



"What were they thinking?"
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On why every public executive needs to be

Both a Hedgehog and a Fox

In his essay on Leo Tolstoy's view of history, Isaiah Berlin begins with a quote from the Greek poet Archilochus: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing."

The same distinction could be used to categorize public executives. Some know lots of little things. Others know—or, at least, focus on—one big thing.

This distinction can be illustrated by one contrasting pair of public executives: the United States presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Carter was the prototypical fox. Reagan exemplified the hedgehog.

Berlin, of course, was not interested in elected executives or, indeed, in any executives in the public, private, or nonprofit sectors. He was focused on "the deepest differences which divide writers and thinkers." As Berlin explained it, Dante, Plato, and Kafka were hedgehogs; Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Joyce were foxes.

Still, this deep difference also divides public executives.

Certainly, public executives may not need to write. When it comes to putting words on paper (or even on a screen) many have speech writers and interns to do this for them.

Still, there are counter examples. Winston Churchill was an excellent writer, and his literary skills reflected his analytical powers. To be an excellent writer, a public executive needs, first of all, to be an excellent thinker.

Indeed, all public executives do need to think. Some of them think like foxes. Some like hedgehogs. And how they think does make a difference. It affects the character of their leadership, and thus both what their organization seeks to accomplish as well as how it attempts to do so.

Several years ago, I wrote, "President Carter gave attention to detail a bad name." Then President Reagan did "the same for delegation."

Reagan was all about the big picture. He was, to use Berlin's words, an example of those "who relate everything to a single central vision, one

system less or more coherent . . . a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance." Reagan, however, ignored the details.

In contrast, Carter focused on the details. He was, again using Berlin's words, one of "those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory . . . related by no single moral or aesthetic principle." Carter, however, lacked a "central vision."

These are, of course, caricatures. Just as Berlin's categorization of writers and thinkers were, he confessed, "over-simple classifications."

After all, Reagan had not one but two central visions. He had a domestic vision: "Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." And he had a foreign-policy vision: Defeat the "evil empire."

Public executives need to combine the hedgehog's focus on one big thing with the fox's recognition that, to achieve anything that is big, everyone in the organization needs to know many little things each of which makes an essential contribution.

Certainly Carter had a few minor, if not dominant visions. For example, a major theme on which he campaigned for president was: "don't vote for me unless you want to see the executive branch of government completely reorganized." And, once in office, he gave some of his most talented people this reorganization task.

Still, despite this simplification, there can be little doubt that along the fox-to-hedgehog spectrum, Carter is much more of a fox while Reagan is much more of a hedgehog.

Moreover, it is possible to attribute Reagan's inability to achieve his big purposes (and the high-level scandals in his administration) to his inability to also think like a fox. Similarly, it is

possible to attribute Carter's inability to accomplish much of significance to his lack of the hedgehog's "central vision."

Effective public executives need to be able to think like a hedgehog *and* to think like a fox. They need a central vision—or, at least a very few, core visions. They also need to be able, in Berlin's words, to move "on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences."

Effective public executives need to combine the hedgehog's vision with the fox's recognition that achieving that vision requires many different people to do many different things.

If the executive's "single, central vision" is excessively dominant, he or she will fail to recognize signals that contradict, or undermine the value or relevance of that vision. The executive will fail to recognize the need to make fox-like adjustments to either purpose to be achieved or means for achieving that purpose.

Similarly, if the executive lacks any such vision—if there is no big purpose to be achieved—subordinates and collaborators will not know on what they should focus. In the absence of a central vision, the guidance to subordinates and collaborators can be given only through detailed, micro-management instructions.

To be effective—to create an organization that has the vision and capacity to achieve significant purposes—public executives need to combine the vision of the hedgehog with the foxes ability to recognize the importance of all the little things that are necessary to convert that big thing into a big reality. **B**

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