerful way to communicate to other voters—the most effective way to move the great swath of undecided voters/citizens. Committed loyalists and soft supporters also help neutralize the negative reaction of the soft and hard opposition groups.

Last year, this kind of hard opposition was activated effectively by Conservative Republicans. At the same time, in 2009, seeming to hand policy over to the Democratic Congressional Leadership did nothing to pull soft supporters to President Obama’s legislative priorities. Although his 2008 victory represented a refutation of

Bush Administration policies, it also represented a refutation of business-as-usual in the Democrat majority Congress. Remember: During the 2008 Election, the only approval ratings lower than those of President George W. Bush were those of the Democratic Congressional Leadership.

All of us, as Americans, must hope and pray for our President's success in 2010. That's why we hope and pray for his return to the insurgent principles that took him from "out house to White House." In "do the doable" steps, and in ways that mobilize supporters and gain momentum, we need the insurgent change the Obama campaign so vibrantly and effectively promised.

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