ONE YEAR IN: REVIEWING CHARLIE BAKER

Charlie Baker is an effective manager, but is he a leader?

Bill Aulet is a professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management.

By Bill Aulet | JANUARY 03, 2016
In the fall of 1977, the aspiring Harvard varsity basketball players used to play pickup games every afternoon. All of us were vying for the limited spots on the team. The competition was fierce. I remember one not particularly athletic guy, less of a thoroughbred and more of a workhorse, a Clydesdale. I did not see him making the team, but Charlie Baker surprised us. He not only made the team, but turned out to be a terrific teammate.

Governor Baker’s challenges now are much bigger and more significant, but the same attributes he showed back then — a hard worker who knows his limits, a guy who doesn’t take himself too seriously, but is still comfortable being an enforcer when needed — have never left him.

The big question for Massachusetts is whether he can pull off something rarely seen in business and even less often in politics — to be both a great manager and a great leader. To put this in context, managers optimize resources and produce consistent results, and leaders inspire people to effect positive change that is much more than incremental.

On the management side, Baker has taken the reins like a good MBA would, tackling challenges like the MBTA and the opioid crisis with working groups that create logical plans of action for achieving concrete goals. The T doesn’t run well in the winter? Charlie’s Winter Resiliency Plan announced in June will fix certain infrastructure, on a certain timetable, with certain budget funds. A thousand people died from opioid overdoses last year? Charlie’s opioid addiction bill will aim to lower that number by targeting how drugs are prescribed. So as a manager, his reputation as “Mr. Fixit” has proven valid.

The more complicated analysis comes in leadership. The first necessary condition of leadership is to have a clear identity that emanates from core principles. On this front, not only has he articulated core principles, but he has walked the talk. Fiscal conservative, social liberal. Handle problems with a mindset that is moderate, fact-based, tough, and not impaired with political
and emotional baggage. He has largely stuck to this approach, with one regrettable exception: his initial opposition to resettling Syrian refugees in Massachusetts, a knee-jerk reaction to the Paris terrorist attacks.

Following in the footsteps of GOP establishment

Governor Baker understands exactly what he faces as the Republican governor of a blue state, says Ben Branch.

Aaron Nurick: He’s pragmatic, effective, and good enough

His values tend to be management-centric. The distributed leadership model of the MIT Sloan School of Management is a useful lens to continue the assessment. This framework outlines how effective leaders design organizations to complement their strengths and weaknesses.

This model defines leadership as consisting of both enabling and creative capabilities. The enabling capabilities include making sense of complicated circumstances and building relationships to motivate and sustain change. On
the other hand, creative capabilities — developing vision and inventing ways to achieve it — provide focus and energy. The latter are essential for organizations to be truly transformative.

Charlie has shown a great willingness to develop enabling capability in his administration by identifying, recruiting, and retaining top talent regardless of political affiliation. Secretary of Transportation Stephanie Pollack has been a progressive policy advocate for decades; Secretary of Health and Human Services Marylou Sudders is a proud social justice independent; and Chief Legal Counsel Lon Povich advised former governor Deval Patrick on judicial nominees.

The creative capabilities assessment is yet unknown. Vision is what a leader like Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, or Ronald Reagan so effectively communicated to us. A vision is an exciting world of what’s possible. It inspires in a much more powerful way than simple competency ever can.

A vision is then-Governor Frank Sargent canceling the destructive highway bypass projects in the 1970s and doubling down on mass transit, including the Red Line’s expansion to Alewife. In his first year, Charlie has yet to offer that compelling vision.

The successful integration of an excellent manager and excellent leader is rarely achieved. It often seems like the two skill sets can’t overlap. That’s not true; it’s just extremely hard to do. The next act for Charlie is to provide that inspiring vision while continuing management excellence. It seems like a real stretch, but based on personal history, I would not bet against the Clydesdale, Charlie Baker.

*Bill Aulet is the managing director of the Martin Trust Center for MIT Entrepreneurship, a senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management, and author of “Disciplined Entrepreneurship.”*