

Third Opinion

# Making It Real

Saj-nicole Joni 01.18.08, 5:00 PM ET



Barack Obama and Betsy Myers

Barack Obama, bidding to become the first African-American nominee for the presidency, admitted in the Democratic candidates' debate this week that he "wouldn't make a good operating officer."

Luckily, he has Betsy Myers.

A year ago, Myers was serving as executive director of Harvard's Center for Public Leadership when she received a call from the Illinois senator's campaign.

Myers recalls, "When I saw him, we talked at length about his commitment to a new kind of leadership. He wanted to do it—make this new kind of leadership real—in every aspect of how the campaign operated. How would I go about it?"



A few days later, Obama asked her to join his campaign as chief operating officer. She had served in the Clinton White House as one of his deputy assistants—her younger sister Dee Dee was President Clinton's press secretary—and had also served as the Small Business Administration's director of the Office of Women's Business Ownership and later as associate deputy administrator for Entrepreneurial Development.

But this was a challenge at another level.

On Jan. 8, 2007, she signed on to a campaign that had a handful of people. Today, it is a \$100 million "start-up" with 700 employees, headquarters in Chicago, 70 field offices and hundreds of national volunteers. Myers has led the way, building a fast, effective and efficient operation.

Like in many organizations with this function, the operations component of the campaign covers four main elements: financial operations; headquarters and field operations (including correspondence, call centers and legal and human resources); information technology and infrastructure; and travel. In short, Myers has a central, hands-on, day-to-day role with the responsibility of overseeing everything that is not specifically related to policy, polling, media or campaign strategy.

Myers recently sat down to discuss the leadership lessons from what is a genuinely historic political campaign.

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She talks about how she and the candidate have aimed to embody a new kind of leadership in a presidential campaign, which can be traditionally chaotic and messy.

**Saj-nicole Joni: How do you take operations—everything from infrastructure, cashiering, reporting, HR, correspondence, travel and operating policy—and turn it into something that makes a leadership difference?**

**Betsy Myers:** Campaigns are about people. People believing, volunteering, voting. So for us, the starting point is that people really do matter. In operations, this translates into two key ideas. First, everything we do is part of our mission: respect, inclusiveness and customer service. Second, we deeply value all the people who contributed to our campaign, so we constantly ask: How efficient and effective is what we are doing? Are we making the best use of these precious resources?

**Customer service sounds like a business—what does it mean to embody this in the inner workings of your campaign?**

Right. It's not enough to promise change as an idea. You have to be able to do it, and to do it, you have to get a lot of people to follow you—willingly. Historically, campaigns go up fast, are chaotic, have lots of in-fighting; operations and budgets are often messy. Barack said, let's run this as a business, and I've taken it to the next step. I said, let's run it as a business built around the principle of customer service. Meaning that people inside our campaign are our customers, and people outside our campaign are our customers. We started operations with this mentality and it has become pervasive. This is more than a "nice to have," because if ops runs well, the rest of the campaign can focus on winning. It creates calm. And a calm environment is necessary if everyone is to be heard.

**Sen. Obama comes from a new generation of leadership. The trend is to move away from the "command and control" leadership that Jack Welch used to be famous for and toward a new kind of leadership which is inclusive, listens, brings disparate voices to the table, and which works with people who disagree to come up with a common goal. What does it take to make this real in the way the campaign operates?**

First, if you want to do something different, you can't do it with people who are steeped in the usual way of doing business. With the exception of my deputy, Henry DeSio, no other members of my senior team had worked in a presidential campaign. To create a new kind of campaign, I brought in business people with critical expertise and known track records in the functional areas we needed. And I looked for people who also had the kind of orientation to figure it out, fast. For example, our Chief Technology Officer Kevin Malover was recruited from Orbitz to establish the campaign's technology infrastructure.

**When you make this kind of bet, you have to look at people's track record on results, but also you have to look at their judgment in new, different and difficult circumstances.**

Exactly. When you build this kind of team, you have to work to get all voices heard. You have to live and breathe a culture of communicating—getting the right people together, and having the real conversations.

For example, historically, campaign headquarters and the field have fought. So I hired a deputy to work with me in HQ who knows a lot about the field to oversee that aspect of the campaign. From the beginning, our operations in Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and Nevada were extensive. In Iowa, for example, we had 38 offices and a couple hundred people, and in New

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Hampshire, we had 16 offices and a hundred-plus people. So we have put significant resources into the states. From the start, HQ saw everyone in the field as their customers. And the field staff saw the volunteers and voters and everyone outside the campaign as their customers. This was a new orientation—it focused our priorities and our issues, and it has worked.

Little things can get miscommunicated and lead to resentment between HQ and the field. And so we set up weekly calls to the field offices, and on that call is my deputy, our CFO, our head of HR, our CTO and our lawyer, so that the field have this time every week with our team in HQ. The commitment to work things out is real, tangible and regular. People don't miss the opportunity to be on the calls.

**You've achieved something that many people thought was impossible—showing that presidential campaign operations can be efficient, well run, collaborative and service-oriented. What are you most proud of?**

I've always believed in listening, in respecting people, in putting the right people in place. I don't think I know everything. I have a vision and a track record of getting people aligned, infused with new energy. But I never go in thinking I have it all figured out. It evolves. And it evolves because you bring the right people to the table.

I'm proud that this organization is running so smoothly, with no material mistakes, and with a level of customer service that people are entitled to.

I'm proud we run efficiently, without sacrificing effectiveness. We take all the monies we've raised very seriously. Some 475,000 people have contributed to our campaign, with most contributions under \$100. Right now, the average American is just getting by, and that's real money to them. So we take it very seriously.

And I'm proud of all of the team who have given so much, and accomplished so much. You need to treat your team like your customer. If the team feels valued and respected, then the voters are also going to feel that. In campaigns, people make huge sacrifices—life sacrifices, financial sacrifices, family sacrifices—and so you need to show them you care. Traditionally, in campaigns, people don't feel cared about. But we shifted that dynamic.

**What would you do differently if you were starting today vs. starting a year ago?**

If I had known how successful we would be in building respect and customer service into everything we do in operations, I would have been able to make this new way of operating more strategic for the campaign.

**And what's one thing you've learned that you think all leaders should know?**

I see again and again that money is never the whole story. Appreciation, noticing what people contribute, is key. There are a variety of ways to thank people. Authentic appreciation needs to be a well-honed part of every person's leadership. Because in the end, we are all in this together. And it's when we pull together, encouraging and respecting different perspectives, skills and needs, that we create a future worth working for.

*Dr. Saj-nicole Joni is CEO of Cambridge International Group.*