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Making a difference

A morning radio program the other day asked its regular listeners to phone in their opinion of President Noynoy Aquino's performance. Taking off from the Social Weather Station's recent report of a steep drop in the president's ratings, the hosts posed two questions: "Based on your own personal expectations, is President Noynoy's performance 'over' or 'under'? What should he do to gain public approval?"

Of course, the "under" answers prevailed. With such questions, whoever is being rated has little chance of getting favorable results. One would have to be an ardent admirer of the president to assess him as "over-performing" beyond expectations. A third "just-right" option would have nuanced the generally negative picture that emerged. Equally uninformative were the remedies offered, reflecting as they did the clichés of public opinion: send crooks to jail, raise wages and pensions, lower prices, etc.

Reputable survey firms invest a lot of effort in formulating questions and devising a sampling procedure in order precisely to neutralize the kind of biases one finds in "call-in" surveys. Still, they cannot completely overcome the limitations that hound all survey research. First, respondents do not always understand the questions in the same way. The responses they give, no matter how carefully a survey may try to group them, convey varied meanings and contexts that are rarely recorded by interviewers in the field. Yet, these responses are assigned conventional numerical values. Second, even when informants may have little or no awareness of an issue, the survey situation primes them to respond as if these issues have been uppermost in their minds. Views obtained under such conditions can hardly be called public opinion.

All this is not to say that surveys have no value. Indeed they offer a slice of the public sentiment. As such they form a vital input to policy-making and program implementation. But they need to be interpreted judiciously, in pretty much the same way that the divine messages of ancient oracles had to be deciphered and translated into something sensible. A leader must have a framework within which to make sense of surveys. One who allows himself to be ruled by surveys usually only has the vaguest notion of what he himself wants to accomplish. Surveys cannot substitute for clarity of vision.

There is nothing unusual about the rise and fall of presidential approval or satisfaction ratings. In many ways, they are expected. Presidential popularity typically peaks during the incumbent's first three to six months in office. This is when the new president is contrasted against the old one. The more despised the predecessor the easier it is for an incumbent to earn public approval.

Thereafter, the reference point shifts. A president begins to be measured in terms of what he is expected to be and to do. That is when the ratings start to drop. The less clear the path the president wants to take, the more diffused and impatient the expectations would be. The steeper also tends to be the fall.

So, it is not just a question of getting the good news out. One also needs to explain what difference the "good" makes, or why it is good. The more crucial task therefore is to clarify the path into which the country's chief leader wishes to take his people. To do this, he must have a solid grasp of the situation that the country faces, and be able to communicate this in terms of the specific challenges it poses. Only then can he point to the direction in which he wishes to take the nation. He must indicate the dangers and difficulties that lie ahead, and what they demand of us. He has to tell the people where we are at every stage of the journey, especially during the early phases. For, only then can he make the nation see that his leadership is making a difference.

It is easy enough to project this difference, when the reference point, as I said, is an unpopular former president. For, the contrasts that are drawn would tend to be limited to aspects of personal style and demeanor. But, as his predecessor fades into the background, the new president has to contend with the hopes and promises that had thrust him into office.

This is often the lowest point of any new administration. The public begins to view the new leader of the country in a less admiring light. The initial esteem that shielded him from scrutiny gives way to a readiness to judge. Some presidential quirks and little-known traits begin to surface, and these become receptacles for broader criticism. Even the most trivial lapse then assumes the magnitude of a calamity, eclipsing in concreteness and saliency whatever gains there may be in institutional reform.

One starts to make a difference by drawing a new line on previously marked space. From there he proceeds to describe the space he occupies, i.e. where he stands. Only when he has a clear command of where he is can he confidently draw a picture of what the outside looks like, and what it offers and demands. He must communicate this vision relentlessly. If the picture he offers is vague, stronger visions coming from elsewhere will define the national situation. Then he loses not only his focus but his footing as well.

President Noynoy has great communication skills that instantly connect him to ordinary citizens. He projects commonsense, sincerity, earnestness, and transparency. But all effective communication begins with a clear message. And by that I mean, in the case of the presidency, a fleshed-out agenda, not a set of slogans. Surely, that cannot be the sole responsibility of a “messaging” team.

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