

Document name: Doing politics differently: How a 'nerdy Professor' engaged with the citizens of Calgary.
Document date: 2013
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OpenLearn course: OpenLearn course: Collective leadership Collective leadership
OpenLearn url: <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/money-business/collective-leadership/content-section-0?active-tab=description-tab>



Doing politics differently: How a 'nerdy Professor' engaged with the citizens of Calgary.

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“It is the follower’s job to let the leader *know* what he or she needs [.....] and this is done by both of them [leader and follower] acting honestly, working together with mutual respect, honoring their respective roles and responsibilities as leader and follower” (Maroosis, 2008).

For this honest and mutual respect to be apparent, what a leader does is obviously about doing the right things, but the role is also about saying the right words so the follower can hear them in the right way (Maroosis, 2008). Leadership is a role that should not just be reduced to a leader’s actions or just maintaining a relationship between themselves and the follower; it should be concerned with the engagement and mobilization of resources of all forms and backgrounds (Grint, 1997).

The following case study looks at an example of leadership where there are valuable lessons to be learnt about mobilizing a dis-engaged population. Whilst reading the following case study, consider and make notes around the following questions:

1. What can be learnt from the following case study in terms of bringing together different ages, cultures, individual backgrounds?
2. Considering examples in the case, as a leader how would you better work collectively and engage with your followers?

Calgary, Alberta, Canada: Most people know Calgary either for the Stampede or for the Winter Olympics in 1988. Others may have flown into the International Airport to go skiing in the nearby Rockies, whilst other Canadians maybe see Calgarians as ‘predictable, shortsighted and bitter’. Whilst the annual Stampede is stated as ‘the greatest show on earth’, what the citizens of Calgary didn’t realize in 2010, was a new approach to local (municipal) politics was coming their way. An educated gentleman raised in Calgary was coming home to do things differently. He was a man who knew the importance of getting everyone involved, whether they were still in school, a student at the university, a Punjabi taxi driver, or a single parent; he wanted to engage and conduct ‘politics in full sentences’.

Background

Calgary is a city in the province of Alberta located in the south of the province, in an area of foothills and prairie, approximately 80 km east of the front ranges of the Canadian Rockies. It has a population of approximately 1,096,833 (2011) covering an area of 726.5km²¹. An elected mayor and 14 elected aldermen (councillors) run the City Hall, with all of them being Independent and not party politically aligned. In most municipalities in Canada, city councils are not involved in the mainstream political parties. The exceptions are Vancouver, Montreal and Quebec.

During the 2010 campaign, the average age of a citizen in Calgary was 35.7 years. They are considered a highly educated, fiscally conservative multicultural meritocracy, who see themselves as “innovative risk-takers who are not afraid of change” (to quote Nenshi’s own words from one of his campaign speeches).

The ‘nerdy Professor’ (as he described himself in an interview with the author) is Naheed Nenshi. Born in Toronto, Ontario, he was raised in Calgary, Alberta by his Tanzanian parents, Noorjah and Kurban, who were South-Asian-origin immigrants to Canada. He left school and attended the University of Calgary, where he received a Bachelor of Commerce degree in 1993. He then continued his education and completed a Master of Public Policy from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University in 1998.

After leaving Harvard University, Nenshi worked for McKinsey & Company for several years before starting his own consulting business. Before venturing into politics, he was an instructor in non-profit management in the Bissett School of Business at Mount Royal University and wrote a regular municipal affairs column for the *Calgary Herald*. He still occasionally guest lectures at the JFK School of Government at Harvard. His main area of interest academically (and personally) is cities and how they can work better – “Urbanization is an important change with the population in cities constantly increasing” (Nenshi, 2011). He has written about how cities can retain young professionals, and believes “its important young people are involved.”

Doing things differently

Nenshi first ventured into local politics in 2004, running unsuccessfully for a seat on Calgary's City Council. When asked by the author why he decided to run for Mayor in 2010, he passionately replied, "How can I make Calgary work better."

His initial aim was to encourage a younger person (he was only 38.7 at the time of the election) to stand for Mayor. In 2009, due to the incumbent Mayor stepping down, he tried to recruit someone young and enthusiastic, but no one appeared to want to do it. So this 'precocious ethnic kid from NE Calgary' (Koentges, 2011) launched his own grassroots campaign – he had no money, no party political involvement. That didn't matter to him; what did matter was his profile. That is when he realized he had to do it differently, but how? "Politics in full sentences."

When his team started to 'brand' Nenshi for the campaign in July 2010, the main issue was not his background or ethnicity, but how he started his sentences when asked questions. He would use words similar to "Here's why you're wrong....." But, as the campaign progressed his team encouraged him to pause..... he would bite his lip and then say "You're not going to like my answer....." Calgarians seemed to start warming to him. The team branded Nenshi as "he is who he is". His campaign strategist shrugged his shoulders when interviewed whilst saying, "Women seem to like that he's the biggest nerd in the world."

To transform the conversation with the citizens of Calgary and prove he was going to do things differently by doing "politics in full sentences", the heart of the campaign was about stressing the word "*and*" in a sentence; not the word "*no*". The use of *and* was to reform the conversation so that people could get more involved themselves.

At the start of the campaign, the polls had him in 10th place (out of 15 candidates) with less than 4% of the support. As time went by and the campaign gained momentum, he realized he could use the popularity he was generating. Nenshi eventually won gaining 40% of the vote, with a turnout of 53%. The previous mayoral election turnouts had been well below 40% (2007, 33%; 2004, 18%).

“Old fashioned engagement – government matters so there is a need to tell the voter why.” (Nenshi, 2011)

Connecting with people

Nenshi believed in engaging the youth vote, especially students, and this was extremely prevalent during his campaign. He already spent most of his time using Twitter and Facebook, so ensured that social media played a pivotal role in attracting people to his campaign. He started by recording a Youtube clip in “plain English” stressing “3 themes” for Calgary, not a manifesto of policies.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89bzyRXK9nQ>

His Facebook page was the first out of all the mayoral candidates to reach 10,000 likes, and he constantly tweeted what he was doing, where he was going and what he was thinking.

<https://www.facebook.com/NaheedNenshi>



However, he also knew that social media, despite its advantages of reaching the masses, wasn't necessarily going to reach people directly in their living rooms; it is an impersonal method, which doesn't necessarily cross generations. His team created a programme that would target people who wouldn't normally get involved with an election by inviting them to meet Nenshi at a 'coffee party'. For the people who thought only birds tweeted, and Facebook was literally a book, the idea of these focused gatherings in living rooms and local community centres was for people to meet and have a conversation with Nenshi in flesh and blood. It gave ordinary people the

opportunity to meet and vet Nenshi as their mayoral candidate. What began to happen was that people would attend a coffee party, and then report back to their friends. Many people, having never been involved in an election before, now wanted to get involved. Numbers would vary with some coffee parties reaching people in the hundreds, with others with just a few dozen. This didn't matter; what was happening was a two-way conversation. Nenshi's idea of 'politics in full sentences' was that citizens must talk back. He was sharing his ideas and themes with Calgarians face-to-face, standing in their living rooms!

It was one thing, however, to put Nenshi into people's front rooms and to 'like' him on Facebook. It was when people heard him speak that people started to connect. It was becoming a movement by engaging Calgarians with real information in a common language. It was becoming a dialogue that was in their city's best interest.

Where extra care had to be taken with connecting with people and communities, was NE Calgary. Campaigning in NE Calgary is apparently an art! It is an area of Calgary consisting of complex cultures and ethnic communities, where they have historically voted for the winner. During Nenshi's campaign, because of his Tanzanian roots ("because he's brown"), his Campaign Director having Caribbean roots ("being black") and half the people on his team representing other cultures ("some shade in between"), they should have had NE Calgary "in the bag" (Koentges, 2011). This was not necessarily the case.

The challenge facing any of the candidates in NE Calgary is that 'door knocking' doesn't work. The reason is that people didn't really answer their doors; if they did, their English was very limited so they didn't always understand complex ideas and policies. They cared about their environment, facilities for senior citizens and education for all; they didn't really care for the usual mayoral complicated policies. The only way to engage with the people in NE Calgary was through their community leaders. These leaders were at the various mosques, churches and temples. To show he was serious about NE Calgary Nenshi and his team published all of their 'better ideas' leaflet in more than a

dozen different languages. These translations cost them nothing – all they had to do was use the free Google app to translate it for them!

An example of how this way of engaging with NE Calgarians in *their* language using a common language, is when one of Nenshi's team delivered some of these 'better ideas' that had been translated into Farsi for a small group of Afghans at one of the local mosques. It's not a large community, but there were at least 2,000 Afghans associated with the mosque. They liked what they were reading.

When Nenshi first agreed to stand for Mayor, a web site was built – blue and gold. "I hated those colours!" Nenshi said. What Nenshi and his team knew, was that they needed to stand out from the other candidates. Purple! Why? Because he knew that nobody else would chose that colour. He researched the political implications and learned that it had no real political connotations. The only slight link with politics was that swing states were often marked purple. The colour purple gave Nenshi a brand image, but he preferred to think of his campaign as an ideas campaign.

The team of volunteers in their purple t-shirts became known as the 'purple army'. On the eve of the election 'Operation Purple Dawn' was launched, although nobody really knew what this was. What they did know was that it was going to be a good thing. The candidate started by giving a gracious speech, followed by one volunteer in the room announcing he had been to Toys R Us and purchased their entire supply of purple chalk. Why? The volunteers were going to go out at midnight and write Nenshi's better ideas on the sidewalks of Calgary so on the morning of the election, voters would see streets covered in purple chalk!

Better ideas win!

<http://www.nenshi.ca/>

Despite this incredible win, a volunteer named Jeff arrived at the campaign headquarters just after the announcement had been made of this historic win. Jeff had knocked on doors, handed out leaflets, he had blogged about the 'better ideas', he had stayed up all night with his piece of purple chalk.

He didn't congratulate himself or Nenshi on the win and he didn't congratulate Calgarians for voting for the best candidate; he stated the he would listen and watch the candidate he helped become mayor. He would watch the new council and Nenshi's 'new' way of doing things very closely, just as he had closely watched the previous Mayor and council. "He's still a politician. I'm going to watch him very closely."

ⁱ Taken from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calgary>

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