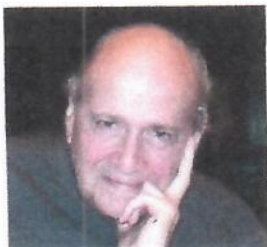


AN OPEN LETTER TO AJAY BANGA

By Gene Rotberg



On occasion I have been asked the differences between the World Bank's two messianic presidents, Jim Wolfensohn and Robert McNamara. On reflection, if Martin Luther King had a Rolodex and attended Harvard Business School, he would have become a Jim Wolfensohn; but if Martin Luther had gone to the Harvard Business School, he would have been Robert McNamara. I suspect that it may take the messianic qualities of both to run the Bank in the future.

But first, permit me to suggest what the new president should not do. 1. Don't reorganize or restructure or prepare a new budget. If the Bank is organized with significant power in the project staff, leave it alone. So be it. If it is organized with country directors having the final say, leave it alone. So be it. If it is organized so that economists or sociologists or political scientists, or environmentalists have the final say, leave it alone. Every new president has found the reorganizing results only in expending energy and morale with no good coming of it. 2. Don't bring personal staff to take care of you. Not even a "personal assistant." Unfortunately, personal staff will only insulate you from Bank staff. Bad idea. 3. Do not come with an agenda. Rather, ask key staff what initiatives would they like to implement and can't. Why not, and what are the constraints? And what keeps them up at night with worry or concern. Yes, staff are elitist and often arrogant. Many have political and familial ties to heads of state. They do not take it well if they are ignored or pushed around. Ask Paul Wolfowitz.

The staff should understand there are no gold stars for initiatives that turn out well and no "black marks" for unwise initiatives. In the development business rewards and punishments lead only to excessive risk-taking or reversion to the mean – both undesirable outcomes and inconsistent with rational thinking. As president, you should make clear it is perfectly okay to tell you that your priorities are misplaced and your initiatives are likely to do more harm than good. The fact is the staff is better equipped by experience and knowledge about what can go wrong. And they will share it – if you let them and if they don't feel threatened. And, the staff should know that the president of the Bank does not consider himself as the center of the universe. Remember, unlike governments or heads of state, you have neither taxing power, nor can you print money to meet your obligations. Ninety percent of the Bank's resources come from the private sector capital markets - a constituency not at the table.

You may say, "All that may be well and good but what about leadership? Isn't that what the president is supposed to do - lead? Are you not abdicating to the staff? Yes. But to motivate the staff to tell you the truth as they see it – what they really think – to admit to risk, vulnerability and uncertainty is sorely needed at the Bank. You might also consider measuring the consequences of failure to act and missed opportunities.

It takes a strong ego to be president of the Bank. Strong enough to encourage criticism and admit to failure. Many variables can cause havoc to the best laid plans. Corruption is rife, earthquakes and drought occur, democracies are fragile, violence is endemic, civil governance is not a given. The president should be strong enough to withstand the pressure from various constituencies, whose agendas are vastly different and often inconsistent, strong enough to accept not getting credit even when deserved and able to brush off unjust criticism.

Although your name may be forgotten in a few decades, it really doesn't matter because of what you will have accomplished – less infant mortality, less violence, more calories, more civil discourse, a better life for hundreds of millions, clean water, education, and climate change. But, pain and failure will be *blamed on you* if it occurs during your presidency. The praise for the good stuff may be heaped upon your successors.

But one day there will be a little girl from Bangladesh or Pakistan who, when she grows up, will be honored as president of the Bank. She will have never heard of you. But you put her there.

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