Charlie Baker: "Just focus on the work."

By James Furbush | June 1, 2016
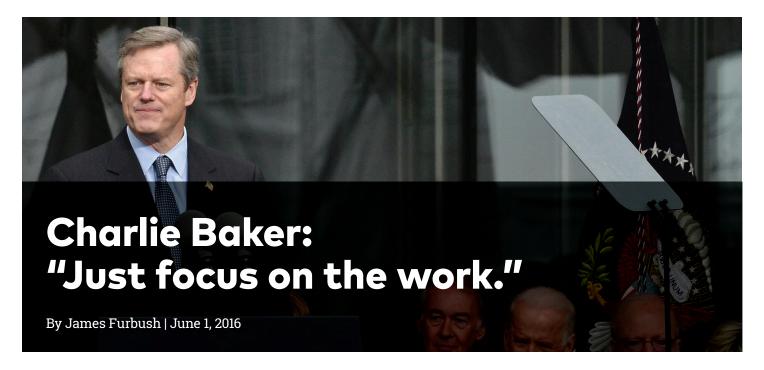
How do you know if you're succeeding as a leader? One year into his first term, Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker has poll numbers any politician would envy. But he also has seen anecdotal signs – he calls them "waves in the narrative" – that the people of Massachusetts approve.

"I ran into a lot of people who said either, 'I'm a Democrat but I'm really pleased with the job you're doing.' or, 'I didn't vote for you but I think you're doing the right things,'" said Baker, a Republican governor with an approval rating of 73 percent in an overwhelmingly Democrat state, who also happens to be the former CEO of Harvard Pilgrim Health Care.

Baker sat down with athenaInsight to discuss his "no muss, no fuss, just focus on the work" approach to administration and leadership.

You've been governor now for a little more than a year. What leadership trait has helped you the most so far?

The most important thing is to roll with the punches. We had lots of surprises in our first year. We had budget deficits we weren't expecting. The public transportation system broke while we were in the midst of nine feet of snow. The nine feet of snow was a bit of a surprise.

One of the things we did really well as an administration was adapt. That's also one of the most important things any organization has to be able to do. I mean, you have a plan. You try to stick with it. But there's all kinds of stuff that kind of comes flying over the transom along the way, and you've got to be able to adjust.

Being adaptable is crucial for health care organizations, because of the monumental sea changes facing the industry. How can they become more fluid?

I'm a big believer that in the end, you have to have the right people in the right seats. If you have a good team it doesn't solve all your problems, but it helps a lot with trying to get folks to row in a similar direction. And when you get into some of the bigger health care organizations, which are very complicated, it's going to be really important.

Historically in health care, a lot of folks have thought, "If I just carry the load myself I can figure this out." It's not going work that way going forward. It's has to be a team game. No superheroes, because one person or two people aren't going to be able to deliver the kind of experience that folks are going to be looking for.

So, as someone who oversees a complex organization, what can you do to ensure that your teams are collaborating and executing in an optimal way?

I'm a big believer that you can't give anybody more than five things to do. Most people in the course of a day will probably deal with more than that. Right? But for me, everybody in our administration at the secretariat level has five things that we expect them to accomplish. I have five things that I have to accomplish, too. And we all know what each other's are, and some of them are cross-functional.

If you have more than five priorities then you really don't know what's important. If you don't build your own scorecard, somebody else is going to build it for you. I'd rather be judged on the stuff that we build together than judged by something that somebody else decides is important.

So how do you decide what's important? In health care, with so much change, it's easy for organizations to get overwhelmed by all of the important strategic bets they need to make.

Recognize that every issue you deal with is passionately important to someone. So you've got to treat them all with respect. Even things that aren't that interesting to you, it's important that you realize that to somebody else, it's the most important thing of all.

I never want to be one of those leaders who is only talking to the people who report to me. You have to go talk to the people you report to. And in health care, that's your customers, your patients, your suppliers, the people you work with every day, to actually deliver for the people you're serving.

How do you get buy-in from your staff or the citizens if you are placing bets they aren't passionate about or don't fully understand?

One of the things leaders in health care should be doing, especially if they're managing physician groups and large health care groups, is get in place with the folks who are on the front line seeing patients, managing their tech system, doing the things every single day that make their health care organization work. If you just demonstrate to folks that you really want to know and understand what they do — and value it — they un-

derstand that what you're trying to do is improve their ability to serve their patients, not make it harder.

Finally, are there any lessons you hold close from leaders that have inspired you?

I learned a lot from Bill Weld and Paul Cellucci. [ed. note: Baker served in high posts in both the Weld and Cellucci administrations.] Bill Weld was a master at not saying the thing that would create a major distraction in the course of public debate, and instead biting his tongue and biding his time and playing the long game around trying to get something accomplished. Paul Cellucci was a master at understanding how important it was to maintain open lines of communication with your colleagues in state and local government. And to maybe even be aggressive about how much outreach you do and how many times you talk to people.

I think a lot of our problems in government and politics these days are driven by a lack of communication, a lack of trust and this sense that the fight is more important than actually moving the Commonwealth and the country forward.

James Furbush is the managing editor of athenaInsight

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