

John Deffenbaugh blog: Poleaxed

Chris Christie is in a spot of bother. He's the Republican governor in a Democratic state who had to apologise 33 times in a press conference for the misdemeanours of his staff. Not for what he did, but what his subordinates did. Christie had wanted to be president. Frankly, he now appears to be toast.

This started out as a local story, then went national, and is now international. We pay attention here when a future president of the US goes pear shaped. Given Christie's physical presence, some would say he already is, and this episode seems to confirm that view.

To recap, Christie's subordinates and political appointees connived to snarl the traffic on the main 14-lane artery across the Hudson River from New Jersey to Manhattan because the local mayor didn't support Christie for re-election. They came up with bogus reasons to close lanes on the George Washington Bridge, causing massive traffic delays for four days. Nobody died, but it was one heckofa gridlock.

Christie is in a long line of presidential hopefuls who have fallen from the front runner position: Romney senior in 68, Ed Muskie in 72, Gary Hart in 88, Howard Dean in 04. Christie is therefore not alone, but his story has a more significant twist.

What did Christie know about the bridge closure? That is the crux of it. History tells us that we'll find out. Nixon was coasting to victory in 1972 when his staff decided to put icing on the cake by undermining the Democrats. Watergate resulted from their escapades. Every public scandal now ends in 'gate' – the most recent is Plebgate.

Which leads onto police misdemeanours: massaging crime statistics, taking bribes, and fabricating evidence, which has been demonstrated recently not just in relation to Andrew Mitchell, but also by constables making statements that have been shown to be wrong when exposed in court. Who and what can we trust?

There are lessons here for NHS leaders. Against the background of pressure to achieve waiting list targets, we have seen instances over recent years when staff have been overzealous in their actions – a tweak here, an interpretation there. Some chief executives have gone, some stayed. For those who want to stay, consider the culture that you set and the direction you give your staff. Consider these questions:

Compass – In what direction does your moral compass point? Do you clearly state what is right and wrong? How do you evidence that? Are there parameters for this right and wrong?

Relationships – Are your relationships high or low trust? Do you have favourites? How do you treat the people you don't really get on with? How do you show respect? What do you reward?

Conversation – What language do you use? What stories do you tell? How do you talk about people when they're not there? What do you praise? Criticise? Do you swear?

There are many benchmarks for public service leadership: the Nolan Principles of Conduct of Public Life, NHS Principles and Values, Code of Conduct for NHS Managers. These certainly give direction for your compass, the type of relationships you have, and the way you conduct these relationships. Also critical is getting the right people to support you in the first place, not just how you lead them.

There will be enormous pressure in your organisation to support you, to follow your lead. You probably don't know the extent to which people will work in accordance with what they think are your wishes and your values. You might be sleeping soundly, then out of left field comes something that you had no idea about. But why the surprise, given it's the culture you put in place and the staff you appoint?

Chris Christie appears to have failed in both areas.

I'll give Winston Churchill the last word: "The loyalties which centre upon number one are enormous. If he trips he must be sustained. If he makes mistakes they must be covered. If he sleeps he must not be wantonly disturbed. If he is no good he must be poleaxed."

John Deffenbaugh
23 January 2014