

Leadership Secret Three And The Race For The Presidency

I promised the other day that we would say a few words about Secret Number Three “Set the High Performance Objective”, in light of the Presidential race. It was fitting, I think, to have first delved into the meaning of “greatness” and what it takes to achieve “greatness” in the context of the needs of our country now in the early years of the twenty first century. First of all, I’d like to define the difference between the “high performance objective” and the “objective”. The “objective” is the goal, the object of a team’s attention. The HIGH PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVE, on the other hand is quite different.

Let’s look again at the Presidential race in this country. On the Republican side, the contest has become a tactical battle among Governor Huckabee, Senator McCain, Governor Romney, and Rudolph Guiliani. All four, while defining the objective as winning the Republican nomination and then winning the White House, have also broken that objective down into measurable benchmarks. Delegates have to be won state by state. Public opinion has to be swayed both nationally and locally to develop momentum that can influence voters in each future primary. Each candidate has strengths and weaknesses among different demographics represented in each of the fifty states. In short, it has become an extremely interesting competitive test. Out of this contest may come a very strong candidate, annealed in the fire of close combat and tactically adept, patient, and willing to understand the benefits of concentration on process, perseverance, and confidence. Or not. It all depends on whether, during the next few weeks, they all keep their eye on the prize.

A high performance team is DEFINED by the goal it sets, but it is MADE by the environment it creates to get it. That is the real difference between the objective and the High Performance objective. On the Democratic side, Hilary and Obama are trading blows like two heavyweights intent on an early knockout, while Edwards waits in the wings for the critical blow that could disable one of the major combatants. Who will win this match depends on what I’ve mentioned before, the power to tell the story of America in the 21st century, as well as which of the candidates remembers the inherent advantage the Democrats possess in this election; the American people are no longer interested in tactics. They want a leader who will represent for them who and what each and every American truly WANTS to be. They want a leader who will say, “The objective is not to win the White House. The objective is to stand for the best that WE CAN BE, as a nation.” THAT is the high performance objective. It is not defined by benchmarks, not even by stretch goals or BHAGS (Big hairy Goals). It is way beyond the largest stretch goal you can imagine. The High performance objective simply says “I don’t know what it is I can do, or you can do, or my team can do. I have no idea. But, having said that, I am not going to hold you, me, or the team back from what it is they can truly do. I am going to believe in the possibility of perfection, of maximum effort, of inspired brilliance and I am going to free all of us to go there.”

In other words, it is not enough to achieve a stated objective. Not only does that have nothing to do with greatness, it normally impedes the pursuit of greatness. In a political campaign, it may be impossible to stay true to a higher calling, to stay true to the pursuit of the perfect. Perhaps, in politics, it is not only laughable, it might be an impure thought to hold to the possibility of staying above the fray and calling on the best that is within us. The temptation, after all, to go tactical, to answer the flurries of attacks, to grind out a “win” through sheer dogged trench warfare may not only be irresistible, it may be a necessity. Having said that, the truly great will somehow struggle to rise above the tactical and remember what must happen in the end.

The descent into attack that has characterized the last week or so of the Democratic race has dragged both main contenders into the tactical mire and has given life, however briefly, to John Edwards. The High Performance Objective is to create the environment “where champions are inevitable”. It is not to worry about the gold medal. It is to create the environment where gold medals happen. The candidate who can do that will win the race. That may not always be the case in political campaigns, but I believe it is the case this year. The country is starving for real leadership and sensing the uncertainty of the future. Now is the time to see who will step up to the plate to continually echo the call of our hearts and help us find the “hero within” that will take us into the challenges of the next fifty years.